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Conspiratoria – the Internet and the Logic of Conspiracy Theory

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a theoretical investigation of the relationships between the logic of conspiracy theory and the Internet. It argues that the Internet can be conceptualised as a technocultural space conducive to the development of conspiracy belief and practice. Critical discourses regarding the relationships between mainstream media and the Internet are discussed as constituting the main points of connection between conspiracy theory and the Internet.

With reference to radical discourses of media power, the study first considers conspiracy theorist's conceptions of mainstream media as a site of conspiratorial control, and their configuration of the Internet as a medium which operates as a countervailing influence to mainstream media power. The study then considers cyber-cultural discourses, such as those of the second media age, that articulate the Internet as a site of democratic empowerment, and how these resonate with the democratic ideas that, in distorted forms, constitute key aspects of conspiracist belief. These two major discursive themes – the Internet as a counteractive force to mainstream media power, and the Internet as a site of democratic empowerment – are then discussed as forming the basis for radical configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium. The study then shifts into an examination of the Internet's configuration as an alternative public sphere, and argues that this configuration constitutes the most significant point of connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory as the alternative principles of opposition to mainstream media and radical democratic activity correspond to central ideas of conspiracist thought. This argument is developed further through a discussion of alternative news practices, and the ways in which conspiracy theorists appropriate such practices as a means of legitimating their extremist beliefs within the alternative public sphere. A case study of the conspiracy news site *Rense.com* is then presented as an illustration of this appropriation-legitimation dynamic in action. The study concludes by arguing that the Internet does constitute a 'conspiratorium' for conspiracy theorists in relation to the ideas outlined above, and that conspiracy theory can – ironically – be seen as a major embodiment of the dominant technologically deterministic discourses that articulate the Internet as a 'revolutionary' technology.

The arguments presented in this study are developed with reference to direct examples of online conspiracy theory beliefs and practices. Major theoretical bases for the study include the work of Atton (2004) on alternative media; Curran's (2002) discussions of media power; Holmes' (2005) and Mosco's (2004) overviews of the cyber-utopian perspectives that have shaped the development of the Internet; and Keane's (1991) work on the media and democracy.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ideas of this study

This study is concerned with investigating the relationships between two of the most influential phenomena of millennial Western culture - the Internet and conspiracy theories. Or, to put it in the critical terms of media studies, the relationships between a particular communication technology and a particular form of political and cultural discourse. My specific take on this relationship is to examine it from the perspective of the logic of conspiracy theory – the beliefs and principles that underlie conspiracist thought and practice. In this study I will argue that there are profound points of connection between the technocultural discourses that have shaped the ways in which the Internet operates within contemporary Western society, and the logic of what I term classical conspiracy theories. These connections render the Internet a medium of considerable importance to classical conspiracy theorists. The technocultural discourses and capacities of the Internet can be seen to serve as a means of empowering conspiracy theorists in relation to their beliefs and their information practices. Most significantly, it can be argued that the discursive frameworks of the Internet empower conspiracy theorists by providing the basis for information practices through which conspiracy theorists attempt to legitimate their ideas in relation to the democratic structures of contemporary Western society. In these respects I will argue that the Internet can be considered a ‘conspiratoria’ – a medium that constitutes a cultural ‘space’ conducive to the development of conspiracy thought and practice.¹

My intention with this work is to contribute to the field of academic research on conspiracy theories and conspiracy culture, which constitutes a small but growing area of interest within the humanities and social sciences. While many scholars have pointed out that there appear to be important relationships between conspiracy theorising and the Internet, critical discussion of the links between the two has been under-examined and poorly theorised. In most academic works on conspiracy theory, discussion of the Internet is limited to a few pages at best, with the arguments presented as to the relationship between conspiracy theory and the

¹ Please consult appendices 1 and 2 for a delineation of the use of terminology in this study related to the subject areas of conspiracy theory and the Internet.

Internet revolving around the formal properties of Internet communication. For example, many of these arguments revolve around analogies between the perceived structures of conspiracist thought and the information systems of the Net. Since the Internet (as considered in terms of its most visible application, the World Wide Web) operates by connecting different pieces of information together through 'non-linear' means (such as hypertext), and since the non-linear connection of pieces of information can also be used to describe the nature and practices of conspiracy theorising, so the Internet is a medium that appears eminently suited to the practices of conspiracy theorising.

While I do not disagree with the basic premise behind these arguments – that the Internet is a medium that organises and disseminates information in communicative forms well-suited to conspiracy theorising - I think that these formal factors are better understood as manifestations of more complex relationships between Internet technology and conspiracy culture; in particular, that the ways in which the Internet organises information – which shape the ways in which people relate to and use such information - are resonant with certain political and critical perspectives concerning the status of media systems as organs of power within contemporary Western society. This resonance has led to the Internet being configured as a technocultural embodiment of the complex relationships between the public and institutions of power. It is this role that makes the Internet particularly significant to conspiracy theorists both in terms of their ideological beliefs and the communicative practices by which these beliefs are disseminated and developed. In these respects the Internet can be considered as a 'conspiratoria' – a technocultural framework that provides the political and cultural 'space' for the actualisation of conspiracy thought and practice within Western society.

As the above comments indicate, my focus on the relationship between the Internet and conspiracy theory is one best situated in relation to critical debates within media studies, especially in the field of public communication – the relationships between media systems and the operation of democracy. The political content and ideological background of conspiracy theories is of central importance to my arguments. In this respect my study differs from much of the existing scholarship on the subject, particularly those from media studies backgrounds, which tend to discuss conspiracy theories in relation to postmodern ideas of cultural politics. Here the political content of conspiracy theories is

considered as something of metaphorical importance - symbolic cultural expressions of the psychosocial realities of particular identity positions. Again, while I do not disagree with this approach, and touch on these perspectives in the course of my discussion, I found the more direct or traditional emphasis on politics inherent in the public communication perspectives to be more relevant and conducive to understanding the relationship between the Internet and conspiracy theory in relation to my research into online conspiracy culture. This is particularly so given that the worldview of contemporary conspiracy theory and the significance of the Internet as a global communication system are both directly engaged with the socio-political changes of the early 21st century. The Internet can be argued to be one of the major drivers of such change; conspiracy theory one of the major forms of commentary about it.

The sense of agency attributed to the Internet in this statement as the major ‘facilitator’ of conspiracy theorising should not be taken to indicate that my approach here is one based upon a technologically deterministic perspective in which the Internet is the major shaping force on conspiracy theorising. As political and cultural discourses, many of the key ideas that shape the contemporary conspiracist worldview have a long and complex history within Western societies that far precedes the development of the Internet. Furthermore, conspiracy theories are rendered ‘visible’ and ‘influential’ within the wider culture by courtesy of the ways they are communicated to the members of that culture through a wide variety of different media – not just the Internet. However, as I will argue in this study, the Internet can be said to be a major factor in terms of the visibility and influence of conspiracy theory within 21st century Western culture in that it provides a brace of technocultural resources for conspiracy theorists to communicate their ideas in sometimes new and sometimes more sophisticated ways (sophisticated both in terms of the ways in which conspiracy ideas are presented as media content and in the associations made between conspiracy theorising and the ethos of ‘free’ information that is central to the ways in which the Internet has become incorporated into 21st century everyday life). In this respect the Internet can be seen to provide a key means by which broad ideas of conspiracism have become more prevalent in Western culture and by which specific conspiracy theories have become more noticeable and – in some cases (such as 9/11 conspiracy theories)– more persuasive.

1.2 Approach to subject matter

My approach to investigating the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet has been to try to understand the conspiracist concepts that appear to underlie the ways in which conspiracy theorists relate to and utilise the Internet. This ‘direct’ approach seemed to me to be the most effective way of developing an in-depth understanding of online conspiracy culture relevant to the major question driving this study - how do conspiracy theorists conceptualise, and utilise, the Internet in relation to their conspiracy beliefs? I have therefore taken what conspiracy theorists have said about the Internet and done with the Internet as the basis for potential answers to this question. My proposed answers can be considered in terms of theory and practice. In terms of theory, I present critical discussions of what I take to be the major frameworks of ideas - ideological, political, and cultural - that lie behind the ways in which conspiracy theorists conceptualise and utilise the Internet. In terms of practice, I undertake an examination of how these attitudes are expressed through the online information practices of conspiracy theorists and the beliefs and themes evident in online conspiracist content. In terms of the socio-cultural background of conspiracy theories, my focus is on contemporary conspiracy theory within a Western/English-speaking context. My research into the history of Western conspiracism and observations of online Western conspiracism indicate that contemporary conspiracy theory is heavily Amerocentric in terms of the socio-cultural background of the conspiracy theorists who create and disseminate it (the majority of whom are American) and the conspiratorial view of the world which it suggests (in which the takeover of America appears to be the major goal or motivation of the conspiratorial plan in question). This approach should not, however, be taken to imply that conspiracy theory is a solely American phenomenon, as it is also has a long historical pedigree in a wide variety of cultures from around the world (e.g. Pipes 1996: West and Sanders 2003).

1.3 Chapter Overview

A detailed breakdown of the overall structure of this thesis is as follows.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review.

This is an overview of the major scholarship in the areas of conspiracy theory which provides the contextual background for the positioning of my own approach in this study. The literature overview here is constructed around what I consider to be the two main critical approaches to the subject – the pathological and the allegorical perspectives. The pathological approach is the oldest and most-established critical approach to conspiracy theory and is predominantly associated with fields such as political science and psychology. Here conspiracy theories are regarded as manifestations of extremist ideologies and/or irrational thinking. Scholarship in this field is largely concerned with critically dissecting and debunking conspiracist beliefs as a means of neutralising their potentially deleterious impacts within the wider political and cultural landscapes. The allegorical approach is a more recent take on conspiracy culture with roots in the postmodern and poststructuralist frameworks of fields such as cultural studies and literary theory. Here conspiracy theories are considered as metaphorical and narrative embodiments of the epistemological shifts and identity politics within Western culture in the fin de siècle/millennial eras. I identify two major critical perspectives within this allegorical position. The first is the paralogical approach, in which conspiracy theories are configured in cultural studies terms as populist narratives that challenge dominant ideas of knowledge and power. The second is the cognitive mapping approach in which conspiracy theories are considered in neo-Marxist terms as symbolic expressions of the nature of late capitalism. I discuss what I consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of these two main approaches in relation to conspiracy theory as a political and cultural discourse. This in turn serves as the basis for an outline of my own critical approach to conspiracy theory, a syncretic approach between both pathological and allegorical positions that I describe as ‘modified cognitive mapping’.

An important issue raised in the literature review concerns the problematic nature of the ways in which ideas of conspiracy theory are conceptualised in the existing academic literature on the subject. Scholars in both the pathological and allegorical traditions tend to discuss conspiracy theory as a singular critical object,

an approach which overlooks the diverse range of ideas and beliefs that are articulated within the general concept of ‘conspiracy’ itself. This chapter seeks to address these issues via the development of a ‘typology’ of conspiracy theories. This typology is an attempt to delineate the broad ideological beliefs and worldviews that serve as the thematic and epistemological base for a wide range of specific conspiracy theories. My intention is to establish a more critically robust framework for understanding conspiracy theory that will aid the development of my later arguments regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet.

Chapter 3 – Theory and Methodology.

This chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological frameworks for this study. In terms of theoretical frameworks I discuss public communication as the major media studies framework in which this study is positioned. The influence of ideas from the fields of medium theory and cultural politics is also discussed here. In terms of methodological approaches, I first outline the interpretive frameworks by which I am examining online conspiracy practices. This outline is broken down into macro and micro levels. On the macro level, I position the study within parameters of qualitative media research. On the micro level, I discuss my research activities in terms of the traditions of hermeneutic analysis, relating my observational research method to the specific hermeneutic-based research approach of cultural interpretation. Second, I outline the analytic methods by which I am approaching researching content on the Internet. The concept of the web sphere is discussed as the analytic framework within which I am examining conspiracy theory online. This is followed by an outline of the factors involved in sampling online conspiracy material for research purposes, such as the various forms of websites (news sites, blogs), and the technical parameters that affect the ways in which information is mediated online. Finally, I discuss the ways in which I undertake a content analysis of the material presented on conspiracy websites.

Chapter 4 – Conspiracy Theory and Information Freedom.

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute a macro-level examination of the ‘logics’ of both conspiracy theory and the Internet, and indicate points of connection between these structures that will be developed further in chapters 7,8, and 9.

Chapter 4 delineates the logic of conspiracist attitudes towards established media systems and discusses how such logic informs conspiracist attitudes towards the Internet. This discussion is divided into two parts. The first part considers the centrality of ideas of control and freedom to classical conspiracy thought, and how conspiracy theorists conceptualise mainstream media as major systems of conspiratorial control in ways akin to radical/critical approaches to media power. With reference to conspiracy theory texts, I argue that such conceptions serve as the basis for conspiracist configurations of the Internet as a medium which is 'free' of the power structures of mainstream media. The second part outlines the democratic political ideals that, in distorted forms, constitute key aspects of conspiracist attitudes towards power and freedom. These ideas include civil liberties, public service media, populism, and libertarianism. Such ideas form the basis for arguments regarding Net/conspiracy relationships developed in the following chapters.

Chapter 5 – The Internet and Information Freedom.

This chapter delineates cyber-cultural discourses that have been particularly influential in terms of configuring the relationships between the Internet and Western society, and argues that these are integral points of connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory. This discussion has two main parts. The first part considers cyber-cultural discourses of the 'second media age' which articulate the Internet in technologically deterministic terms as a 'revolutionary' force for democratic empowerment. It also discusses the ethos of the 'digital sublime' which underlies such cyber-utopian discourses, which serves to configure the Internet in mythic terms as a medium that enables users to transcend the limitations of mainstream social reality. I then argue that these discursive frameworks constitute integral points of connection with the logic of classical conspiracy theory because they configure the Net as a 'radical' force for democratic empowerment in a manner resonant with the ostensibly 'radical' principles of conspiracy theory, and because they articulate the Net as a medium which transcends the conspiratorial control structures of mainstream media.

The second part expands upon these ideas by showing how notions of the Net as a radical democratic medium were articulated by American cyber-theorists in relation to the libertarian ideals that constitute a distinct aspect of American democracy. I argue that these libertarian associations further strengthen

conspiracist conceptions of the Internet as a medium which embodies radical democratic ideals because they resonate strongly with the Amerocentric libertarian perspectives that constitutes a key aspect of conspiracist logic.

Chapter 6 – Alternative Media and the Internet.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 develop the macro-level ideas introduced in chapters 4 and 5 through a micro-level focus on configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium, and arguments that the Net's role as an 'alternative public sphere' constitutes the most significant point of connection between the Net and conspiracy theory.

Chapter 6 has two main parts. The first part outlines the theoretical precepts of the public sphere as the major theoretical basis for notions of alternative media, and discusses the technocultural capacities of the Internet as a prospective realisation of public sphere principles. The second part defines 'alternative media' as a media ethos and set of media practices intended as an alternative to the poor realisation of public sphere principles in most contemporary mainstream Western news media. I then argue that the resulting configuration of the Internet as an alternative public sphere serves as the major point of connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory, particularly because it provides a critical framework which conspiracy theorists can use to legitimate their ideas.

Chapter 7 – Alternative News and Conspiracy Theory.

Further developing the alternative public sphere arguments presented in chapter 6, Chapter 7 discusses news as a key component of the Internet's configuration as an alternative public sphere, and how notions of alternative online news are appropriated by conspiracy theorists as a means of legitimating their conspiracist ideas in relation to the alternative public sphere. This discussion has two main parts. The first part delineates the integral role news plays in conceptions of the public sphere, and the critical arguments regarding the failure of mainstream news to realise these public sphere principles. The configuration of the Internet as an alternative news site is then discussed as a means of addressing the public sphere inadequacies of mainstream news. The second part considers the ways in which alternative online news practices have been appropriated to operate as legitimating frameworks for classical conspiracy theory.

Chapter 8 – *Rense.com* case study

This chapter presents empirical evidence for the ideas discussed in chapters 6 and 7 through a case study of the conspiracist news site, *Rense.com*. The focus of the case study is in how *Rense.com* appropriates concepts of alternative media and alternative news practice as a means of legitimating its classical conspiracy content within the alternative public sphere of the Internet. Background information on the *Rense.com* site is presented, followed by a discussion of the methodology involved in sampling and interpreting news content from the site. The data gathered from the news sample is presented and then analysed in relation to the ideas that alternative news practice serves as a legitimating framework for conspiracy theory. The analysis is conducted in relation to three main topics: the types of news source used; the formats of the news items presented; and the types of subject matter that form the content of the news items.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion

The ideas and arguments presented in this study are summed up and discussed in terms of their critical significance to an understanding of the relationships between the Internet and conspiracy theory. The strengths and weaknesses of my arguments and approaches are acknowledged, and a range of other critical topics related to the ideas of this study are discussed as prospective areas for further investigation. A concluding discussion is presented related to the central argument of the study – that conspiracy theorists configure the Internet as a medium that empowers conspiracist thought and practice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review has two major intentions. The first is to situate this study within the broader field of existing scholarship on the subject of conspiracy theory. The second is to discuss some of the conceptual problems involved in these academic approaches to conspiracy theory that I suggest are not adequately addressed within the existing academic frameworks on the subject. These problems form the context for my own critical position on conspiracy theory in this study, and also form the basis for my attempt to rectify some of these problems via the development of a typology of conspiracy theories (which will be discussed in chapter 3).

This chapter is organised into three main sections. The first is an overview of the major theoretical approaches to the subject of conspiracy theories within Western academia. As part of this overview I will highlight existing scholarly perspectives regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet. The second is a discussion of the problematic aspects of these approaches. The third is an articulation of this thesis' critical position on the subject.

2.2 Critical approaches - pathological

What I refer to as the 'pathological mode' of academic engagement with conspiracy theory is predominantly rooted in the fields of political science and history. I would also posit that the arguments regarding conspiracy theory developed in relation to these fields are those most influential in relation to the largely pejorative perceptions of conspiracy theory and theorists that are the

dominant mode for mainstream consideration of conspiracy theories as political discourses.

2.21 Pathological approaches – Hofstadter

My starting point for a review of academic literature that adopts a pathological approach to conspiracy theory is American political historian Richard Hofstadter's post-war essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (Hofstadter 1966). Hofstadter was a member of a post WWII American intelligentsia concerned with normalising pluralist and consensus conceptions of democracy as integral aspects of American political practice and cultural identity. This milieu regarded conspiracy theories as forms of 'political paranoia', a form of psychosocial "pathology suffered by those existing outside of the pluralistic consensus who promoted fears of conspiracy" (Fenster 1999:3). The irrationality and ideological extremism of such political paranoia was regarded as posing a threat to these democratic norms.

Hofstadter's essay can be regarded as a seminal text for subsequent scholarship in the subject of conspiracy theory for two main reasons. Firstly, because of his outline of 'political paranoia' as a distinctive strain of American (and, by extension, international) political thought, an "old and recurrent mode of expression" in public life that has "frequently been linked to movements of suspicious discontent and whose content remains much the same even when it is adopted by men of distinctly different purposes" (Hofstadter 1966: 6). Such paranoia is identified as being more prevalent and prominent in periods of social, political, and economic change (ibid: 39).

The essay's second main area of significance is in Hofstadter's delineation of the 'paranoid style' – the conspiracist "way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself" (ibid: 4). Hofstadter is concerned with delineating "the way in which [conspiracist] ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content" (ibid: 5). I will present Hofstadter's outline of the characteristics of the 'paranoid style' here in full since they have proven influential on subsequent conspiracy scholarship and are still relevant summations of conspiracy thought and practice. This does not, however, mean that I subscribe to Hofstadter's psychopathological take on conspiracy culture.

A – a universal, historical scope. “The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade” (ibid: 29).

B – an apocalyptic worldview. “The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point: it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy. Time is forever just running out” (ibid: 29-30).

C – a tone of urgency and activism. “...the paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated – if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention” (ibid: 31)

D – an emphasis on the omnipotence of the conspiratorial agents. “[The enemy] is a free, active, demonic agent. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history himself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way....The paranoid’s interpretation of history is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone’s will” (ibid: 32).

E – a pedantic emphasis on ‘evidence’. “The typical procedure of higher paranoid scholarship is to start with such defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least of what appear to be facts, and to marshal these facts towards an overwhelming ‘proof’ of the particular conspiracy that is to be established. It is nothing if not coherent – in fact, the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities” (ibid: 36).

F – a seemingly ‘logical’ premise that allows for excessive interpretations.

“What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts (though it is occasionally true that in his extravagant passion for facts the paranoid occasionally manufactures them), but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events....The plausibility the paranoid style has for those who find it plausible lies, in good measure, in this appearance of the most careful, conscientious, and seemingly coherent application to detail the laborious accumulation of what can be taken as convincing evidence for the most fantastic conclusions, the careful preparation for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable” (ibid: 37-38).

The themes and techniques of the paranoid style, such as the emphasis placed upon evidence for the conspiracy (what Hofstadter refers to as ‘pseudo-scholarship’),² can be seen as key factors in the ongoing appeal of belief in conspiracy theories.

2.22 Later pathological studies

Hofstadter’s configuration of conspiracy theory as a psychologically and ideologically ‘pathological’ form of political expression that can be ‘diagnosed’ by virtue of the ‘paranoid style’ and thence contained from damaging the consensus ‘body politic’ has served as a template for much subsequent academic discussion of conspiracy theory, particularly for American scholars. I regard these pathological studies as adopting two main approaches to the subjects of conspiracy theory and conspiracy culture. Firstly, studies of ‘political paranoia’

² It is worth outlining Hofstadter’s description of the techniques of paranoid scholarship in more detail as such techniques can be seen as particularly relevant in relation to online conspiracist practices. A conspiracy theorist begins from factually “defensible assumptions”, accumulating facts “or at least what appear to be facts” towards ‘proof’ of the conspiracy in question (Hofstadter 1966: 36). The interpretation and presentation of such evidence as proof has three main characteristics: a highly ‘coherent’ view of the world of the conspirators that “leaves no room for mistakes, failures, and ambiguities”; a ‘rationalistic’ tendency to try and explain “all of reality in one overreaching, consistent theory”; and a use of scholarly techniques in the writing and presentation of ideas, such as reference to conspiracy “experts, study groups, monographs, footnotes, and bibliographies” (ibid: 36-37).

that focus on the psychosocial aspects of conspiracy theory; secondly, historical overviews of conspiracy theories within American political and social history.

‘Political paranoia’ studies include Graumann and Moscovici’s *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (1987); Elaine Showalter’s *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997); Robins & Post’s *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (1997); and Daniel Pipes’ *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (1999), and journal articles such as Lieber (2003) and Swami *et al.* (2009). These studies tend to offer directly ‘pathological’ readings of conspiracy culture in their emphasis on conspiracy theories as examples of ‘diseased’ thought, a mixture of extremist ideological beliefs and individual psychosis that represents a potentially serious threat to modern democracies. For example, Showalter discusses conspiracy theories in relation to ideas of ‘hysteria’ - personal and group anxieties that have been transformed by the sensationalist ethos of modern media culture into cultural movements that have a negative impact on many aspects of contemporary life. Such movements include claims of ‘satanic ritual abuse’ and alien abductions.

Studies in the historical school of pathological research include Curry & Brown’s *Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History* (1972); Gregory Johnson’s *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics* (1983); Robert Alan Goldberg’s *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (2001); and Michael Barkun’s *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2003). The emphasis in these works is a forensic one, seeking to “consider conspiracy imaging in its historical, social, and political environment(s)” (Goldberg 2001: xii). This wider scope enables such studies to avoid the reductionist tendencies of the ‘political paranoia’ approach. For example, Barkun’s study looks at how seemingly disparate historical influences, such as European anti-Semitism, American new-age thought, and ufology have combined in the millennial climate of the fin-de-siecle period to form ‘superconspiracy’ narratives such as the ‘New World Order’ conspiracy.³

A central concern of pathological studies from the 1990s onwards is that conspiracy theories have shifted from the margins to the mainstream of American political and cultural life. This shift has potentially ‘pathological’ consequences

³ ‘New World Order’ superconspiracies are typically predicated on a mixture of Illuminati conspiracy theories, Zionist conspiracy theories, and Masonic conspiracy theories.

for American politics and society and the institutional and epistemological foundations of the modern West, including democracy and science (Showalter 1997: Pipes 1997: Goldberg 2001: Barkun 2003). For example, Goldberg concludes that “conspiracy thinking has moved Americans beyond a healthy skepticism of authority. Lacking public confidence, core institutions become unstable and lose their ability to govern. The cancer of conspiracism has begun to metastasize. Without a new awareness of its character and quick intervention, countersubversion may soon overwhelm the body politic”(Goldberg 2001: 260).

Much of the responsibility for this millennial ‘mainstreaming’ of conspiracy theories is placed upon the media. Two aspects of modern media systems are singled out here as of particular significance. The first is the ‘familiarisation’ of conspiracy theories as forms of popular entertainment in films such as *JFK* (1991), TV shows such as *The X-Files* (1990s) and novels/films such as *The Da Vinci Code* (2002). The second is the development of the Internet as a major ‘mass’ or ‘domestic’ medium. I will outline Barkun’s (2003) comments here as a representative example of this tendency. Barkun argues that the relationship between conspiracy theorists and the mainstream media has been one of tension. The mainstream media serves a gatekeeping role in terms of deeming certain types of knowledge important or suitable for the broad purposes of ‘mass’ populations. In this context the ideas propagated by most conspiracy theorists generally come across as too extremist or ridiculous, so that mainstream media generally treat them with ‘contempt’ and consign them to the fringes of the mainstream culture. The Internet here becomes attractive because of factors such as “its large potential audience”, “the low investment required for its use”, “the absence of gatekeepers who might censor the content of messages”, and the ability to develop ‘virtual conspiracy communities’(Barkun 2003: 12-13). In other words, the Net provides a cultural context in which the ‘paranoid style’ of conspiracy theorising can be expressed unfettered by the ideological restrictions of traditional media. In combination with the use of conspiracy themes in popular entertainment media, the result is the establishment of a mainstream cultural environment that is much more receptive to conspiracy theories and conspiracist modes of thought.

2.3 Critical approaches – allegorical

What I refer to as the allegorical approach to conspiracy theory scholarship is distinguished from the pathological approach by its consideration of conspiracy theory in relation to postmodern cultural theory rather than political science, history and psychology. The emphasis is less on the ideological dangers of conspiracy theories as political discourses than on the symbolic significance of conspiracy theories as cultural discourses. The complex beliefs and paranoid worldviews of conspiracy theorists are considered as allegories – metaphorical narratives for the relationships between society and the self within particular cultural and historical contexts.

Since Hofstadter's essay on the paranoid style can be regarded as a template for the pathological approach to conspiracy theories, I posit Jean-Francois Lyotard's epistemological framework of 'paralogic' vs 'grand' narratives and Fredric Jameson's configuration of conspiracy theories as forms of 'cognitive mapping' as the two templates for allegorical discussions of conspiracy theory.

2.31 Allegorical approaches – Lyotard

Lyotard's ideas, as outlined in works such as *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), are central to the development of postmodernism as a major post-WWII theoretical framework within the humanities and social sciences. I will here outline those aspects of Lyotard's postmodern philosophy that inform many of the allegorical approaches to conspiracy theory.

Lyotard argues that modernity is pivoted upon particular 'metanarratives' – dominant 'ways of seeing' the world that have been effectively 'naturalised' as the conceptual frameworks upon which Western civilization operates. Metanarratives such as rationality, freedom, and progress underpin Western conceptions of science, politics, and the self. However, such metanarratives can be regarded as 'totalising' epistemological and social frameworks. They assume that certain ways of understanding reality are 'correct' or 'true', and that people who occupy social roles related to the perpetuation of such understandings, such as academically ordained 'experts', have cultural power as arbiters as to what can be

considered 'truth'. "Simplifying to the extreme", Lyotard defines the postmodern condition "as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). This incredulity is based upon the philosophical recognition that our views of the world and reality are almost entirely shaped by the languages we use to describe and conceptualise them. As argued by poststructuralist philosophy, the meanings of language are not 'fixed' but unstable in accordance with factors such as the cultural background of the percipient and the nature of sign systems. The 'postmodern condition' is an epistemological and ontological perspective in which the homogeneous worldviews of totalities and essences typical of modernist thought are giving way to heterogeneous worldviews of difference and instability related to this awareness of the play of meaning inherent in language. The 'world' constructed by these heterogeneous elements is not one of the totalising metanarratives but a multiplicity of small-scale, local, fluctuating narratives and ways of being (ibid: xxiv). Lyotard uses the term 'paralogy' to refer to these heterogeneous 'little narratives' that are suppressed by totalising metanarratives. A 'celebration' of paralogies can serve as a practical means of opening up the instabilities within metanarratives and challenging their totalising nature.

2.32 Paralogical studies

The configuration of conspiracy theories as 'paralogies' has proven influential for many postmodern academics interested in conspiracy theory. In this perspective conspiracy theories are 'little narratives' that derive from diverse individuals or groups and that explain reality in ways which directly challenge ideas such as 'trust' and 'rationality' which are integral to the metanarratives of fields such as government and science. In so doing they are typically regarded as 'illegitimate' forms of knowledge and consigned to the margins of society and culture. Paralogical discussions of conspiracy theories therefore tend to discuss conspiracy theories as allegories for the postmodern condition itself, in particular as oppositional narratives that question the epistemological certainties that drive the metanarratives of capitalist/modernist society. Such studies include Jodi Dean's *Aliens In America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (1998) and *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (2002); Clare Birchall's *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to*

Gossip (2006); Jack Bratich's *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (2008); many of the essays in the anthology *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2002, ed. Peter Knight) (all three authors mentioned above being contributors to this volume); and a plethora of journal articles (Keeley 1999; Dean 2000, 2001; Birchall 2001; Dorsey 2002; Bratich 2004; Walton 2007) For example, Walton (2007) summarises Birchall's work in explicitly paralogical terms:

Birchall argues that popular knowledges like conspiracy theory provide 'paralogic moves' which can help create 'dissensus' (as opposed to 'consensus') which in the end will force 'athetic' processes (a term Derrida used to suggest a process of moving 'beyond' the current theory or position) to occur in society. Thus, when a reader is forced to make deliberate decisions about the knowledge she encounters, she is involved in an 'athetic' process that in the end can result in a positive move forward – a process that can be described as a kind of 'politics'....So, even if these discursive formations foment 'latent insurrection' through 'dissensus', they are positive because they defamiliarize entrenched 'epistemic' power structures and move society forward toward justice and freedom through 'athetic' processes (Walton 2007).

The Internet is discussed as a key factor in the paralogical effects of contemporary conspiracy theory. For instance, Dean (2002) argues that the democratic ideal of the media as the 'public sphere' has been irrevocably co-opted as part of the 'totalising' metanarratives of late capitalism. The technocultural capacities of the Internet provide the basis for the development of paralogical forms of 'publicity', such as conspiracy theories, that challenge the totalising myths of the public sphere. For example, the ways in which conspiracy theorists have traditionally gathered evidence for their claims - linking together of disparate pieces of information into revelations of hidden conspiratorial truths – have traditionally been deemed 'illegitimate' as a basis for knowledge. However, the networked and decentered nature of the Net, which is predicated upon non-linear links between pieces of information in the form of information structures such as hypertext, can be seen to provide a media environment that legitimates such conspiracist information practices as forms of publicity. Online conspiracism

thus helps to configure the Net as a paralogical 'object' that is "politically threatening, bringing with [it] risks of fragmentation, the legitimization of marginalized and extreme political positions, and the de-authorization of the traditional and mainstream information sources" (Dean 2000: 77). Birchall briefly notes that a major part of the cultural history of the Net is its association with 'hacker' culture which has helped imbue the Net with an 'underground' ethos that suits those engaged in 'radical' or paralogical cultural activity, such as conspiracy theorists (Birchall 2006: 46-47). Bratich uses debates about the effects of the Internet on institutional journalism to articulate online conspiracism as a combination of cultural anxieties regarding conspiracy theories as paralogical challenges to consensus politics with "a broader cultural anxiety over the disruptive effects of new technologies" such as the Internet itself (Bratich: 94). In the face of the democratic potential of the Net as a site of 'citizen journalism' in forms such as blogs, mainstream journalists have attempted to preserve their elite position as information 'gatekeepers' by developing a 'conspiracy panic' in which online information is critiqued as being derived from inherently untrustworthy amateur sources such as conspiracy theorists (Bratich 2008: 79-95).

2.33 Allegorical approaches – Jameson

The importance of Jameson's take on postmodernity and academic approaches to conspiracy theory derive from his 1988 essay 'Cognitive Mapping' and are developed in more detail in later works such as *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Jameson 1992). My discussion of these ideas is indebted to Fran Mason's (2002) essay on cognitive mapping and conspiracy theory. Central to this relationship are Jameson's views of late capitalism as a 'totalising' system. The ongoing establishment of the large-scale, trans-national material and cultural forces of globalisation has overwhelmed the sense of 'the local' that serves as the basis for most people's experience of individual and community identity: "in the corporate multinational global economy of late capitalism, the multiple informational and sign systems that are made available cannot be synthesized by the individual subject or consciousness, a situation that also occurred in modernity, but which is exaggerated and intensified in late capital" (Mason 2002: 41). To use a topographical metaphor, the social and cultural 'map' of late capitalism is so vast

and dense that the boundaries between local and global identities have become blurred. The inability for individuals to adequately ‘map’ themselves in on a local scale is contributing to individual and collective senses of alienation. These senses, of what Mason calls “disconnection and fragmentation” (Mason 2002: 41), in turn help neuter the potentials of individuals and communities to effectively challenge and critique the power of late capitalism in relation to identity positions such as class, race and gender.

Jameson here posits ‘cognitive mapping’ as “a means to achieve an understanding of the complexities of the social relations that exist” in the globalised world of late capitalism (Mason 2002: 40). ‘Cognitive mapping’ delineates “a means by which the individual subject can locate and structure perceptions of social and class relations in a world where the local no longer drives social, political, and cultural structures or allows the individual subject to make sense of his or her environment” (Mason 2002: 41). The ‘means’ by which cognitive mapping takes place is identified with the realms of the cultural (beliefs) and the aesthetic (art). Jameson suggests that certain types of popular belief systems, such as conspiracy theories, and artistic activities, such as ‘postmodern’ art, represent attempts to encapsulate the totalising realities of late capitalism due to their capacities for rendering totality and complexity explicable through the use of metaphorical themes. However, Jameson also argues that both of these activities ultimately fail to accurately convey the nature of late capitalism and therefore to serve as a basis for criticism and resistance to its totalising nature. Conspiracy theory can be seen as “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content” (Jameson 1988: 356).

In this respect conspiracy theories stop being perceived as allegorical maps of late capitalism but instead become literal ‘truths’ in their own right. As a basis for critiquing late capitalism, therefore, conspiracy theories are inadequate in that they focus on cultural fantasies rather than the ‘real world’ of political economy. The highly conservative, often extremely right-wing worldviews espoused in such conspiracy theories further the critical inadequacy of conspiracy theory since they promote highly regressive and divisive social relations (e.g. racism, sexism, and the like) – divisions that serve to perpetuate late capitalism by preventing

different groups of people from uniting together in challenge against the late capitalist totality.

The cognitive mapping approach to conspiracy theory can be considered as something of a ‘middle ground’ between the pathological and paralogical approaches. By acknowledging that conspiracy theories represent genuine attempts by people to make sense of the nature of late capitalism and their individual and cultural relation to it, it doesn’t take the reductionist approach, typical of the pathological theorists, and argue that conspiracy theories are inherently destructive forms of political and cultural discourse. However, by recognising the failure of conspiracy theories to successfully realise their critiques of late capitalism, and by noting the potentially deleterious political consequences of the extremist ideologies that underlie conspiracist beliefs, nor does it take the radical approach of the paralogical theorists and argue that conspiracy theories are potentially ‘progressive’ forms of cultural politics.⁴

2.34 Cognitive mapping studies

Theorists utilising the cognitive map approach discuss conspiracy theories as culturally significant but politically problematic allegories for contemporary political trends, particularly those of globalisation and late capitalism. Studies in the cognitive mapping vein include Mark Fenster’s *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (1999); Timothy Melley’s *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000); and West and Sanders’ *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (2003). For example, Fenster notes the paralogical potential of conspiracy theories as symbolising a populist “resistance to power that implicitly imagines a better, collective future” (Fenster 1999: xiii). Conspiracy theories implicitly reflect popular feelings of political disempowerment, their signifying practices (such as the constant search for evidence that will uncover the conspiratorial plot) serving as an erstwhile form of cognitive mapping that symbolises citizens’ “sense of political insignificance” (Fenster 1999: xiv). However, the populist sensibility

⁴ Jameson’s adherence to the ‘metanarrative’ stance of neo-Marxist criticism and his apparently ‘unreconstituted’ cultural politics (as in the un-PC phrase ‘poor man’s cognitive mapping’) have led to his cognitive mapping ideas being attacked by scholars in the paralogic tradition; e.g. Spark (1997), Mason (2002).

inherent in most conspiracy culture is presented as one that articulates itself in a pathological sense, drawing on “the most simplistic, disabling, and dangerous interpretations of political order, including fascism, totalitarianism, racism, and anti-Semitism” (Fenster 1999: xiii). This needs to be understood if what is valuable about conspiracy theory – its ‘signifying practices’ about the nature of power – are to be appropriated for use within what Fenster terms “the evocative, emancipatory politics” of “a truly progressive populism” (Fenster 1999: xiv).

Of these studies, Fenster’s work provides the major discussion of the possible significance of the Internet to contemporary conspiracy theory. In a discussion of early 1990s American conspiracy theories such as the ‘Octopus’ narrative⁵, Fenster argues that conspiracy theorists were early adopters of the Internet “not merely to distribute information and ideas, but also as a forum for the formulation of political and social practice” (Fenster 1999: 197). Although not elaborated, the implication is that the Net enables conspiracy theorists to present conspiracism as a collective, alternative political ‘movement’ rather than a mass of contradictory, competing discourses.

2.35 Anthologies and general studies

There are also several anthologies and general studies of conspiracy theory across a range of subject areas which discuss conspiracy theory from both paralogical and cognitive mapping perspectives. Anthologies include George Marcus’s *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook of Conspiracy in Postwar America* (1999), Parish and Martin’s *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Social Sciences* (2001), both of which consider conspiracy theory from a sociological perspective, and Peter Knight’s cultural studies themed *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2002). Knight is also the author of *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (2001), a cultural history of conspiracy theories in post WWII American culture and society.

⁵ The ‘Octopus’ conspiracy theory was a superconspiracy narrative that linked together most of the American counter-culture conspiracy theories that had developed regarding the anti-democratic and imperialist activities of the US intelligence agencies (such as the Iran-Contra scandal or the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba) under the unifying device of a computer ‘super-program’ named PROMIS that was alleged to endow the US intelligence agencies with the ability to implement Orwellian control over US citizen’s private information and to manipulate the likes of global financial markets for their own sinister ends. See McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 128-130.

The major discussion of online conspiracism in the anthologies is Nigel James' essay 'Militias, the Patriot Movement, and the Internet: the Ideology of Conspiracism' in Parish and Parker (2001: 63-92). In a discussion of the conspiracy beliefs and practices of right-wing American nationalists, James argues that the 'computer mediated communication' (CMC) capacities of the Net, such as those of newsgroups and bulletin boards, has led to the development of virtual communities of nationalist groups which help codify and bolster their real-life counterparts. Knight's cultural history of American conspiracism contains a number of important observations about the nature of the relationship between conspiracy studies and the Internet. Knight argues that notions of connectivity constitute a metaphorical bond between the Net and conspiracy theory. He postulates that "the assumption that everything is connected has been one of the guiding principles of conspiracy theory. The hope – but also the fear – is that every seemingly insignificant fact or detail might turn out to be a clue to a larger plot, if only one could see the hidden connections" (Knight 2001: 204). The Net is a medium to which similar ideas of the interconnections between pieces of information are also central. In the decentered and networked information structures of the Net, "every [web]page is linked to at least one other, and so, in theory if rarely in practice, it is possible to click endlessly from one site to any other at will" (Knight 2001: 210). In this respect the connectivity of the Net makes it a medium well-suited to the creation and dissemination of conspiracy theory. Knight here describes the wider socio-political concerns that have developed regarding these correspondences between the Net and conspiracy theory. The "insatiable connectivity" of information on line is seen to encourage "paranoid cross-referencing" and the "circulation of conspiracist rumors" on a scale large enough for them to "reach a critical mass of acceptance" (Knight 2001: 210). Knight also presents a general outline of how the technocultural capacities of the Internet can facilitate conspiracist practices:

The user-friendly Web permits a widespread and virtually free netcast of alternative ideas that is potentially untraceable and uncensored. Unlike previous forms of conspiracy culture, the Web allows anyone to put forward to a potentially huge audience whatever views they like, crackpot or otherwise, with no overheads, no quality control, and no legal comeback. Since it is easy to cut and paste from other pages and

documents, conspiracy sites can quickly take on a baroque complexity, as each minor conspiracy theory is linked to all the others. More than anything, the Web encourages viewers to make links and trace the hidden conspiracies (Knight 2001: 211).

This summary touches on several ideas of significance to considerations of the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet. One is the association between the Web and ideas of freedom. The Web facilitates freedom of expression (“uncensored” and “alternative” ideas) and is also relatively free to use in an economic sense (“no overheads”). Another is the user-friendly nature of the medium. The Web favours amateur content in that there is “no quality control” determining what can be posted online, and in that it is easy for users to use the existing information online for their own purposes, as in cutting and pasting information from other pages and documents. A corollary of this is the way in which the connectivity of the Net potentially interpellates the user in the conspiracist mentality of interconnection, “encouraging viewers to make links” between different pieces of online information in order to bring out their hidden conspiratorial meanings.

2.4 Overview of critical approaches

In this section I will discuss what I regard as the useful and problematic aspects of the critical approaches outlined above. This will form the basis for the positioning of this study within existing academic approaches to the subject area of conspiracy theory.

2.41 Pathological approaches – strengths and weaknesses

To recap, there are two major tendencies of the pathological approach. The first is the treatment of conspiracy theories as the expressions and embodiments of particular political and ideological beliefs, in which the content of conspiracy narratives tends to be interpreted literally rather than metaphorically. The second

is the labelling of conspiracy beliefs as something intrinsically dangerous to social and political order. Conspiracy theories are perceived as expressions of worldviews based on ideological premises that are to a large extent opposed to those of modern, pluralist, consensus-oriented societies. An understanding of conspiracy theories is therefore necessary if they are to be successfully dismissed in the political realm. The pathological approach can therefore be seen as one that is critically and culturally conservative in that it seeks to protect existing political, cultural and epistemological structures from the challenges embodied in conspiracist beliefs.

The pathological portrayal of conspiracy theory as a resolutely negative and dangerous subject is understandable given the historical associations between conspiracist ideas, regimes of terror and acts of destruction. The 20th century saw particularly traumatic examples of these in the likes of the Holocaust and Stalinist Russia.⁶ In this respect I regard the strengths of the pathological approach as residing in its intensive historical overviews of the roots of conspiracist thought and awareness of the socio-political implications of conspiracy theories. This emphasis provides a degree of historical and political insight and depth often lacking in allegorical studies of conspiracy theory. Both the paralogical and cognitive map schools tend to discuss conspiracy theories as a manifestation of postmodern American society, with the historical context under investigation limited to the post-WWII era, particularly the fin-de-siecle period of the 1980s and 1990s. This can give the misleading impression that conspiracy theories are little more than a postmodern cultural movement flowering in the zeitgeist of the millennial shift to the 21st century.⁷

The major problem with the pathological perspective is that it reinforces a reductionist view of conspiracy theories as forms of political paranoia, a perspective which generally fails to consider the critical and symbolic significance of conspiracy theories in relation to the multifarious facets of social and cultural life that collectively constitute Western civilization. The nadir of this

⁶ More directly affective examples of this tendency for American scholars include the 1995 bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City by domestic terrorists whose 'patriot' worldviews perceived the federal government as the pivot of a conspiratorial 'New World Order' (McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 212–216), and the 9/11 terror attacks of 2001 which were predicated on the extremist worldviews of Islamic fundamentalism.

⁷ This impression of 'zeitgeist scholarship' is reinforced by the fact that the bulk of the studies in the allegorical approach appeared either side of the year 2000 e.g. Dean 1998; Fenster 1999; Marcus 1999; Dean 2000; Melley 2000; Knight 2001; Parish and Parker 2001; Knight 2002; West and Sanders 2003; Birchall 2005.

perspective is reached in the tendency for many of these critics to portray the relationship between conspiracy theory and mainstream American society as an epistemological and ideological struggle between the forces of ‘good and evil’. Such arguments have the ironic effect of making pathological scholars appear as apocalyptic and paranoid as those of the conspiracy theorists they are warning against.⁸

The lack of discussion of the wider critical and theoretical significance of conspiracy theories also evokes a sense of academic stagnation. The emphasis on conspiracy theory as something to be debunked and dismissed can appear as something of a defensive gesture, in which existing paradigms of rational thought must be protected and preserved from contamination by the conspiratorial ‘other’. This may be at the expense of the development of such paradigms in relation to the wider socio-cultural implications of conspiracy theories.

2.42 Allegorical approaches – strengths and weaknesses: paralogy

I see the major strengths of paralogical approaches to conspiracy theory as residing in their emphasis on conspiracy theories as cultural practices – something that ordinary people do as part of daily life.⁹ Such discussion of the complexity of the social environments within which conspiracy theories are implicated are important in relation to many key critical questions about conspiracy culture, such as the possible reasons for the persistence of conspiracist ideas in Western culture and the ostensible prominence of conspiracy theory in this millennial era. This emphasis on conspiracy theory as cultural practice can be seen as a corrective to the focus on the political implications of conspiracist discourses typical of pathological studies, and a complement to the treatment of conspiracy theories as ‘ideological metaphors’ typical of studies in the cognitive mapping vein.

⁸ For example, Goldberg’s conclusions that conspiracist “countersubversion may soon overwhelm the body politic”(Goldberg 2001: 260); and Barkun’s configuration of conspiracy theory as “a fighting faith” that “must obliterate its adversaries” (Barkun 2003).

⁹ For example, Birchall’s (2006) discussion of conspiracy theories as ‘popular knowledges’; Dean’s (1998) discussion of the alien abductee subculture; Bratich’s (2008) interest in the ‘grassroots’ nature of the 9/11 truth movement.

However, it is the examination of conspiracy theories as cultural practices embodying postmodern ideas of cultural politics that I feel render the paralogical approach particularly problematic. By treating conspiracy theories symbolically as radical oppositional narratives, paralogical theorists run the risk of bestowing some kind of critical legitimacy upon the extremist far-right ideological perspectives that constitute the content of most conspiracy theory. In this respect the paralogical approach can be seen as the inverse of the pathological approach. The pathological approach focuses on conspiracy theories as dangerous ideologies without considering their wider socio-cultural significance; the paralogical approach focuses on conspiracy theories as radical forms of cultural politics without considering the ideological implications of the actual conspiracist ideas presented.¹⁰

I will here discuss Bratich (2008) as an exemplar of this disjunction between conspiracy theory as cultural politics *form* and conspiracy theory as ideological *content*. Bratich seeks to reclaim conspiracy theory as a form of popular knowledge with “radical democratic potential” (Bratich 2008: 207). Conspiracist ‘skepticism’ regarding the ‘truth’ of official knowledges signifies the radical status of conspiracy theories as “counterhegemonic” discourses which articulate populist dissent against the totalising forces of globalisation and mainstream society (ibid:126). In this respect Bratich states that

one can see this counterhegemonic possibility at work in the way conspiracy theories foreground social, political, and economic inequality in their research. While not always presented in a traditionally leftist framework, conspiratorial research places inequities (and quite often explicitly classed ones) as a crucial component of its analysis. Distinctions between the powerful (at times omnipotent) and the powerless, the oppressors/oppressed, the elites

¹⁰ Fenster (1999) also recognises this problem in discussing the importance of popular culture to the “project of cultural studies and its amorphous, interdisciplinary, politically progressive project” (Fenster 1999: 222). As he states, “the populism of popular culture – embodied both in its more transgressive cultural texts and in the most active practices of reception of its audiences – is almost necessarily disruptive of dominant power structures, opposed to the “dominant” of “high” or “bourgeois” art, and, when pleasurable, an “empowering” experience. What happens, however, when this disruption, opposition, and empowerment are employed in the service of a genocidal racism, when “the people” is defined as an exclusionary and violent group?” (Fenster 1999: 222).

and the people are presented as both the object of study and the very motivation for doing conspiratology in the first place (ibid).

Bratich discusses the New World Order conspiracies that are an integral part of the American far-right militia/patriot movements as examples of such ‘counterhegemonic’ cultural politics in action. He acknowledges that these movements have been marginalised within the political arena because of their extremist worldviews: “It is true that dominant, conservative forces were at work within the militia movement and thus articulated NWO [narratives] in racist and anti-Semitic ways (e.g., when narrative elements like Zionist Occupational Government, race mixing, anti-immigration, and Christian Identity were central)” (ibid: 125). However, he then goes on to argue that “the fixation on the right-wing elements of militias and NWO theories ignores the more pervasive anti-elitist, populist forces that comprised them and brackets the politics of articulation for a politics of fixed identities” (ibid: 125-126). In other words, Bratich acknowledges that New World Order conspiracy theories are closely associated with extremist ideologies, but argues that such content is secondary to the counter-hegemonic potential inherent in the suspicion of institutionalised or elite authority that is integral to the New World Order worldview. This paralogical approach places Bratich in an ethically problematic and critically paradoxical position, in which the postmodern ideal of a non-totalising material and cultural politics is apparently realised through the critical legitimisation of conspiracy worldviews rooted in the highly totalising ideoscape of the American far-right.

This critical position is further reflected in Bratich’s use of conspiracy theories to critique mainstream liberal political perspectives. The liberal press and intelligensia are presented as cultural elites who function as ‘gatekeepers’ of critical debate, articulating criticisms of power within a narrow set of liberal socio-political concerns. In this respect conspiracy theories such as those of the 9/11 truth movement, that potentially offer genuinely radical critiques of power, are marginalised within the Left because of their populist provenance and ethos (ibid: 140-142). The critical implication is that the Left has become part of the establishment, leaving the likes of conspiracy theories such as those surrounding the events of 9/11 as one of the few remaining cultural sites of popular radical or transgressive political activity. However, nowhere does Bratich provide a detailed overview of the actual conspiracy claims asserted by the 9/11 truth movement.

9/11 conspiracy theories almost all centre around the belief that forces within the US government secretly staged the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in order to further the establishment of a conspiratorial New World Order. In the truther milieu the Islamic hijackers were either operatives or dupes for US intelligence agencies; the collapse of the World Trade Centre buildings was not due to the damage caused by the plane impacts but to demolition charges secretly planted by the government within the buildings; the Pentagon was not hit by a plane but by a US military missile (McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 360-370). Of course these claims strain credulity to the utmost. The logistics involved in order for such scenarios to be carried out border in the realms of the materially impossible: needless to say no scientifically plausible evidence has appeared to validate them outside of the exegesis of conspiracy theorists, almost all of which is based upon interpretations of documentary footage of the buildings' collapse rather than scientific analysis.¹¹ In these respects it can be postulated that a more obvious reason for the marginalisation of 9/11 conspiracy theories by the American left is not because of the cultural politics of gatekeeping but because the 9/11 conspiracy claims are so fantastical as to cast the credibility of any groups who espouse them into serious disrepute.¹² The 'radicalism' Bratich attributes to 9/11 conspiracy theories also overlooks the fact that plenty of other individuals and groups have used the 9/11 attacks as means to 'radically' critique the totalizing narratives of American hegemony and globalization without recourse to the ideological extremism of conspiracist perspectives (e.g. Chomsky 2001). The paralogical emphasis on the cultural politics of conspiracy theory can again be seen as highly problematic in that it downplays or excuses the extremist ideological beliefs inherent to most conspiracist worldviews. Conspiracy theories

¹¹ Conspiracist imaginings of 9/11 truth quickly took on baroque and grotesque dimensions, such as claims that the planes were actually holographic projections designed to disguise the 'controlled demolitions' of the twin towers, or that the attacks were a Zionist plot undertaken by Mossad (McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 360-370).

¹² Bratich also tries to argue away the far-right slant of much 9/11 conspiracy theory in paralogical terms: "At other times, right-wing sources have been cited by 9/11 skeptics. Most contentious has been the use of anti-Semitic and/or anti-Zionist narratives. Far from being seduced by right-wing narratives (as if belief in a 9/11 inside job is a "gateway theory" to anti-Semitism) the quarrelsome character of the 9/11 skeptics milieu forces the source's perspective to be foregrounded. However, the sources aren't considered poisoned just because their articulations presume a different, even repellant, context. A disagreeable source does not prevent the facts from being usable (undergoing similar filtering processes as agreeable ones). Articulation here is a practice involving parsing out bits, thus it refrains from a wholesale dismissal of an account because of its teller" (Bratich 2008: 145).

are therefore – ironically – ‘legitimated’ as vehicles of radical progressive thought.¹³

2.43 Allegorical approaches – strengths and weaknesses: cognitive mapping

As already indicated in section 2.33 above, the cognitive mapping approach can be seen as a middle ground between the critical polarities presented by the pathological and paralogical perspectives, in that it combines an awareness of the political/ideological content of conspiracy theory, typical of pathological perspectives, with an emphasis on the cultural/symbolic significance of conspiracy theory, typical of paralogical perspectives. I regard this synthesis as constituting the main critical strengths of the cognitive mapping approach. The cognitive mapping perspective recognises that conspiracy theories are symbolic manifestations by disempowered groups within society of the ‘totalising’ metanarratives of dominant power structures such as those of late capitalism. In this sense conspiracy theories can be construed as possessing a paralogical function in that their articulation of dominant power structures as agents of the conspiracy enables individuals and groups to identify themselves with oppositional or alternative positions. However, it also acknowledges the pathological nature of conspiracy theorising in that these oppositional or alternative positions are usually articulated via extremist ideologies such as anti-Semitism. Conspiracy theories therefore fail as discourses or worldviews which embody genuinely progressive alternatives to totalising forces such as late capitalism.

However, I regard the major critical weakness of the cognitive mapping approach as residing in a reductionist tendency to perceive conspiracy theories solely as metaphors for existing socio-political conditions. Conspiracy theories are treated as epiphenomenal manifestations of social and political contexts rather than socio-cultural phenomena in their own right. This can lead to other perspectives on the cultural and epistemological significance of conspiracy

¹³ My views here should not be taken as evidence of a critical animus towards cultural studies *per se* – merely as criticism of this particular application of cultural studies ideas in relation to conspiracy theory.

culture (something evident in the cultural studies background of the paralogical approach) being ignored or overlooked. For example, the conspiracist emphasis on the apocalyptic goals of the conspirators bears the direct influence of fundamentalist religious thought; while the thematic tension in contemporary conspiracy culture being a conspiratorially corrupt modernity and an idealised pre-modern past suggests strong ties between conspiracy thought and romanticism.¹⁴ In this respect the cognitive mapping approach may need to be ameliorated by a deeper recognition of the sociological and cultural aspects of conspiracy theory that are more evident in the paralogical approach with its emphasis on popular cultural contexts. The configuration of conspiracy theories as symbols of contemporary political and economic power structures – as in Jameson’s treatment of them as allegories for the alienating effects of late capitalism – can also exhibit a lack of awareness of the historical background of conspiracy theory. As is shown by the historical studies related to the pathological approach, contemporary conspiracy theories are not cultural by-products of late modernity and postmodernity but are usually better understood as current manifestations of ‘paranoid’ mindsets, extremist ideologies and fringe beliefs whose cultural roots often go back centuries.¹⁵ The tendency to overlook the historical contexts of contemporary conspiracy culture may therefore result in cognitive mapping approaches giving a narrow or distorted understanding of the political and cultural dimensions of conspiracy theory.

2.5 Critical position of this study

My theoretical take on conspiracy theories in this study is a syncretic one utilising elements from all three of the major theoretical approaches discussed. While I disagree with the pathological dismissal or contempt for conspiracy theory per se,

¹⁴ This tension is a notable undercurrent of post-war American conspiracism, in which the early American era of the Constitution and the founding of the American republic is portrayed as the American ideal of freedom from which America has been led astray by conspiratorial forces. See the overview of nationalist conspiracy theories in chapter 2, section 2.51. The likes of Hofstadter (1966), Curry and Brown (1972), and Goldberg (2001) also provide in-depth historical overviews of the development of strand of conspiracist discourse in American political life.

¹⁵ Notable examples here include anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, which stretch back to the early Christian era (Perry & Schweitzer 2002) and anti-Masonic conspiracy theories, which begin to flourish in Western culture in the late Middle Ages and Enlightenment eras (Goldberg 2001: McConnachie & Tudge 2005).

it is clearly evident from my background research into the conspiracy theories prevalent on the Internet that most are the expressions of extremist and far-right ideological perspectives rooted in American political and social contexts. I, therefore, share the pathological schools' concern with the highly negative socio-political implications of the content of such conspiracy theories. It is this awareness of the regressive and potentially destructive worldview implicit in most conspiracy theories that leads me to find the paralogical configuration of conspiracy theories, as 'radical' forms of cultural politics, an ethically dubious approach to adopt in relation to the subject. However, my observations of online conspiracy culture shall illustrate that many conspiracy theorists perceive and present themselves in paralogical terms as thinkers and activists who are concerned with directly challenging the dominant epistemological and political structures of modern Western society. In this respect paralogical ideas - such as conspiracy theories constituting a radical 'alternative' to mainstream culture - have proven a vital influence on the present work regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet.

It is also readily apparent from my background research that conspiracy theories also function in the cognitive mapping sense as allegories for the contemporary workings of power. Events in the political and economic realms, such as the 9/11 attacks or the 2007 - 2008 American finance sector crisis, form the backbone for the bulk of the conspiracy theories currently circulating on the Internet. In such respects the content of many conspiracy theories can readily be seen as attempts, by individuals and groups, to conceptualise and make sense of the complex workings of power (such as globalization and American hyperpower) through ideological frameworks that reconstitute such complexities in simplified forms. This perspective can be seen to overlap with the pathological and paralogical positions in that, while the ideological frameworks involved are usually based in extremist and far-right beliefs - thereby rendering such conspiracist 'maps' of power socially and politically ineffectual - they can still have cultural potency as the basis for such individuals and groups to 'empower' themselves against the anxieties and alienation inherent in such power structures. This does not, however, mean that I am approaching conspiracy theories purely as socio-political allegories. For example, although the 9/11 terror attacks of 2001 spawned a vast range of conspiracy theories, it is evident that most of these theories are not based on a *sui generis* view of 9/11 as conspiracy event but are

extensions of already existing conspiracy perspectives with complex historical, cultural, and ideological pedigrees. The main basis of the 9/11 conspiracy theories – that it was a ‘false flag’ attack undertaken by the US government itself – can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of a perennial strain of American conspiracism that perceives the federal government as an institution which is conspiratorially working against the constitutional liberties of the American people.¹⁶ In light of the above views, and my positioning of the cognitive mapping perspective as a middle ground between the pathological and paralogical perspectives, I set up the thesis’ approach to conspiracy theory as one of ‘modified cognitive mapping’, with a possible reference point in the work of Fenster (1999) which I think successfully combined pathological, paralogical, and cognitive mapping perspectives.

This syncretic approach is also useful in developing further theoretical considerations of the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet. All three theoretical perspectives consider the unregulated and decentered nature of the Internet to be the key point of connection with the beliefs and practices of conspiracy theory. For pathological theorists such as Pipes (1997) and Barkun (2003), these aspects of the Net make conspiracy theories more potentially dangerous as conspiracy theorists are able to use the Net to avoid the established epistemological structures that traditionally work to determine the validity of information within society (such as science, academia and much institutional journalism) and present their conspiracist ideas to large audiences as prospectively truthful pieces of information. For example, the vast amounts of information available on the Net can be seen to provide an invaluable resource for conspiracist practices of ‘pseudo-scholarship’. In relation to the concerns of this study, the pathological view provides insights into how conspiracy theorists can use the Internet to contextualise their ideas within the wider culture as valid or legitimate forms of information.

For paralogical theorists such as Birchall (2006) and Bratich (2008), conceptions of the Net as an unregulated and decentered medium are central to the articulation of conspiracy theories as ‘oppositional narratives’ in that they constitute the Net as a medium with radical ‘democratic’ potential that is well-

¹⁶ Previous manifestations of this strain include the 19th century American nativist and populist movements (Hofstadter 1966), the far-right John Birch Society of the 1950s and 1960s (Goldberg 2001), and (in a leftist form) the 1960s counterculture (Knight 2001).

matched with the ‘radical populist’ discourses of conspiracy theory. In this respect this paralogical perspective is useful to this study in that it considers the ways in which conspiracy theorists use the technocultural capacities of the Internet to present themselves as purveyors of socially and politically ‘radical’ information, as in their identification with socio-political configurations of the Net as an ‘alternative’ medium.

2.51 A typology of conspiracy theories

Another problematic aspect of existing theoretical approaches to conspiracy theory is the tendency to delineate the latter as a singular theoretical ‘object’. Almost all of the existing theoretical studies to date discuss conspiracy theories as if they all subscribe to the same sets of ideological beliefs and derive from the same social, cultural, and political contexts. This theoretical impression will be soon dispelled by observation of online conspiracy theories, which indicate wide differences across conspiracy theories in terms of factors such as ideological beliefs, cultural context, tone, etc. In other words, the dominant theoretical approach is to focus on the formal properties of conspiracy theory – the thematic and structural characteristics that distinguish conspiracy theory as a particular kind of cultural or political discourse (for example, the central conspiracist idea that there is a sinister plot being undertaken by some special ‘group’ to enhance their socio-political power). This focus on conspiracy theory as a ‘form’ of expression overlooks the diversity of conspiracist content, which indicates that ideas of conspiracy have resonance with, or are derived from, a wide range of socio-political perspectives. I will address this conceptual difficulty by briefly outlining ideas for a ‘typology’ of conspiracy theories that attempts to take into account the major contextual factors shaping conspiracy content in order to provide a more robust basis for my approach to the subject.

I hypothesize two major ‘types’ of conspiracy theory. The first is ‘realpolitik’ conspiracy theory, which views conspiracy in ‘hard’ political terms as part of the workings of existing political and economic structures without recourse to extremist or fantastical explanations. In this regard scholars such as Goshorn (2002) and Bale (2007) have criticised the dominant academic approaches to conspiracy theory discussed above for failing to adequately acknowledge the

reality of conspiratorial activities within contemporary structures of power. To use some recent American examples, the CIA's MK-ULTRA intelligence program in the 1960s, the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s, and the 9/11 attacks (i.e. the official explanation) in 2001 could all be considered examples of 'realpolitik' conspiratorial activities in that they were enacted in relation to institutional and geopolitical trends such as the Cold War, US hegemony in Latin America, and the politicisation of fundamentalist Islamic culture (McConnachie & Tudge 2005).¹⁷

The second type are 'classical' conspiracy theories, which conceptualise the conspiracy in terms of identity politics rooted in extremist far-right ideologies and/or occult beliefs. My research acknowledges that conspiracy theories are also expressed on the political left. However, I would argue that the vast bulk of conspiracy theories are predicated on far-right ideological beliefs, and that left-wing conspiracy theories are usually linked with realpolitik contexts. I therefore consider the critical assumption that conspiracy theories are expressions of extremist far-right thought to be generally accurate.¹⁸ I use the appellation 'classical' to connote the fact that such theories are those most commonly thought of or visible in terms of popular conceptions of conspiracies, and that such theories usually have a long ideological pedigree within Western culture (e.g. anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories). I delineate three main 'sub-categories' within the classical type. The first sub-category, and the one with the longest historical pedigree within Western culture, are fundamentalist conspiracy theories in which the conspiracy worldview is rooted in fundamentalist religious ideology (for theoretical discussions of fundamentalism see Antoun 2001; Ruthven 2004; Frey 2007). In terms of Western conspiracism, this fundamentalist perspective is invariably a Protestant one and is usually expressed in terms of

¹⁷ The American academic Noam Chomsky and Australian journalist John Pilger could be considered examples of 'realpolitik' conspiracy theorists in their discussions of the hidden geopolitical machinations of American imperialism and Western capitalism. For example, Chomsky 1992; Pilger 2002.

¹⁸ Certain conspiracy theories, such as those claiming that 9/11 was a 'inside job' by the US government, are often articulated on both the left and the right because the conspiracist connotations appeal to both left and right critiques of government. For example, the events of 9/11 are directly bound up with multiple areas of leftist/radical critique, such as the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the 'war on terror', and the neo-Conservative/hard right administration of President George W. Bush (2000 – 2008). 'Inside job' conspiracy theories have therefore been expressed by some in the radical American left. These leftist conspiracy theories of 9/11 tend to explain the 'inside job' premise in realpolitik terms as residing with neo-conservative factions within the US government, rather than identifying the conspirators as Illuminati, 'Zionist' Jews, Communists, or other ideological bogeymen typical of the American right.

American evangelism.¹⁹ The conspiracy is perceived to be a plot to undermine 'true' Protestant Christianity and the social and cultural structures that are associated with it (such as patriarchy, or American hyperpower as an expression of divinely ordained 'manifest destiny'). The conspirators are configured in relation to identity positions which represent challenges and alternatives to the fundamentalist worldview, such as Jews, Masons, Catholics, Jesuits, secular humanists, gays, and feminists.

The second sub-category are nationalist conspiracy theories predicated upon essentialist ideologies of national and racial identity (for theoretical discussions of nationalism see Calhoun 1997; Grosby 2005). Contemporary expressions of this perspective are invariably Amerocentric in nature. These conspiracies can be summarised in the catchphrase 'the plot against America'. In this conspiracist worldview, America is conceived as the mythic embodiment of the grand ideals of Western civilization, such as democracy, individual liberty, free market capitalism, and Protestant Christianity. These essential aspects of American identity are seen to be under threat by conspiratorial forces which seek to take over America and implement a society that is the mythic opposite of American 'freedoms', such as a totalitarian 'one-world government'. Such nationalist conspiracy theories tend to conceptualise the identity of the conspirators in three major forms. The first is with racial and cultural identity positions that are different to the 'white Anglo-Saxon Protestant' identity position that is held up as the basis of 'true Americanness', such as Jews and Hispanics. The second is with ideologies that present alternatives to American socio-political ideals, such as communism and socialism. The third form is that of political and economic organisations that present alternatives to American hyperpower through principles such as internationalism, such as the UN and the Trilateral Commission (McConnachie & Tudge 2005).

The third sub-category are New Age conspiracy theories. These are predicated upon the beliefs and worldviews of the many occult and alternative spiritual traditions that constitute what has have collectively been termed New Age thought and religion (for theoretical discussions of New Age beliefs see Heelas 1996; Kemp 2004; Kemp & Lewis 2007). These conspiracy ideas are more modern than fundamentalist and nationalist conspiracy theories, having developed alongside the

¹⁹ While this study is focussing on the Western cultural contexts of conspiracy theory, it is important to note in this regard that conspiracy theories are also a hallmark of fundamentalist Islam and Hinduism. See Pipes' (1997) study of Islamic conspiracism, and Antoun's (2001) global overview of fundamentalist movements.

rise of New Age thought in Western culture after World War II, and generally constitute the source of the more fantastical and bizarre conspiracy ideas. New Age conspiracy theories generally hypothesise that the human race is being prevented from developing into a more spiritually and socially advanced future by conspiratorial forces associated with degraded aspects of human nature such as materialism and scientism. This future-looking worldview is different from that of fundamentalist and nationalist conspiracy theories, which configure the actions of the conspirators as designed to prevent society returning to the values and lifestyle of an idealised religious and nationalist past. Identity positions typical of New Age conspiracy theories frequently identify the conspirators with ‘un-human’ forces such as aliens or ‘inter-dimensional intelligences’.

While I have outlined these sub-categories as distinct areas of conspiracy thought, most contemporary conspiracy theories use ideas from all three categories in a variety of ways. A particularly common trend in millennial conspiracy theory is the ‘superconspiracy’ narrative that combines fundamentalist, nationalist, and New Age conspiracy beliefs together (Barkun 2003: see Appendix One for further explication of this concept). The Illuminati New World Order is a contemporary conspiracy framework that functions in this superconspiracy fashion. The close socio-cultural ties between religious and national identity mean that fundamentalist and nationalist conspiracy themes are often closely intertwined with each other (e.g. anti-Semitic conspiracy beliefs that Zionists are plotting to both undermine true Protestant values and politically ‘take over’ America simultaneously). Conversely, there can be tension between fundamentalist and New Age conspiracy beliefs due to the wildly different spiritual outlook of both. Fundamentalist Christians see New Age faiths as ‘false religions’ that are part of the evil conspiracy to lead people away from their ‘true faith’; New Agers often portray fundamentalist and institutional Christianity as one of the conspiratorial control systems that has perpetually kept people and society locked into a ‘negative spiritual state’. From my research I will argue that nationalist conspiracy perspectives tend to be the most dominant in terms of contemporary conspiracy theory, with the religious and spiritual ideas of fundamentalist and New Age conspiracy perspectives often being used to reinforce nationalist identity in these contexts. For example, most expressions of the Illuminati superconspiracy tend to

have as their central focus the Illuminati's attempts to 'take over America'.²⁰ Fundamentalist and New Age ideas serve as the basis for subsidiary explications of this central nationalist focus, such as the Illuminati attempt to destroy American Protestantism as a means of undermining 'true' American identity and freedom, or the Illuminati using evil occult forces or alien technology to establish totalitarian control over the USA.²¹

I am focussing on classical conspiracy theories in this study for three main reasons. The first reason is that the extreme and fantastical nature of such conspiracy theories has made them the main focus of academic works on conspiracy theory. For example, nationalist and fundamentalist conspiracy theories are a major focal point for scholars concerned about the politically 'pathological' effects of conspiracy theory or for those interested in conspiracy theories as metaphors for the ideological upheavals of the modern West (see sections 2.2 – 2.22). The second reason is that these conspiracy theories are often highly visible in Western culture since the controversial and extremist nature of their beliefs renders them culturally 'spectacular' discourses. The third reason is that the extremist nature of classical conspiracy beliefs relegates such theories to the fringes of mainstream culture. Classical conspiracy theorists are therefore more likely to conceptualise and use the technocultural capacities of the Internet as a means of overcoming such marginalisation and legitimating their conspiracist ideas in relation to mainstream culture.

²⁰ A good example of such arguments is the conspiracist beliefs of the American-Canadian conspiracy theorist Henry Makow: <http://www.savethemales.ca/>

²¹ An extreme but clear illustration of such beliefs is the website *Educate Yourself*: <http://educate-yourself.org/>

CHAPTER 3

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the theoretical and methodological aspects of this study. It is divided into three sections. The first section provides a macro-focus outline of the theoretical contexts related to media studies that informed my approaches to investigating the relationships between conspiracy theory (as introduced in chapter 2) and the Internet. The second section outlines the methodological frameworks within which I conducted my research into conspiracy theory online. The third section describes the practical undertaking of my research and analysis, such as the sampling of online conspiracy content.

Section 1 –Theoretical contexts

Academic research in the field of media has traditionally been undertaken in relation to two major disciplines – media studies and communication studies. While there are notable similarities and cross-fertilisation of ideas between these disciplines, there are also significant differences in intent and approach that serve to distinguish each. In the interests of clarity, I will begin this section with a brief outline to delineate this study as one positioned within media rather than communication studies. In exploring the relationships between the ideological and epistemological aspects of conspiracy theory and the technocultural properties of the Internet, I am adopting an approach typical of media studies research: a discussion of the social and cultural meanings of media content and media technologies, as expressed in relation to theoretical perspectives such as ideology and subjectivity (Littlejohn 2002; Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee 2008). This emphasis on the interpretive and critical frameworks distinguishes media studies from communication studies, in which the media are more typically analysed in

relation to the largely positivist traditions of social science research (Reinard 1998).

The following delineation of the three major perspectives in media studies that constitute the theoretical context for this study is generalised as my intention here is functional rather than critical. By this I mean to broadly position my ideas in relation to existing media studies perspectives for methodological purposes, and to introduce some key concepts from these perspectives that will be engaged with more specifically in the research sections.

3.21 Public communication

The major theoretical perspective from media studies that has shaped my examination of conspiracy theory on the Internet is that of public communication. As outlined by McQuail (1992), public communication deals with democratic notions of the public in relation to the operation of media systems. The public is configured here as the collective body of individual citizens within a democratic society. The constituents of this body “share and pursue objectives and interests, especially in respect of forming opinion and advocating policy” (McQuail 1992: 2). In relation to the democratic ethos, the term ‘public’ connotes “what is open rather than closed, what is freely available rather than private in terms of access and ownership, what is collective and held in common rather than what is individual and personal” (ibid). ‘Public communication’ thereby “refers to the intricate web of informational, expressive and solidaristic transactions which take place in the ‘public sphere’ or public space of any society” (ibid). McQuail delineates three major components to public communication. The first is the ability of the public to access “the channels and networks of mass communication” (ibid). The second is “the time and space reserved in the media for attention to matters of general public concern” (ibid). The third is the presentation “of subject matter of general interest, about which it is relevant and legitimate to communicate openly and freely” (ibid). As McQuail’s outline suggests, public communication as a theoretical perspective entails a focus on ideas such as the media as a public sphere which operates in the public interest and on those media practices and media content relevant to the effective working

of democracy, such as news and journalism (these ideas are central to chapters 6-8).

The public communication focus on the political functions and socio-political effects of media systems appeared to me to be particularly pertinent to understanding how conspiracy theorists conceptualised and used the Internet. Integral to the very idea of conspiracy is the political relationship between publicity and secrecy. The democratic ideal is that the public should be kept informed regarding the workings of power – that political activity is made public or ‘publicised’ (Dean 2002). Conspiracy theorists might then argue that conspiratorial forces in positions of power violate this ideal by keeping information ‘hidden’ from the public or by presenting information in a distorted manner so as to further their conspiratorial machinations. A key theme of the conspiracist worldview is, therefore, that the traditional media systems of public communication are failing in their responsibilities to effectively inform the public regarding the practices of power. The Net is a new medium that represents an improved and alternative form of public communication, particularly through its technocultural capacities to present more supposedly ‘truthful’ information on grounds such as those presented by conspiracy theorists (this theme will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4).

3.22 Medium theory

A second theoretical perspective from media studies that has influenced this study is that of medium theory. Medium theory is concerned with “the communicative features and transformative potential of media technologies themselves” (Moore 2005: 42). The central premise here is that media technologies, by their very existence, operate as transformative agents upon social and cultural structures and behaviours. As Ronald Deibert notes, “at the heart of medium theory is the argument that changes in modes of communication – such as the shift from primitive orality to writing or the shift from print to electronic communications – have an important effect on the trajectory of social evolution” (Deibert 1997, in Macnamara 2010: 66).

Medium theory ideas can be seen to be manifest in a variety of generic assumptions that underpin the field of media studies. As outlined by McQuail

(2002), the first of these is that “newly invented communication technologies make possible more efficient production and distribution” of media content. The second is that “the application of the technologies [including the forms of organization involved] inevitably leads to new uses and forms of communication, as well as to more communication”. In this respect new media technologies can be regarded as having cultural and psychological effects in that they produce “new kinds of sense experience and media use behaviours”, as well as socio-political effects in that the coalescing of new uses and forms of communication “changes the relations between (media) ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’”, such as enabling ‘receivers’ to have more influence over the information content provided by those in the ‘sending’ position. New media technologies can therefore be seen as important in that they facilitate changes in “the power relations between different ‘communicators’ and between them and other agents of power in the society” (McQuail 2002: 16-17).

In more applied forms, medium theory has proven to be a critically contentious perspective within media studies due to what many scholars perceive to be its implicit tendencies towards technologically deterministic understandings of the media, in which changes in media technologies are configured as arbiters of radical ‘paradigm shifts’ shaping the development of human consciousness and society. As Jim Macnamara states, “medium theory as often advanced attributes changes in society to media alone, reducing multiple inter-related influences to a single alleged cause [changes in communication technologies] and assuming that technological innovation drives change rather than the opposite possibility – that change in society, economics, politics or culture drives technological innovation” (Macnamara 2010: 66). The popular expostulation of such ideas in the 1960s and 1970s by Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan has led (somewhat unfairly) to the development of the appellation ‘McLuhanism’ as a signifier for technologically deterministic medium theory perspectives (McLuhan & Zingrone 1997: McLuhan 2001).²²

These medium theory perspectives underlie many of the existing academic approaches to conspiracy theory (as discussed in chapter 2) and also complement my main theoretical focus on the Net as a site of public communication. For instance, generic medium theory ideas that the Net enables “more efficient

²² McLuhan’s ideas were themselves derived from the formative influence of his mentor and fellow Canadian scholar Harold Innis, as expressed in works such as *Empire and Communications* (1950).

production and distribution” of conspiracy content, and that the sensory experience of the Net somehow makes conspiracy content more ‘believable’ or ‘acceptable’ are central to pathological treatments of conspiracy theory (e.g. Pipes 1997: Barkun 2003). Similarly, arguments that the Net can alter the “power relations” between conspiracy theorists “and other agents of power in the society” are integral to paralogical conceptualisations of conspiracy theory (e.g. Dean 2002: Birchall 2006: Bratich 2008).

‘McLuhanesque’ perspectives on digital media as constituting a radical paradigm shift in human society are important to consider as a major philosophical underpinning to early cyber-utopian conceptions of the internet. As discussed in chapter 5, not only can such conceptions be argued to have established particularly influential discursive frameworks for popular understandings of the relationships between the internet and society, but also as shaping the ways in which conspiracy theorists perceive and utilise the internet as an ‘alternative public sphere’. A major theme of the study is that conspiracy theorists conceptualise the Net as a potentially radical alternative to the existing media of public communication because of its technocultural capacities for facilitating “more efficient production and distribution” of information in the public interest (this being the type of information that conspiracy theorists consider themselves to be presenting).

While technologically deterministic approaches to the net constitute a major subtext to this study in that I believe they are highly important to understanding how conspiracy theorists engage with the internet, it is not my intention to advocate such perspectives in relation to net culture. Some concluding criticisms of such approaches are presented in chapter 9.

3.23 Cultural politics

A third theoretical perspective related to media studies that is pertinent to this study (and one that tends toward reconfiguring aspects of the first two) is that of cultural politics. As outlined by Jordan and Weedon (1994), cultural politics explores how ideas of power are irrevocably implicated with ideas of culture. Culture here refers to “a set of material practices (such as interpersonal behaviour, language usage, media product consumption) which constitute meanings, values,

and subjectivities” (Jordan and Weedon 1994: 8). Culture is not merely a separate ‘sphere’ of human life (as in the artistic and creative activities of different peoples) but is regarded as a “dimension of all institutions – economic, social, and political” (ibid). In this respect cultural changes can lead to changes on this institutional level (e.g. the ‘counter-culture’ movements of the 1960s), while changes in the economic, social and political spheres may in turn lead to changes to cultural practices, products and perceptions (e.g. the association of free market economic theories with cultural notions of ‘individuality’ and ‘freedom’).

Building on these conceptions of culture, cultural politics is concerned with the meanings of the cultural practices that constitute society and “which groups and individuals have the power to define these meanings” via their communication in forms such as news and entertainment media (ibid: 5). Cultural politics thus functions as a counter-discourse to the technological determinist perspectives of medium theory positions, and present a major reconfiguration of the simplistic ‘sender-message-receiver’ models of communication which often form a default position in terms of theoretical conceptions of public communication and medium theory. These concerns with structures of cultural power are usually expressed through discussions of the relationships between social identity and inequality. Power is regarded as being directly implicated with particular identity positions or subjectivities, such as class, gender, and ethnicity. The privileging of particular identity positions over others leads to a “social relations of inequality” (ibid) that, unless challenged, usually becomes naturalised or hegemonic as the dominant mindset within which ideas of the individual and society are formulated and enacted. Cultural politics sees culture as a dynamic system in which dominant cultural practices and beliefs are constantly being challenged by those from oppressed or marginalised groups – a process which can result in the modification of social power structures towards a more equitable state (e.g. the success of feminist and anti-racist movements). The nature of “social power” is therefore seen as manifesting itself “in competing discourses” (ibid: 14).

A key aspect of cultural politics perspectives is an emphasis on the cultural practices that support structures of cultural power and inequality. Jordan and Weedon identify several types of cultural practice that are particularly significant in this context. The first is “the power to name”. Here terms are used to reinforce power inequalities by connoting particular groups as inferior or unequal to others. The second is “the power to represent common sense”. Here basic notions and

values that underlie a society are embodied and articulated in ways that promote the power of certain groups over others. The third is “the power to create official versions”. Here certain groups are able to control the institutional structures that determine what we take to be ‘official’ or ‘definitive’ views on subjects to create official versions of the world that naturalise their positions of power. The last is “the power to legitimate the social world”. Here certain groups have the “power to speak on behalf of respectable, decent society” and present their identity positions as the legitimate standard against which others are judged (ibid:13).

Conceptual sensitivity to these cultural practices was vital in contemplating a key aspect of online conspiracism - how conspiracy theorists conceptualised and used the Net to challenge mainstream knowledge through the construction and presentation of their ideas. Both the technocultural capacities of the Net, and the technocultural discourses which surround the Net (such as those of information freedom, discussed in chapter 5), provided epistemological and cultural contexts in which conspiracy theorists could prospectively overcome the pejorative associations of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ and present their ideas as being legitimate takes on the social world which challenged the official versions of events and the common sense values that underpin the existing systems of social power. A disclaimer is necessary here also. While these cultural politics ideas of ‘cultural practices’ were useful in thinking about how conspiracy theorists use the Internet, my application of them does not mean that I advocate or support the cultural politics of conspiracy theory – a cultural politics that is, for the most part, entwined with far-right and extremist ideologies (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.42).

Section 2 – Methodological frameworks

This study is my attempt to develop a framework of critical ideas from a variety of fields in the humanities – media studies, cultural studies, and politics - that I think important for helping to understand and explain the ways in which conspiracy theorists conceptualise and utilise the internet. I am thus presenting and arguing for this framework as an appropriate and insightful approach for interpreting the relationships between conspiracy theory and the net. Whilst a standard approach in the humanities, an interpretive study of this sort is loose in

terms of research methodology by comparison with the standards of social sciences research (techniques of which are also used within media studies work). The following sections will outline how this study may be positioned within broad paradigms of qualitative research; an interpretive research method is manifest in the study through the likes of hermeneutic approaches to the subject matter in question. – as one which inform study in the humanities and much of the social sciences.

3.31 Qualitative paradigms

As Wimmer & Dominick discuss, there is no set definition of qualitative research, with the term qualitative being used “to refer to (1) a broad philosophy and approach to research, (2) a research methodology, and (3) a specific set of research techniques” (Wimmer & Dominick 2003: 108). I will here discuss how this study relates to the first category – qualitative research as a broad philosophy and research approach.

Qualitative research approaches are often defined in relation to the objectivist - positivist paradigms of quantitative research as associated with the sciences. A key aim of such research is to generate empirical data from objectively controlled studies (such as surveys and experiments) that can then be used as objective proof to validate an hypothesis regarding a particular topic under investigation. By contrast, qualitative research is seen to be concerned with generating frameworks of interpretation – “to understand how people in everyday natural settings create meaning and interpret the events of their world” (Wimmer & Dominick 2003: 108). As such, it is generally associated with more subjective forms of research in which the researcher implicates themselves as part of the research process and/or attempts to develop their own frameworks for understanding such processes of interpretation in relation to specific social groups or trends. As Gomm (2004) states, the traditional approach towards understanding how people create interpretive structures for generating meaning can be labelled ‘the mind-reading approach’. The aim of such research “is to produce descriptions of...what is in people’s minds” that shapes their ways of interpreting and understanding the world. Such research “usually goes on to explain how people got their minds made up that way, and what are the consequences of people having the minds they

do” (Gomm 2004: 9). Such interpretive structures may be related to concepts such as “the distribution of power in society and political ideology” (Wimmer & Dominick 2003: 108). In these respects this study can be situated within this qualitative/interpretive paradigm in that I am attempting to understand how conspiracy theorists conceptualise the internet in relation to their interpretive frameworks of politics and society. These conspiracist frameworks in turn have their roots in critical concerns about the ways in which power is constructed in society and extremist ideologies.

In terms of research practices, Wimmer & Dominick identify five major differences between positivist (quantitative) and interpretive (qualitative) approaches:²³

1. **Role of the researcher.** The positivist researcher strives for objectivity and is separated from the data. The interpretive researcher is an integral part of the data; in fact, without the active participation of the researcher, no data exist.
2. **Design.** For a positivist, the design of a study is determined before it begins. In interpretive research, the design evolves during the research; it can be adjusted or changed as the research progresses.
3. **Setting.** The positivist researcher tries to limit contaminating and confounding variables by conducting investigations in controlled settings. The interpretive researcher conducts studies in the field, in natural surroundings, trying to capture the normal flow of events without controlling extraneous variables.
4. **Measurement instruments.** In positivist research, measurement instruments exist apart from the researcher; another party could use the instruments to collect data in the researcher’s absence. In interpretive research, the researcher is the instrument; no other individual can substitute.
5. **Theory building.** Where the positivist researcher uses research to test, support, or reject theory, the interpretive researcher develops theories as part of the research process – theory is “data driven” and emerges as part of the research process, evolving from the data as they are collected (ibid:109).

²³ It should be noted here that this interpretive approach encompasses a wide range of research methods and perspectives. As Gomm (2004) points out in overview of quantitative and qualitative paradigms, interpretive research can manifest in forms such ‘phenomenology, interpretivism, symbolic interactionism, interactionism, hermeneutics and ethnomethodology’. Some of these have wide applications across different disciplines and fields (such as hermeneutics, which I am using in this study – see section 3.32 below)); others are usually used more specifically (e.g. ethnomethodology).

Again, I consider my research in this study to reflect the interpretive research practices outlined here. In relation to point 1, I have actively selected certain types of conspiracy theory and specific websites as key focal points for my researches into online conspiracism. Regarding point 2, the design of my study changed according to various factors that became apparent from ongoing observation of online conspiracy material (such as the links between conspiracy theory and ideas of alternative media). In terms of point 3, while my studies have not been ‘field research’ in the ethnographic sense of directly observing or interviewing conspiracy theorists, I have treated the web as the ‘natural media surroundings’ within which much conspiracy discourse is presented as part of the ‘normal flows’ of information and cultural expression online. My selection of particular online conspiracy texts and sites as representative of online conspiracism overall positions me in a subjective interpretive position typical of point 4. Regarding point 5, my theories about the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet were definitely ‘data driven’ in that they developed out of my observations of online conspiracist thought and practice.

In relation to the hermeneutic framework discussed in the following section, in this study I use particular conspiracy texts as representative examples of broader conspiracist beliefs and practices that I considered integral to developing an understanding of the relationships between conspiracy theory and the internet. Most of these texts take the form of conspiracist essays or articles sourced from particular websites. However, in chapter 9 the conspiracist text that is used as illustration is the conspiracy news site *Rense.com*. My discussion of this website includes content analyses of trends associated with the news content on *Rense.com*, which are expressed in the form of statistic tables. While the use of statistics is often associated with quantitative research approaches, it is not mutually exclusive with qualitative approaches. As Glesne (2005) states in her overview of research approaches, there is often overlap between quantitative and qualitative research methods. However, it is usually clear in the course of the study that “the dominant mode of gathering data”, along with the intentions and focus of the study, identifies it as operating within quantitative or qualitative research paradigms. For example, “if doing ethnography, I might include a quantifiable survey in my study, but most of my methods would be qualitative” (Glesne 2005: 8). The statistics tables presented in chapter 9 are a useful method for presenting what I consider to be significant qualities of the news practices

typical of *Rense.com*, rather than representations of quantitative analysis (which would require a much more wide-ranging and rigorously controlled survey of conspiracist news sites).

3.32 Hermeneutic approaches

In terms of more specific discussion of qualitative/interpretive research methods, this study takes a hermeneutic approach to the study of online conspiracy theory.

Hermeneutics has two main applications as a research approach. Firstly, it encapsulates a particular type of analytical approach based on a process of examination and interpretation. This process is referred to as the ‘hermeneutic circle’. A researcher looks “at a specific text in terms of a general idea of what that text may mean”, then modifies “the general idea based on the examination of the specifics of the text” to come to a greater understanding of the text and the contexts within which it operates (Littlejohn 2002: 188). Secondly, it is used in a more specific sense to refer to an analysis of particular objects of study. These take two main forms: text hermeneutics, that seek to interpret the meanings of texts such as novels or films; and social or cultural hermeneutics which are interested in interpreting the actions and practices of people and communities (ibid: 187).

In this hermeneutic context, texts are “any artefacts that can be examined and interpreted...A text is essentially a recording, whether written, electronic, photographic, or preserved by some other means. Even actions can be viewed as texts, but more often, the term designates written documents and other records” (ibid: 187). Therefore, texts include “films, television programmes, radio programmes, newspaper articles, websites, magazines, pop music and so on” (Bertrand & Hughes 2005: 173). Notions of text must therefore consider the ways in which information is presented in different media. The emphasis in this study is on websites as texts. A website is an information space that contains within it many individual ‘pages’ of content. Since each of the pages can be accessed and downloaded as a discreet media object, ‘text’ may be used to refer to an individual web page as well as an overall web site. ‘Text’ can also be used in a much more literal sense to refer to the dominant role of words and writing in the content of

websites. Since the bulk of people's interactions with computers and cyber-media like the Net is enacted through a keypad in which information is presented online in the form of writing, written text can be considered "probably the most important part of most webpages" (Whittaker 2004: 205).

My method for examining online conspiracy theory as a means for developing ideas about the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet made use of both the hermeneutic circle and text/social hermeneutic approaches. In relation to the general analytic approach of the hermeneutic circle, I considered online conspiracy texts in terms of general theoretical ideas about both conspiracy theory and the Internet, then used specific aspects of those texts – such as conspiracist comments about the Internet, or the ways in which evidence for the conspiracy was presented to the reader – to further develop ideas regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet.

In relation to the specifics of text and social/cultural hermeneutics, I examined conspiracy websites in order to develop interpretations of conspiracy thought (for instance through the actual ideas presented in written form by conspiracy theorists) and conspiracy practice (such as the ways in which conspiracy websites present conspiracy theories as forms of news). For example, in chapter 4 I present textual analyses of essays posted online by conspiracy theorists as illustrations of the ethos of 'information freedom' that I argue is integral to contemporary conspiracy thought. The analysis of the *Rense.com* website in chapter 9 is done in relation to the social/cultural hermeneutics approach, as there I am interested in specific information practices of the site, such as its presentation of conspiracist information alongside mainstream news stories.

3.33 Cultural interpretation

A particular variant of social/cultural hermeneutics that is particularly relevant as a research framework for this study is the approach termed 'cultural interpretation'. As Littlejohn (2002) notes, "this kind of hermeneutics requires observing and describing the actions of a group, just as one might examine a written text, and trying to figure out what they mean" (Littlejohn 2002: 192). The researcher observes the activities of a particular group in order to build up an understanding of the inner workings of the group and the systems of meaning that

hold the group together. Cultural interpretation is outlined as a four-part research process. First, “a basic orientation to the subject” in which the researcher “assesses his or her own assumptions about culture and its manifestations”. For example, some researchers may “identify communication as central to culture...and decide to focus on various aspects of communication” (ibid:193). Second, defining the “classes or kinds of activity that will be observed”. Thirdly, theorizing “about the specific culture under investigation”. This may involve ‘interpreting certain activities within the context of the culture itself’ (ibid: 193). Fourth, returning back to the external perspective of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ and comparing specific cases that have been examined with “the general theory of culture” that has been operative (ibid: 193).

In relation to these precepts of cultural interpretation, my basic orientation in studying online conspiracism was related to the theoretical assumption that the Internet is a medium of particular significance to contemporary conspiracy culture. Secondly, I defined conspiracy websites as the ‘kinds of activity’ that would be observed, with particular emphasis placed upon those conspiracy websites whose content is typical of ‘classical’ conspiracy theory (see chapter 2, section 2.51). Thirdly, I interpreted certain activities or ideas which I observe on conspiracy websites in relation to what I understand about the wider cultural and ideological contexts of conspiracy theory. Finally, I correlated my observations of specific conspiracy websites with my basic theoretical assumptions regarding the significance of the Net to web culture.

Section 3 – Web research practices

In this section I will outline some of the specific methods by which I researched online conspiracy content, in relation to the hermeneutic and cultural interpretation methodological frameworks outlined above.

3.41 Data-gathering – non-participant observation

In order to understand how conspiracy theorists think about the world, as the basis for ascertaining how conspiracy theorists engage with the internet, I

adopted a straightforward data-gathering approach of non-participant observation of conspiracy websites. While I regularly observed the content of conspiracy websites, I did not engage with the conspiracy theorists on these sites or participate directly in online conspiracist activity. Non-participant observation is a specific approach within a broader context of naturalistic observation, in which the researcher is interested in observing the activities of a particular social or cultural group within a particular environment (physical/social/cultural). As Gomm (2004) states, such naturalistic observation “shows the researcher what people actually do” within a particular environmental context (Gomm 2004: 12). The significance of this approach is that the researcher is ostensibly able to get a more accurate perspective on people’s behaviour and ideas through observing them ‘in their natural state’ of everyday activity. In this case, I was interested in observing what conspiracy theorists did within the cultural environment of the internet. Such observation also provided me with insights into the worldviews and mindsets of conspiracy theorists.

On a regular or semi-regular basis I observed a variety of conspiracy websites in terms of factors such as the specific ideas presented in a conspiracist essay, the ideas put forth in the comments pages of the site, and the ways in which the website presented its information content. Given my own socio-cultural background, and in relation to the practicalities of undertaking this study, I only looked at English-language websites. This approach was treated as a means of ‘objectively’ examining the themes and ideas promulgated by conspiracy theorists and the modes of presentation used in the operation of conspiracy websites. The interpretations of online conspiracy thought and practice made through such observation were then used as the basis for developing frameworks for understanding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet, such as my central argument that conspiracy theorists see themselves as practitioners of radical/alternative media.

A wide range of conspiracy websites were observed in order to both gain a thorough overview of the ways in which conspiracy theorists engaged with the net and a good knowledge of conspiracist worldviews and mindsets (see the list of conspiracy websites in the bibliography). From my observations of these sites I then selected content on particular sites, or particular sites themselves, as representative examples of major trends and themes of online conspiracist thought and practice. Conspiracist essays and articles presented in this study are the pieces

by Swinney and Weidner presented in chapter 4 section 4.22, and the ‘Jolly Roger’ piece presented in chapter 5 section 5.3; while a detailed examination of the *Rense.com* website is the subject of chapter 8. This use of specific examples as illustrations of a corpus of beliefs and practices is a standard application of hermeneutic approaches outlined above, in which specific texts are considered in relation to more general ideas of what they may mean. In this case, the ‘general’ context for interpretation of these specific texts was that of a conspiracist worldview, as outlined in appendix 1 and the typology of conspiracy theories delineated in chapter 2, section 2.51. I will also state here that I have presented the aforementioned articles in their entirety within the main body of my text, rather than as an appendix. While lengthy, I considered this approach important in effectively conveying to the reader an accurate sense of the sorts of mindsets and writing styles that typify conspiracist writing, and in presenting an in-depth ‘set-up’ for my subsequent arguments related to the content presented in these articles. There was also an ethical dimension to this approach, in that I felt presenting a piece of conspiracist writing verbatim not only constituted a corrective to the conspiracist practice of selective quotation (presenting snippets of writing from the likes of official or institutional sources as proof of conspiratorial machinations because such snippets are decontextualized from their larger frameworks of meaning) but would also present a buffer from possible criticism of my ideas from conspiracy theorists if they came across this study, since I have not engaged in the likes of selective quotation in relation to the conspiracist sources involved.²⁴

I adopted this non-participant observational approach because I considered this the most effective way of ascertaining how conspiracy theorists engaged with the internet. I could observe large quantities of conspiracist material freely available online in forms such as web sites, blogs, and personal web sites and therefore comparatively ascertain specific patterns and trends of conspiracist belief and practice on a wide scale. Since Anglophone conspiracy theory is predominantly

²⁴ This attitude was also prompted by the fracas surrounding the masters thesis written by University of Waikato philosophy student Roel van Leeuwen tracing the ideological trajectory of leading New Zealand far-right extremist Kerry Bolton that occurred when I was beginning my research. After reading the thesis online, Bolton undertook legal action against the University and van Leeuwen, claiming the thesis quoted him out of context and misrepresented his ideas (van Leeuwen was later exonerated from these charges). For a good local summary of the saga, see Josh Drummond’s article ‘Dark Dreams: How Waikato University’s handling of the van Leeuwen thesis created the worst academic scandal in years’, written 13 July 2009, originally written for the University of Waikato student magazine *Nexus* and available online at <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/ED0907/S00049.htm>.

the domain of American theorists (and to a lesser extent the UK), the virtual nature of the internet also meant that I had direct access to conspiracist content that logistically would have been extremely hard to source from New Zealand due to geographical constraints. There were also two major assumptions underpinning this approach that I adopted as self-evident. Firstly, that conspiracy websites were accurate reflections of conspiracy thought and practice. Secondly, that the specific ideas expressed by the authors of the content to be found on such sites were accurate reflections of the conspiracist beliefs of those individuals.

As stated in qualitative research surveys such as Gomm (2004) and Glesne (2005), naturalistic observation (both participant and non-participant) is often complemented by some form of qualitative interviewing of individuals or groups related to the socio-cultural group, behaviour, or belief system under observation. I did not undertake interview-based research because I considered the content presented on conspiracy websites to be suitably indicative both of the ways in which conspiracy theorists engaged with the internet, and in what their conspiracist worldviews were (in regards to what individual conspiracy theorists wrote and of how these individual contributions revealed collective conspiracist beliefs and mindsets). While more complexity and depth may have resulted from interviews with conspiracy theorists regarding their ideas and attitudes towards the internet, there were also a variety of logistical and ethical issues involved in this regard, such as getting in contact with prospective interviewees (most of whom would be based in the USA) and getting conspiracy theorists to co-operate with an academic study that takes a critical stance towards their beliefs (academia being one of the institutions of social power that most conspiracy theorists regard in an conspiratorial light). Since the development of a critical framework for considering the relationships between conspiracy theory and the internet was enough of a focus for this study, I consider such interview-based research as an area that could be prospectively be dealt with in terms of follow-up work.

In early stages of the study I did engage in a modicum of direct participation with conspiracy theorists through the comments sections on the New Zealand conspiracy news website *Uncensored.com*. Here I adopted a pseudonym and proceeded to engage in sceptical debate with other conspiracist commentators regarding the conspiracist ideas that they were propagating. However, such participation was personally rather than research-motivated, in that I found myself emotionally and ethically affronted by the extremist worldviews presented by the

conspiracy theorists on the site (being a local site for the dissemination of ideas that I previously envisaged in foreign cultural contexts), and engaged in such activity as a form of psychological adjustment to the disturbing realities of the subject area. While these interactions with actual conspiracy theorists were useful in reinforcing my understandings of conspiracist thought and practice, I did not consider them as formal research for the personal motivations outlined above.

3.42 Observation of online conspiracy material – website analysis

In relation to the methodological principles of hermeneutic interpretation and non-participant observation discussed above, my research observations of online conspiracy material were conducted in relation to what web theorists Schneider and Foot (2004) delineate as the three main techniques of website analysis.

The first of these techniques is labelled discursive or rhetorical analysis. These are “more concerned with the content of a website than its structuring elements”, focussing on “the texts and images that are contained on webpages, and /or on webpages/websites” (Schneider and Foot 2004: 116). Schneider and Foot argue that a problem with this approach is that it considers web content in relation to ideas of text typical of old media (e.g. a text as a discrete object). In this respect it can overlook the importance of factors such as hypertextuality and connectivity in relation to web content. The second technique is termed structural or feature analysis. This focuses on the structural elements of a site, such as the number of pages contained within a site and the ways in which these might be ordered, or organising features of a site such as search engines, privacy policies, or multiple navigation options. Schneider and Foot regard such approaches as limited in that “they do not afford systematic analysis of an individual site's situatedness in the larger web, that is, the external pages to which it links and are linked to it” (ibid: 116). The third technique is socio-cultural analysis. This examines “the hyperlinked context(s) and situatedness of websites” along with “the aims, strategies and identity-construction processes of website producers” (ibid: 116). This approach is preferred to the other two in that it combines an understanding of website content and structure from the discursive and structural approaches with an awareness of the unique properties of websites, such as hypertextuality and situatedness.

I would describe my research technique as, therefore, socio-cultural analysis of online conspiracy material. Socio-cultural analysis can be seen to encapsulate both the theoretical contexts and methodological frameworks already discussed as being of significance to this study. Ideas from medium theory, and associated frameworks of interpretative qualitative research, are reflected in the socio-cultural analysis of conspiracy websites to examine the ways in which conspiracy theorists have conceptualised the Net as part of their conspiracist identity (e.g. through ideas of ‘information freedom’ – see chapter 4). Theoretical ideas of public communication and cultural politics, and the critical qualitative research frameworks associated with these, are reflected in the socio-cultural analysis of conspiracy websites to examine how conspiracy theorists have used the Net strategically in relation to the aim of legitimating their conspiracist beliefs within the wider culture (e.g. in relation to ideas of alternative media – see chapter 6). This socio-cultural analysis of online material also makes use of discursive and structural analysis of website content. The syncretic nature of the socio-cultural approach, in that it makes use of both discursive and rhetorical analytic techniques, is also reflected in this study. Understanding the ways in which conspiracy theorists have conceptualised the Net as part of their conspiracist identity are based upon discursive analyses of online conspiracy essays that discuss the Internet (see chapters 4 & 5). Similarly, my theorising regarding how conspiracy theorists have used the Net to position their conspiracist beliefs within the wider culture are based upon structural analyses of conspiracy websites, such as *Rense.com* (see chapter 8).

Schneider and Foot also propose the notion of a ‘web sphere’ as a useful way of conceptualising particular forms of online content as a specific research object, in relation to the hypertextual and interactive capacities that distinguish the Net from other media systems. A web sphere is outlined as “not simply a collection of websites, but as a hyperlinked set of dynamically-defined digital resources that span multiple websites and are deemed relevant, or related, to a central theme or ‘object’. The boundaries of a web sphere are delimited by a shared object-orientation and a temporal framework” (ibid: 118). In this respect online conspiracy theory could be configured as the conspiracist web sphere – multiple websites, connected to each other via hyperlinkages, that provide resources for research and discussion of conspiracy topics.

While I find the notion of a web sphere useful for describing online conspiracy theory as a research object due to its recognition of multiple websites linked by particular subject matter and by temporal factors (such as old webpages which are still accessible), I do not consider this study to be a specific ‘web sphere analysis’ as outlined by Schneider and Foot. This would be an analytical technique that attempts to give comprehensive research coverage of online material within a particular web sphere through the archiving of individual websites within a particular sphere at different time periods; the cross-referencing of various components across collected sites using computer-assisted techniques (presumably for objectivity); and the integration of interviews with the producers and users of websites. I see this study as instead developing a critical framework for discussing the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet that can then be examined more closely through intensive web sphere analysis. For example, the discussions in chapter 7 and 8 about how conspiracy theorists make use of online modes of alternative news would probably serve as a good basis for a future analysis of news sites within the conspiracist web sphere.

3.43 Observing online conspiracy material – website types and conspiracy content

I will here outline the main types of conspiracy websites to indicate the wide range of material that I observed as research background for this assignment. While my central focus in this study is on conspiracy news sites, the content presented on such sites was often derived from non-news conspiracy sites, while a detailed understanding of the conspiracist mindset and worldview required observation of a wide range of online conspiracy material. In terms of conceptualising websites as objects of study, it is important to note that the multimedia capacities of the Net can enable the producers of websites to present information in written forms (e.g. news items, essays, comments), visual forms (e.g. still images, video footage) and ‘cyber’-forms (e.g. hypertext).

The two types of website that seemed most popular for the online presentation of conspiracist material were news sites and homepages/blogs. News sites are websites which provide news information in a manner similar to existing news media such as newspapers and television news bulletins. Conspiracy news sites

typically featured the following sorts of content: stories from mainstream news sources on topics of conspiracist significance; news items from conspiracist sources; and opinion/commentary pieces on current events. Indicative examples of conspiracy news sites include the American sites *InfoWars.com* and *Rense.com* and the New Zealand site *Uncensored.com* (a case study of conspiracist news sites in the form of *Rense.com* is presented in chapter 8). Homepages and blogs are both variants of personal websites. A personal homepage refers to a site that deals with the lifestyle and interests of a particular person and where content is about the personal “interests and aspirations of its producer” (Whittaker 2004: 174). Blogs – short for weblogs – consist of “a regularly updated diary or log of a person’s interests or activities” (Whittaker 2004: 176). The content on such sites is not necessarily self-centered in relation to the personality of the producer, but may reflect an individual’s interest in particular political issues and cultural activities. Good examples of such sites include the homepage of the American conspiracy theorist Jordan Maxwell, and the 9/11 blog *Truth Gone Wild*. Other general types of web format that conspiracy theorists often used are newsgroups and bulletin boards. These are “communal” sites in which individuals post comments on a particular topic or subject area as part of a process of interactive online dialogue with other web users – “readers do not simply consume messages but are expected to post their own responses, whether as answers to questions or requests for help, or a public statement in reply to other (equally public) statements posted online” (Whittaker 2004: 174). An exemplar of this is the *abovetopsecret.com* website.

Alongside versions of news sites and blogs adapted to conspiracist topics, there are also several types of web site that appear to be more specific to conspiracy culture in general. Particularly notable in this regard are website versions of conspiracy magazines and radio shows. The content of such sites generally serves two functions. Firstly, to provide a complementary source of information in relation to conspiracist topics raised in the magazine/radio formats but which are limited in terms of the spatial and temporal constraints of such media. In this respect such sites may provide features such as comments pages and chat rooms in which readers/listeners can provide feedback on and engage in debate about conspiracy topics presented in print and on-air formats, or conspiracy topics in general. Secondly to promote the more commercially lucrative magazine and radio show formats. Representative examples of these types of site include

Rense.com, which is the Net version of the Jeff Rense syndicated radio show; *Paranoia*, the website of the conspiracy magazine of the same name; and *Coast to Coast AM*, the website of one of America's most popular talk radio shows which specialises in paranormal and conspiracist subjects.

Also specifically conspiracist in nature are websites devoted to a specific conspiracy topic or worldview such as 9/11 or the Illuminati. Representative examples of these types of site include the self explanatory *Illuminati Conspiracy Archives*, and *The Enterprise Mission.com* which focuses on conspiracy theories regarding NASA and US government cover-ups of the existence of extra-terrestrial life on Mars and the moon. A variation on this type are websites centered upon groups and communities whose worldview is heavily predicated upon conspiracy beliefs. For example, the *Leading Edge International Research Group* is a New Age group whose worldview is one that incorporates UFO conspiracy theories. Both of these types of sites often have a promotional tone, in that they are attempting to raise the profile of the conspiracy theory or group in question, and an organisational tone in that they seek to enlist members and/or funding to the particular conspiracy cause or group involved.

In terms of subject matter, while my observations involved websites dealing with 'realpolitik' conspiracism as a means of getting a thorough knowledge of the subject area (such as the British website *Lobster*), my core focus was upon what I have outlined in section 2.51, chapter 1 as classical conspiracy theories, in which the conspiracist ideas presented are predicated upon various strands of identity politics linked with extremist/far right ideologies and occult beliefs. To briefly define these in terms of conspiracist tropes, conspiracy theories based in nationalist identity politics tend to present conspiracy theories dealing with themes such as the New World Order, One World Government, secret government, communists, and 'international bankers'. Conspiracy theories based on the identity politics of fundamentalist Christianity focus on conspiracies relating to belief systems such as Zionism, Freemasonry, Catholicism, Jesuitism, Satanism. Conspiracy theories based upon the identity politics of New Age beliefs tend to deal with topics such as UFOs, alien invasions, underground bases, earth changes, and the 2012 apocalypse. Many contemporary conspiracy websites promote 'super-conspiracy' theories that link ideas from all of these positions together, with the secret society of the Illuminati functioning as the all-encompassing conspiratorial agency involved.

Alongside subject matter, it was clear that conspiracy websites were also readily identifiable by some distinctive stylistic tendencies in areas such as language use and website aesthetics. Particularly notable in rhetorical terms were conspiracist terminology, jargon, and neologisms. Examples include the phrase ‘the New World Order’ as a generic signifier of conspiratorial activity; the term ‘sheeple’ to pejoratively describe those average citizens who do not ascribe to the ‘truth’ of the conspiracy theory in question; and ‘shill’ to denote someone who actively debunks or challenges conspiracy theorists as an agent of the conspiracy. A tone of populist outrage was also typical of conspiracy sites – for example, exhortations by the conspiracy theorist in question for ‘the people’ to ‘Wake up!’ to the evil truth of the conspiracy in their midst. Specific modes of reasoning and presentation of evidence are also hallmarks of conspiracy rhetoric. Prime examples include ‘self-referential’ or ‘pseudo’ scholarship, in which conspiracy theorists cite each other’s work as ‘scholarly’ references (for more on this strategy see Hofstadter 1966: 35-38; Pipes 1997: 34), and a reliance on anecdotal testimony by alleged conspiratorial ‘whistleblowers’. A visual corollary to this was the presentation of conspiracist iconography. Probably the most visible example of this was the use of the ‘eye in the pyramid’ (an established Masonic motif) as a symbol for the omnipresent ‘Illuminati’ superconspiracy.

In terms of the aesthetics of website appearance and design, conspiracy websites were also notable for their presentation of advertising for conspiracy-themed products, such as ‘survivalist supplies’ of food, water, and weapons (so that conspiracists can equip themselves to be self-sufficient and thus escape the clutches of the totalitarian ‘New World Order’), and the selling of conspiracist books and DVD documentaries. Other significant aesthetic features of conspiracy websites were related to the ways in which conspiracy evidence was presented. For example, this included analysis of photos using digital manipulation software, a use of material such as news footage accessed from other websites, and embedded audio-visual material, such as YouTube clips and conspiracist documentaries.

3.5 Summary

While public communication is the major theoretical framework I am using for considering the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet, I have also incorporated ideas from media theory and cultural politics perspectives as these are particularly pertinent to discussions of the technocultural capacities and effects of the Internet.

The methodological context for this study is one of hermeneutic analysis in relation to non-participant observation of online conspiracy material. I considered these research approaches to be the most straightforward in relation to the main objectives of this study – the development of a critical framework for understanding the relationships between the internet and conspiracy theory – in that they provided a wide scope for engagement with conspiracy material and the proposition of critical hypotheses related to such material.

CHAPTER 4

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will argue that a suspicion of the relationships between traditional media and power is an integral part of the logic of classical conspiracist thought, and that in this respect conspiracy theories operate inside major frameworks of critical thinking about the relationships between media and power. It will also discuss how these conspiracist attitudes towards media power are informed by political concepts of freedom and democracy, including the likes of civil liberties and public service media, and democratic variants such as populism and libertarianism. The explication of such ideas in this chapter will inform my subsequent arguments regarding the ways in which classical conspiracy theorists configure the Internet as a medium which embodies a democratic ideal of ‘information freedom’, and in how they appropriate this ideal as a legitimating framework for their conspiracist beliefs.

The chapter has two main parts. The first section discusses how classical conspiracy theorists perceive established mainstream media, such as television and the press, to be systems of conspiratorial control, in a manner akin to radical/critical traditions of media power. Against these perceptions the Internet is conceptualised in ideal terms as a medium where information can be presented free of conspiracist influence. The second part outlines the political ideas that inform classical conspiracist notions of freedom in general and conspiracist views of the Net as a site of information freedom in particular. These ideas will in turn inform the discussions of the Internet as a site of information freedom in chapter 5, and the discussions of the relationship between conspiracy theory and the Internet as an alternative public sphere that form the subject matter of chapters 6-8.

4.21 The mainstream media as conspiratorial control system

From my observations of conspiracist material, I would argue that the ways in which classical conspiracy theorists conceptualise established media systems as agents of conspiratorial control constitutes the central starting point for understanding the relationships between classical conspiracy culture and the Internet. My discussion of these ideas in this and the following chapters will revolve around a schema of media systems which distinguishes between mainstream media, alternative media, and conspiracist media. I will here present a table outlining these differences as a reference aid for subsequent discussion:

Figure 1: Schema of media systems referred to in this study

Media systems	Ownership	Content	Ideological function	Ideal audience	Major media forms
Mainstream	State Corporate	Popular Commercial Sensational	Reinforce status quo	Consumers	TV Newspapers Magazines Film
Alternative	Independent Amateur	Informative Democratic Debate	Critical/radical Public Sphere	Citizens	Internet Radio Journals Magazines
Conspiracist	Independent Amateur	Informative Didactic	Critical/radical Extremist	Citizens Believers	Internet Radio Magazines Books

My delineation of media systems here is an attempt to portray what I understand as the conspiracist view of media – a dichotomy between mainstream and alternative sources. As will be discussed in the following chapters, conspiracy theorists consider themselves to be operating in the realms of alternative media in ideological opposition to media which is configured as the mainstream. The bottom row is my outline of what I consider to be the main characteristics of

‘conspiracist’ media. While such media possesses some significant points of overlap with alternative media, it also possesses significant degrees of difference as well - an important point that underpins much of the discussions in chapters 6-8.

In relation to the major tenets of conspiracist thought outlined in chapter 2, section 2.51, and Appendix 1, I would argue that the key theme influencing conspiracist attitudes towards mainstream media is that of *control*. The conspirators are envisaged as small groups who use various systems of control to realise the maximum extent of power over the ‘mass’ public. This control is exercised in an inter-related fashion via control over thought – how people *think* about the world – and control over action and behaviour – how people *act* in relation to their views of social and political reality. Such control systems enable the conspirators to more effectively implement their schemes by reducing possible opposition and interpellating citizens into positions of acceptance and acquiescence with the conspiratorial scheme. Central to this process is the idea of the *control of information*. In conspiracist thought, information is synonymous with the ‘facts’ regarding the ways in which political and social systems are organized and operate. Genuine or ‘true’ information that is information of the sort which reveals the reality of the conspiratorial plots for global domination or similar would provide citizens with the knowledge needed to challenge the conspirators’ plans. The control of such information is thus a crucial aspect of the conspiracy in question. This control of information takes two major forms in conspiracist discourse. One is the *suppression* of information, in which information potentially harmful to the conspirators’ interests is censored or rendered off-limits as a topic of public discussion. The other is the *manipulation* of information, in which ostensibly ‘truthful’ information is made public but in forms shaped in accordance with the interests of the conspiratorial groups involved so that its veracity is compromised.

Since one of the prime functions of mainstream media is to provide citizens with ostensibly accurate and useful information about the wider socio-political reality in which they live, it is inevitable that such media will be regarded with suspicion by conspiracy theorists as prime sites in which the conspiratorial control of information can be exercised. In this perspective the government officials and corporate professionals who own and operate mainstream media outlets become agents of the conspiracy who use their influence to propagate information

conducive to the aims of the conspirators involved. Thus, for many classical conspiracy theorists, the information presented in mainstream media systems consists of forms of conspiratorial propaganda, disinformation, or ‘mind control’. By publicising information that has been suppressed or unknown, conspiracy theorists represent a challenge to these conspiratorial systems of information control. In this respect many contemporary conspiracy theorists present themselves as activists, subversives, or rebels engaged in ‘information warfare’ against the conspiratorial ‘controllers’ who are manipulating mainstream media representations of the world in their own interests.²⁵

These conspiracist attitudes towards the mainstream media can be considered as extremist or fringe versions of radical/critical critiques of media power. With reference to the work of James Curran (2002), I will use this section to outline the major ideas of the radical/critical tradition and consider how such perspectives are reflected in conspiracist conceptions of mainstream media as conspiratorial control systems. This discussion will articulate some key themes underlying the relationships between the logic of conspiracy theory and the technocultural myths of the Internet as an embodiment of democratic ideas of information freedom that will form the basis for subsequent arguments in this study. The following section will present some representative examples of how these radical/critical suspicions of the mainstream media are articulated in conspiracist terms, and how these articulations position the Internet as a medium free from conspiratorial control, prefiguring the discussion of the Internet as a site of information freedom presented in chapter 5.

Curran posits radical approaches to ideas of media power as operating in contrast to the dominant liberal tradition which conceives the media as possessing “a high degree of autonomy in advanced liberal democracies” (Curran 2002: 129). In this tradition the mainstream media are believed to work in the public interest “as a consequence of being independent from government, accountable to the public through the market and influenced by the professional concerns of media staff” (ibid: 132). Radical approaches argue that mainstream media are not autonomous, but are instead heavily implicated with the structures of political and economic power. For example, in their news and entertainment content,

²⁵ I have borrowed the phrase ‘information warfare’ in this context from one of the leading conspiracy news sites on the Web – *Infowars.com* run by American conspiracist Alex Jones. This term is also used in other contexts to refer to the likes of cyber attacks and politically motivated online hacking.

mainstream media outlets favour certain types of stories and modes of representation that generally reinforce rather than challenge or critique the status quo (ibid: 138-139). Radical critics are therefore concerned with the multitude of inter-related factors that “encourage the media to support dominant power interests” (ibid: 148). These factors include:

1. State censorship. The “wide range of coercive, regulatory and patronage powers” the state possesses that “potentially enable it to gag and control the media”. These include “repressive legal limitations on freedom of media expression”, “control over entry into the journalism profession”, and “the lifting of monopoly restraints and provision of financial aid to assist only pro-government media” (ibid).

2. High entry costs. The “large investment needed to establish new media enterprises in the mass market” which effectively “prevent non-elite groups from owning popular media”, limiting media diversity and curtailing consumer choice (ibid).

3. Media concentration. The supplanting of the old looser “partnership arrangements between leading media companies” (ibid) in favour of concentration and consolidation which has resulted in “a growing alliance between the providers of media content and controllers of distribution channels, and between companies in the old and new media sectors, both nationally and globally”. In these respects “producer power has been extended at the expense of consumer influence” (ibid: 149).

4. Corporate ownership. The corporate nature of many mainstream media companies which mean that “their principal shareholders and top executives are wealthy people, with a stake in the status quo”, who have “material business in promoting market-friendly policies”. These corporate owners can “influence the ethos, direction and goals of these organizations through the setting of policy, the hiring and firing of key staff, and the allocation of rewards” (although “their exercise of power within media organizations is constrained in a number of ways, and their political orientations are also not uniform”) (ibid).

5. Mass market pressures. Because “economies of scale are especially high in the media industries”, there is “a very strong incentive to maximise audiences”. Mainstream media content, particularly that classed as entertainment, tends “therefore to converge towards the consensual and conventional, advance

universal themes with a wide appeal, follow tried and tested formulae and seek to avoid giving offence to significant segments of their audience” (ibid).

6. Consumer inequalities: Much of the “media provision for niche markets is skewed towards the interests and needs of the affluent because their high disposable incomes make them a prime market” (ibid).

7. Advertising influence. The consumer inequalities inherent in mainstream media “distort the distribution of media advertising expenditure” and create a ‘prestige press’ of “advertising-rich minority” media aimed at elites, giving them “an influential voice not available to other small minority groups”, and orienting media systems “more towards the wealthy than the poor because the former bring higher advertising rewards” (ibid). Advertisers can also exert direct influence over media outlets “by supporting media which offer a conducive environment for their products or politics, and withholding support from those who do not conform”, something to which “specialist and local media, dependent on a small pool of advertisers, are more vulnerable to” (ibid: 150).

8. Rise of public relations. The use of public relations companies by “both government and business corporations” which effectively “subsidise the cost of gathering and processing the news in order to influence positively the way they are reported” (ibid).

9. News routines and values. The time and budget pressures which lead news organizations to regularly “cover prestige institutions (such as branches of the state)”, which have well-organized media capacities, “as an economical and effective way of gathering the news”. Such routines encourage mainstream media “to give disproportionate attention to the activities and concerns of these institutions” (ibid) at the expense of less organized and/or less powerful groups.

10. Unequal resources. The involuntarily internalization by media staff of “the values, images, explanatory frameworks and premises that are widely shared in society”, and the ability for groups which possess “greater cultural capital (authority, expertise, communication skills), social capital (prestige and social connexions), or economic capital (economic power and material resources) than others” to “exploit these assets to gain control of leading institutions, which influence public attitudes and behaviour” (ibid).

11. Dominant discourses. This refers to the deployment in mainstream media of dominant discourses which underpin capitalist and nationalist structures of power,

such as the anti-communism that was “a key theme of twentieth-century Western ideology” (ibid).

These factors can be thematically combined into three broad areas of radical concern with media power. These are state/corporate control of media content (1, 3, 4, 8); market forces and their restrictions on media access/shaping of media content (2, 5, 6, 7); and the relationships between media content and journalistic practices (9, 10, 11). Classical conspiracy thought can be said to focus on similar areas of concern in its suspicion of mainstream media as systems of conspiratorial control. In terms of concerns about state/corporate control of media content, almost all classical conspiracy theorists identify the workings of the conspiracy with the activities of the state and major corporations. Because these are the two institutional forces that possess the most political and economic power, they are inevitably seen as vehicles through which the conspirators enact their schemes of world domination. In relation to the radical concerns with state/corporate ownership outlined above, conspiracy theorists view the power of the state to censor information, particularly on social/defense grounds such as ‘public morals’ or ‘national security’ (factor 1) as a direct means by which the conspirators involved can silence dissenting voices seeking to expose the ‘truth’ behind the conspiracy. The concentration of media outlets as part of larger corporate networks (factors 3 and 4) are seen as indirect means of censorship/misinformation in that the conspiratorial/corporate power interests can use their position as media owners to directly/indirectly shape news content into ideologically amenable forms, along with restricting the amount of independent news sources that may offer more ‘truthful’ media content. These trends are exacerbated by public relations practices which, in the conspiracist view, involve deliberately misinforming the public as to the ‘real’ conspiratorial activities of governments and corporations (factor 8). Such perspectives are readily apparent in the conspiracist article by Clare Swinney which will be discussed in section 4.22. Swinney argues that both the corporate and state-owned New Zealand television channels are controlled by conspiratorial forces which manipulate the news through the likes of censorship (through what Swinney sees as the failure of the mainstream media to report on a scientific study that allegedly supported conspiracist claims that the 9/11 attacks on the WTC buildings were controlled demolitions undertaken by forces within the US government) and misinformation

(Swinney arguing that news footage of the 7/7 London bombings is a fabrication designed to cover up the actual conspiratorial truth of the event).

In relation to radical concerns with market forces and how these restrict access to media and shape media content, conspiracy theorists argue that the high entry costs (factor 2) required to establish media on a mainstream footing are effective restrictions on smaller/independent news and information sources, such as those made by conspiracy theorists, from reaching mass audiences with their ideas. Swinney clearly articulates these ideas by presenting conspiracy websites such as *Infowars.com* as independent – and therefore better quality – information sources than corporate controlled mainstream media such as television. Regarding the ways in which market forces shape mainstream content, conspiracy theorists appear unanimous in their perceptions of mainstream media systems as providing the public with poor quality information on important issues because they are more concerned with formulaic content they know will attract audiences and generate advertising revenue (factors 5 and 7), and that media representations are designed to inculcate the values of the dominant conspiratorial elites in the rest of the populace (factor 6). The conspiracist essay by Jay Weidner which is also presented in section 4.22 echoes such perspectives by arguing that the non-commercial and interactive nature of the Internet has enabled users to create and access content in ways which have undermined the traditional demographic models of mainstream media production and distribution that were used to divide audiences “along the lines of race, creed, class, color, religion, sex, and location” (Weidner 2008).

Finally, the radical concerns regarding mainstream journalistic practices are also highly applicable to conspiracist views of mainstream media. Mainstream journalism is seen by many conspiracy theorists to be a key site of conspiratorial control due to the ability of powerful conspiratorial groups to manipulate the information resources journalists rely on through the likes of political and economic influence and the implication of journalists within the dominant worldview which downplays the ‘truth’ of the conspiratorial nature of society, thus ensuring journalists naturally reinforce the conspiratorial status quo and marginalise the dissenting voices of conspiracy theorists (factors 9, 10, and 11). This perception is particularly evident in Weidner’s article, in which the online conspiracy news site *Rense.com* is delineated as a site of journalistic ‘excellence’

since it deals with information regarding the conspiratorial truths of society that mainstream journalism ignores.

Alongside this discussion of the power imbalances which constitute the main areas of concern for radical/critical approaches to media power, Curran also outlines several main “countervailing influences” on media power in the form of popular and radical forces which “can influence the media in liberal democracies” (ibid: 151). Many of these influences can be also seen to inform conspiracy theorists’ perceptions of the Internet as a medium free of the conspiratorial control that typifies the mainstream media. The first countervailing influence outlined by Curran is cultural power, in which

non-elite groups can develop alternative understandings of society, engender a strong sense of collective identity, and transmit collective allegiances and radical commitments from one generation to the next, through personal interaction, social rituals and the institutions under their control or influence. Through collective action in the workplace and civil society, they can seek to change prevailing attitudes. Above all, their numerical strength means that potentially they can secure, through the electoral process, political influence over the state and use its power to modify the organization and culture of society (ibid).

The Internet can be configured as a site of cultural power for conspiracy theorists because it provides a cultural space for conspiracy theorists, as ‘non-elite groups’, to ‘develop alternative understandings of society’ and ‘engender a strong sense of collective identity’ through the ‘personal interaction’ and ‘social rituals’ inherent in online communication, outside of the traditional structures of media power which ensure the marginalisation of conspiracist perspectives in the mainstream media. This notion of cultural power is clearly articulated in Weidner’s description in section 4.22 of the *Rense.com* conspiracy news site as forming the basis for a ‘rebellion of the intelligent’ because it attracts ‘smart’ people who are aware of the compromised nature of the information reported in the mainstream media. While the ability for conspiracy theorists to translate this cultural power into political forms of the type suggested by Curran is a source of theoretical contention (e.g. Fenster 1999: 225-226), it should be noted that the cultural power of online conspiracy theory have in some cases, such as the 9/11 truth movement,

contributed to increased public awareness and identification with specific conspiracist discourses (such as the belief that the WTC buildings were deliberately destroyed by the US government under the pretext of the 9/11 attacks),²⁶ and the manifestation of direct political activity (for example, 9/11 truth public meetings, demonstrations, and appeals to government officials).²⁷

Other countervailing influences outlined by Curran include notions of producer power and source power. Producer power refers to the ability for “subordinate groups” to “gain a media voice through owning their own media enterprises”. These “have met with greatest success in specialist markets where entry costs are low, and also in the past when media costs were sometimes less than they are now” (Curran 2002: 154). Curran singles out the Internet as being particularly significant in this respect, providing “a means of communication which is cheap, global, interactive and relatively free from official regulation” (ibid).²⁸ The Internet can be seen as a site of producer power for conspiracy theorists in that its relatively cheap and unregulated nature enables the development of conspiracy-specific content platforms such as websites, streamed radio broadcasts and downloadable documentaries and because its global networking capacities enable the dissemination of such material to potentially large audiences around the globe.

Source power refers to the processes by which “non-elite groups can influence the media” through the establishment of “organizations which are used as sources of news and comment by the media” (ibid: 152). Whether such sources are treated

²⁶ Good examples of these are the online 9/11 conspiracy documentaries in the *Loose Change* series (Avery 2005-2009), and the New Age conspiracy documentary *Zeitgeist* (Joseph 2007) which prominently features 9/11 conspiracy material. These documentaries have proved hugely popular on prominent websites such as *Youtube* (British journalist Ed Pilkington, for example, states that over 4 million people had viewed one of the *Loose Change* films by 2007) and have helped popularise the ‘9/11 as US government conspiracy’ theory on a worldwide scale. Amidst a plethora of online information on these films, reference material consulted for this study included the websites for the *Loose Change* films, <http://www.loosechange911.com/>, and *Zeitgeist*, <http://www.zeitgeistmovie.com/>; skeptical websites such as *Screw Loose Change*, <http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/>; and articles such as ‘Loose Talk’ by Ed Pilkington published in the UK newspaper the *Guardian Weekly* Feb 9-15 2007 (hard copy only: does not appear to be available via the *Guardian* website). Websites accessed 9/9/2010.

²⁷ The website *9/11Truth.org* is a focal point for activism centered around 9/11 conspiracy beliefs. Grassroots communities organised around the Web that regularly undertake public activity relating to 9/11 conspiracy theories include *Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, <http://www.ae911truth.org/>, and the *International Center for 9/11 Studies*, http://www.ic911studies.org/Home_Page.html. Websites accessed 9/9/2010.

²⁸ Curran also notes that the real world imbalances of cultural/media resources are reflected on the Internet as well. Access to online info is “restricted by global and class-based inequalities of computer ownership”, while content is “dominated by business use” with “internal signposting systems” that “can sideline alternative communications” (Curran 2002: 154).

credibly and used by mainstream media “depends, in part, on how much public backing they receive, the topical resonance of their concerns, their perceived importance and their proven reliability” (ibid: 153). Such status can be developed “through improvements in organization” (e.g. cheap PR strategies) and “wider changes in society” which can “influence the structure and hierarchy of the news sources routinely used by the media” (ibid). The Internet can be seen as a site of source power for conspiracy theorists because of the ways in which its decentralised structures of information organisation remove the hierarchical constraints that influence the use of sources in mainstream media contexts. For example, the search engines such as *Google* which constitute the chief means by which users selecting online content often present websites based upon the popularity of a site (how many ‘hits’ it has received) rather than the institutional or professional status of the website. Websites created by amateur users and which may contain qualitatively dubious information – such as those typical of conspiracy theorists – may, because of their regular usage, be ranked as a reputable online information source on an equivalent level to official news sites. Since, for example, many mainstream news agencies are cutting back on their hard information practices such as frontline reporting and increasingly using the Internet as an information source (Davies 2008), the perceived importance of conspiracy websites as useful sources of information created by search engine rankings may lead to conspiracist ideas filtering into mainstream media discourse, as has happened with 9/11 conspiracy theories that the US government secretly staged the 9/11 attacks, or theories that anthropogenic global warming is not a scientific fact but part of a plot to establish a conspiratorial New World Order.

The last major countervailing influence outlined by Curran is staff power - the relationships between journalists and the public. Curran outlines three main strands in this relationship. The first is the populist view of journalism, in which news presenters and reporters represent the ‘unified public’. This generally results in news which reflects, and thereby reinforces, existing social values rather than critiquing or challenging them. The second is the democratic perspective, in which the journalists’ job is to facilitate debate amongst the populace on issues and topics of collective interest. While this perspective ostensibly involves critiquing the mainstream, Curran points out that such debates are usually framed in relation to values and ideas that are derived from the establishment rather than ‘unrepresented’ sources. The third position is the ‘radical/romantic’ one, in which

journalists are seen as crusaders for truth and justice, standing up for the rights and voices of the socially underprivileged and dispossessed. The Internet endows conspiracy theorists with staff power because the decentralised and unregulated characteristics that place it outside the traditional structures of mainstream media accentuate the radical and romantic impulses that are innate to the conspiracist mindset – for example, the belief of many conspiracy theorists that the public needs to accept that their conspiracy theories constitute the real nature of society, and that their conspiracist beliefs are literally revolutionary in their political and epistemological implications. On the Internet conspiracy theorists can absolve themselves of the mainstream stereotypes of conspiracy theorists as paranoid cranks and present themselves as radical investigative journalists who are exposing the reality that exists behind the veneer of political and economic power for the benefit of a public who are otherwise manipulated and lied to. Such a perspective is evident in the Weidner article presented in section 4.22, which depicts conspiracy theorist Jeff Rense as the epitome of the radical ideal of the muckraking journalist, uncovering information that is inspiring people to rebel against the conspiratorial structures that govern society.

This discussion of the ostensibly radical approaches taken by conspiracy theorists towards mainstream media power has articulated important themes implicit to the logic of conspiracy theory which inform the arguments regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet that will be developed throughout the rest of this study. The first is the conspiracist belief that the public service/civil society functions of the mainstream media to effectively inform the public about the workings of power, such as journalism, have been irrevocably compromised by the conspiratorially-affiliated state and market institutions which own and operate mainstream media systems. The second is the conspiracist configuration of the Internet as a countervailing influence to the conspiratorial control of the mainstream media. The technocultural structures of the Net enable information to be presented and distributed free of the conspiratorial control structures of the mainstream media, thus empowering conspiracy theorists by providing a media environment conducive to their information practices. These essential components of conspiracy logic will be developed as major points of connection with the mythic discourses of the Internet in the delineation of the Internet as a site of information freedom in chapter 5, and in the critical articulation of the Internet as an alternative medium

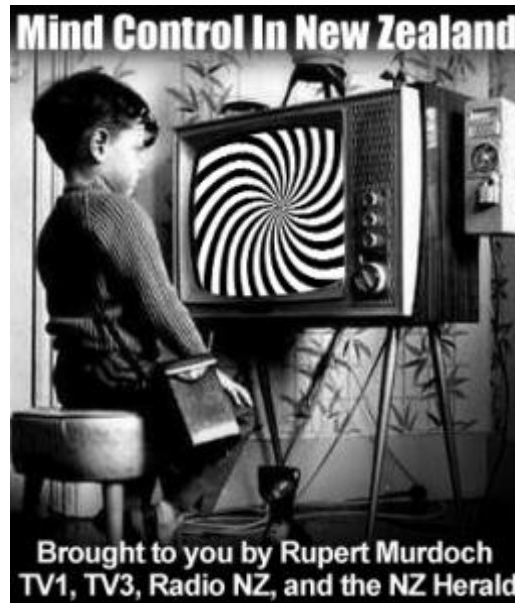
(and legitimating framework for conspiracist beliefs) that is developed across chapters 6-8.

4.22 Conspiratorial control of the media – examples

This section presents two online articles written by conspiracy theorists as exemplars of the ideas discussed in section 4.21 regarding conspiracist suspicions of mainstream media power and the conspiracist articulation of the Internet as a countervailing influence on such power. I have chosen these articles as they present clear examples of the discursive tropes that are typical of conspiracist attitudes towards the power structures of mainstream media. The first article is written by New Zealand conspiracy theorist Clare Swinney and is taken from the New Zealand conspiracy news site *Web Of Evidence: What They Don't Want you to Know*. The article is presented in full on pages 71-78 with discussion following on pages 79-82. The second article is written by American conspiracy theorist Jay Weidner and is taken from the New Zealand conspiracy news site *Uncensored.co.nz* where it has been sourced from the American conspiracy news site *Rense.com*. This article is presented in full on pages 82-87 with discussion following on pages 87-89.

Swinney's article argues that mainstream media content, particularly news, is controlled by conspiratorial forces in the shape of the corporate and state entities that own and operate mainstream media outlets, and that the Internet represents a significant alternative to mainstream media because it enables information to be presented free of the control structures of mainstream media. Swinney's sources will be referenced throughout.

***Why Are So Many People in New Zealand Out of
Touch With Reality? 06/23/2009***



Artwork By Brocke Lever truthimage@internode.on.net

A cursory examination of how the mainstream media has addressed, or more to the point, has not addressed a number of issues recently, including some relating to 9/11, so-called “man-made global warming” and the “swine flu,” reveals the extent to which the public in New Zealand is being blatantly manipulated.

If you are new to this area, please take the time to look at the evidence at the links provided closely, before dismissing the claims that are being made.

9/11 And The Nanothermite Evidence

World Trade Centre (WTC) 1, 2 and 7 collapsed on September the 11th 2001 as if demolished by a team of highly-trained professionals, revealing that the official story about Muslim hijackers is a lie. Now there is hard scientific proof to show that the buildings were demolished, thanks to the work of a team of scientists who examined the WTC dust, and found a military-grade composite called nano-thermite. Read about their work here: [Active](#)

Thermitic Material Discovered in Dust from the 9/11 World Trade Center Catastrophe. ²⁹

While the public in Denmark heard the news about the nanothermite that had been found from their mainstream media in April,³⁰ and mainstream radio listeners heard about it in the US ³¹ in early-June, many New Zealanders are still none the wiser, as the closest the story got to their mainstream media, was via the Scoop.co.nz website.

The Real Story About the 7/7 London Bombings

New Zealand's TV viewers are still being kept in ignorance about the facts of the 7/7 bombings, as an item on 60 Minutes on TV3 which aired on the 22nd of June 2009 demonstrated. In a New Zealand-made feature about the pervasive presence of surveillance cameras, a picture of four Muslim men, whom the reporter said were the 7/7 bombers, was displayed and used to justify the use of Big Brother surveillance in New Zealand. In reality, the picture shown, time stamped 07.21.54am and taken outside the Luton train station, is a fake, which is why only a single frame was shown and not actual video footage.

²⁹ Link to 'Active Thermitic Material Discovered in Dust from the 9/11 World Trade Center Catastrophe' at *Global Research .ca*. This is an alternative news/left activism site that advocates conspiracy theories claiming that the US government is responsible for 9/11: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=13049>, posted 03/04/09, accessed 25/09/09.

³⁰ Link to *YouTube* archival footage of Danish TV channel TV2 interview with Danish scientist Niels Harrit regarding the 'nanothermite' findings: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_tf251x_3o, posted 10/04/09, accessed 25/09/09.

³¹ Link to 'Richard Gage Discusses 9/11 Truth On Coast To Coast AM, One Of The Most Popular Radio Shows In The US' on Swinney's conspiracy blog *Web of Evidence: What They Don't Want You To Know*: <http://clareswinney.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/richard-gage-discusses-911-truth-on-coast-to-coast-am-one-of-the-most-popular-radio-shows-in-us/>, posted 10/6/09, accessed 25/09/09.

Coast to Coast FM is a syndicated American talk radio show specialising in paranormal/conspiracy subjects, and is not a 'mainstream' station in terms of subject matter and ownership.



Picture Shown on 60 Minutes To Justify CCTV Camera use in NZ

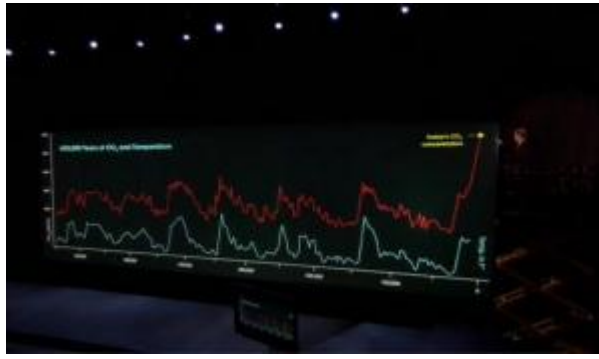
The four men, who were patsies and told they were involved in a mock terrorist exercise, were given instructions and told which trains to catch. They were supposed to have been on the 7.40am train from Luton to the Kingscross Thameslink station with pretend bombs, and then have split up and caught three tube trains and one bus that were evidently scheduled to blow up. However, things didn't go as planned for the organisers of the false-flag terror event, as the 7.40am train from Luton to Kingscross was cancelled that day, so their patsies could not have been on the trains that exploded. This was why it was [reported later that the 7/7 "suicide bombers" had been shot by police at Canary Wharf that day](#) ³² and proved that the bomb attacks were an inside job, as "suicide bombers" who were supposed to have blown themselves up, would not have been seen alive after the bombings to be killed. To see more of the evidence [go here](#).³³

Global Warming Propaganda

When The Great Global Warming Swindle aired on Prime TV in June 2008, scenes had been cut from the film.

³²Link to 'Police shot bombers' reports New Zealander' from the NZ Herald website: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10334992, posted 09/07/05.

³³ Link to '7/7 Ripple Effect' page at the 7/7 conspiracy website <http://forjustice.co.uk/77/>, site updated 4-5/11/07, accessed 25/9/09.



Al Gore Showing The Temperature & CO2 Graphs

These included those taken from An Inconvenient Truth in which Al Gore is on a stage displaying the temperature and CO2 graphs separately saying: “When there is more carbon dioxide, the temperature gets warmer,” followed by footage of Professor Ian Clark reporting that when Gore’s two graphs are put together, it can be seen that the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide follows temperature in this ice core. This was thus perhaps the most important point made in the documentary – one that the public should have been shown, as it reveals that the fundamental assumption of global warming theory – that carbon dioxide causes the temperature to rise, is not supported by the evidence.

“Swine Flu” Disinformation

The information the corporate-controlled media is neglecting to advise the New Zealand public of regarding the wrongly named [“swine flu”](#)³⁴ is alarming, given its huge ramifications also. For example, a local newspaper, the Northern Advocate, included full-page “APN Newspapers in education” page in the May the 19th edition, entitled “SWINE FLU,” which omitted basic information the public had a right to know about.

While purporting to cover the history of the swine flu, it failed to address what occurred the last time there was an outbreak of a new form of “swine flu.”

³⁴ Link to ‘Swine Flu Is Deadly Mix Of Never-Before-Seen Viruses’ by Paul Joseph Watson posted on Alex Jones conspiracy news website *Infowars.com*: <http://www.infowars.com/swine-flu-is-deadly-mix-of-never-before-seen-viruses/>, posted 25/4/09, accessed 25/9/09.

The last significant outbreak originated at Fort Dix army base in 1976 and although [only one death was reported](#),³⁵ President Gerald Ford ordered a nationwide vaccination program. According to a 60 Minutes program from 1979, of the 46 million who were vaccinated before the program was halted, over 500 cases of a severe nerve disease were reported, as well as thirty deaths as a result of the vaccine. To watch the 60 Minutes report [go here](#).

Furthermore, the “SWINE FLU” education page didn’t report that vaccines contaminated with live H5N1 avian flu virus were distributed to 18 countries last December by Baxter International Inc and that in spite of this recent “mistake,” [this company has been chosen to work with the WHO on a vaccine for the “swine flu.”](#)³⁶

Likewise, the page did not mention that highly-respected medical researcher, [Dr Len Horowitz has reported that the Mexican swine flu virus could only have originated in a lab](#).³⁷ In a report dated April the 25th, he has stated that there is only one group in the world that “takes H5N1 Asian flu infected chickens, brings them to Europe, extracts their DNA, combines their proteins with H1N1 viruses from the 1918 Spanish flu isolate, additionally mixes in swine flu genes from pigs, then ‘reverse engineers’ them to infect humans.” This group has been working with a vaccine manufacturer which posted a preliminary report online in the Journal of Virology as soon as Mexican officials began reporting deaths from the new flu.

So, do you think you are being fed information that a healthy democracy needs in order to survive – or are you being misled and

³⁵ Link to ‘Video: Mike Wallace Of 60 Minutes Addresses Issue Of The Neurological Disorders Caused By “Swine Flu” Vaccine Of 1976’ featured on Swinney’s blog *Web of Evidence: What They Don’t Want You To Know*:

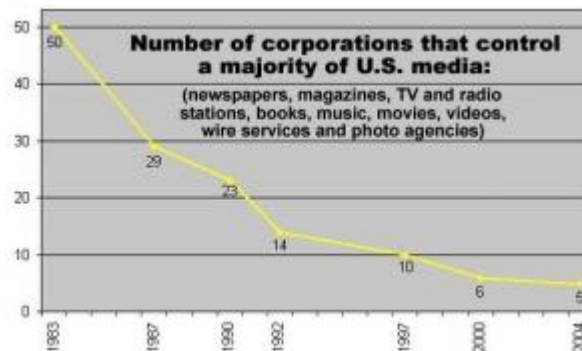
<http://clareswinney.wordpress.com/2009/06/26/video-mike-wallace-of-60-minutes-addresses-issue-of-the-neurological-disorders-caused-by-swine-flu-vaccines-of-1976/>, posted 26/6/09, accessed 25/9/09.

³⁶ Link to ‘Baxter To Develop Swine Flu Vaccine Despite Bird Flu Scandal’ by Steve Watson, posted on *Infowars.com*: <http://www.infowars.net/articles/april2009/270409Baxter.htm>, posted 27/04/09, accessed 25/9/09.

³⁷ Link to ‘Dr Len Horowitz: Mexican Flu Outbreak From Lab’ featured on Swinney’s blog *Web of Evidence: What They Don’t Want You To Know*: <http://clareswinney.wordpress.com/2009/05/06/dr-len-horowitz-mexican-flu-outbreak-from-lab/>, posted 05/06/09, accessed 25/9/09.

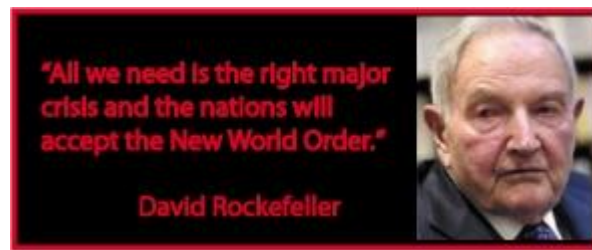
deceived about what is really going on in your world and you wonder why this is occurring?

Disconcertingly, a few global corporations controlled by people with an agenda to bring in a New World Order, carbon taxes and reduce the population, are trying to overwhelm all competing voices in an attempt to turn lies into truth.



Here are a number of quotes from a variety of sources which provide some clues as to what has been going on behind the scenes:

David Rockefeller, who is regarded as the kingpin of the New World Order, said at a Bilderberg meeting in 1991: "We are grateful to the Washington Post, the New York Times, Time magazine, and other great publications whose directors have attended our meetings and respected their promises of discretion for almost forty years. It would have been impossible for us to develop our plan for the world if we had been subject to the bright lights of publicity during these years [original emphasis]. But the world is now more sophisticated and prepared to march towards a world government which will never again know war, but only peace and prosperity for the whole of humanity. The supranational sovereignty of an intellectual elite and world bankers is surely preferable to the national autodetermination practiced in the past centuries. It is also our duty to inform the press of our convictions as to the historic future of the century."



William Colby former Director of the CIA stated: "The Central Intelligence Agency owns everyone of any significance in the major media."

Professor of Communications and Media Studies at the University of New York, Aurora Wallace said: "There is an illusion of choice that's maintained when you can have 100 channels on your cable system...and the owners are a few five or six.(...)It's a democratic issue. It means one viewpoint will come to dominate in most of the outlets we use for what's going on in the world."

New York University Media Professor Mark Crispin Miller said: "These commercial [media] entities now vie with the government for control over our lives. They are not a healthy counterweight to government. Goebbels said that what you want in a media system – he meant the Nazi media system – is to present the ostensible diversity that conceals an actual uniformity."

"We falsely think of our country as a democracy, when it has evolved into a mediocracy, where the media that is supposed to check the political abuse, is part of the political abuse." – Danny Schechter, Former Producer for CNN & ABC.

Aldous Huxley, the author of Brave New World, stated in 1961: "There will be, in the next generation or so, a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude, and producing dictatorship without tears, so to speak, producing a kind of painless concentration camp for entire societies, so that people will in fact have their liberties taken away from them, but will rather enjoy it, because they will be distracted from any desire to rebel by propaganda or brainwashing, or brainwashing enhanced by

pharmacological methods. And this seems to be the final revolution.”

Thus, it seems the glowing rectangle in the corner of your lounge and your newspapers have developed into the most powerful weapons of mind control and disinformation ever invented, and there is a plethora of evidence to show that this is the case. Needless to state, if you want to create a healthier society, you must stop reading corporate-controlled newspapers, stop watching corporate-controlled TV, stop listening to corporate-controlled radio and cease disseminating their propaganda for them. You don't have to take part in the lie. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer who was imprisoned for 8 years for criticizing Stalin in a personal letter, wrote: “The simple step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie. One word of truth outweighs the world.”

Try out the alternative media at Infowars.com, Prisonplanet.com and GcnLive.com and you will quickly come to understand why [a recent Zogby poll found that 37% of respondents said they found the Internet more reliable as a news source than newspapers, which came in at only 16%.](#)³⁸ (Swinney,2009)

³⁸ Link to ‘Editor & Publisher’ newspaper website:
http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003985649,
article deleted.

Swinney's article is a good example of conspiracy theorists' radical views of mainstream media power. She argues that the New Zealand mainstream news media deliberately manipulate news stories on behalf of the conspiratorial forces in power to suppress and manipulate information on topics that threaten to expose the conspiratorial 'truth'.³⁹ This belief is clearly signposted by the graphic that accompanies the introductory paragraph. Here a child is having his impressionable young mind brainwashed by the conspiratorial information on his TV set (as suggested by the swirly shapes on the TV screen, a standard pop culture symbol of hypnotic suggestion). The purveyors of this misinformation are clearly identified in the accompanying text as the mainstream NZ news media, in the form of the TV news shows of the state-owned TV 1 and corporate-owned TV3 networks; the news and current affairs presented through the state-owned public broadcaster *Radio NZ* (particularly the National programme); and the nation's leading daily newspaper, the *NZ Herald*. Global media mogul Rupert Murdoch's name is also listed, presumably for the symbolic resonance of Murdoch's reputation as someone who deliberately manipulates stories in his

³⁹ For the purposes of comprehending this piece, Swinney is an adherent of the 'Illuminati' superconspiracy mentioned in chapter 2, section 2.51. To describe this in more detail, the Illuminati are conceptualised by contemporary classical conspiracy theorists as an evil 'secret society' which originated in 18th century Enlightenment Europe and which has subsequently manipulated world history towards the furtherance of a totalitarian one world government/'New World Order'. Influential ideological and philosophical systems of a radical or universalist bent, such as Communism, Zionism, secular humanism, and environmentalism, are regarded by conspiracy theorists as systems of Illuminati developments through which they shape political and social developments to their totalitarian 'endgame'. Perceived members of the Illuminati include pretty much anyone who is part of the Western/global elite – politicians, corporate leaders, journalists and academics etc. Particular emphasis is placed upon international organisations such as the United Nations and elite think-tanks such as the Bilderberg group as key political agencies of Illuminati influence.

The various conspiracy theories presented in Swinney's article reflect different aspects of the multi-faceted Illuminati plot for world domination. The first is the belief that the 9/11 and 7/7 terror attacks were deliberately staged by the US and UK governments (controlled by Illuminist politicians) as a pretext for a 'crackdown' on constitutional and civil liberties in the name of national defence. The state of quasi-martial law that conspiracy theorists see as the ongoing result of such terrorism is a first major step towards totalitarian control of 'free' countries such as the UK and USA. The second is the theory that global warming is a fabricated threat made up by Illuminist scientists and politicians to encourage nations to economically and politically 'unite' to prevent environmental catastrophe – this unification again being one of the building blocks for a one-world government. The third is the theory that swine flu was genetically engineered by Illuminati/US government scientists and deliberately released as a pandemic for the purposes of reducing the earth's population so that total Illuminati control can be more easily implemented. Vaccination programmes are a key part of this depopulation plan, as the vaccines are Illuminati-produced poisons rather than medicines.

many news media holdings for political and financial gain, rather than for his direct involvement in the New Zealand news media.⁴⁰

Swinney outlines some of the key techniques of such conspiratorial manipulation of mainstream media news content. Censorship is implied in the failure of the NZ mainstream media to report on the ‘discovery’ by Danish scientists of nano-thermite particles in the debris of the World Trade Centre, thereby proving conspiracist suspicions that the towers were destroyed by controlled demolitions set up by the US government or other conspiratorial agencies, rather than the plane impacts themselves. Disinformation – the presentation of fabricated information as fact – is argued for in the claims that the TV3 *60 Minutes* news feature on the use of surveillance cameras as a deterrent against terrorism used false footage. Misinformation, in the form of the deliberate misrepresentation of facts, is reflected in accusations that *Prime TV* undermined the scientific credibility of a documentary skeptical of global warming by editing out a crucial scene of evidence, and that NZ newspaper coverage of the 2009 swine flu epidemic neglects to mention ‘facts’ such as the origin of the swine flu as a genetically engineered NWO ‘bioweapon’. A pertinent aspect of these wider conspiracist debates about the conspiratorial control of mainstream media that is also present here is the singling out of television as the most ideologically ‘dangerous’ media technology. Alongside the claims made regarding the presentation of disinformation and misinformation in the television coverage of the 7/7 terror attacks and the *Great Global Warming Swindle* documentary, the opening graphic and the penultimate paragraph explicitly portray television as a ‘brainwashing’ technology: “Thus, it seems the glowing rectangle in the corner of your lounge and your newspapers have developed into the most powerful weapons of mind control and disinformation ever invented, and there is a plethora of evidence to show that this is the case” (Swinney 2009). While seldom clearly articulated, the conspiracist animus against television appears to result from a suspicion of the medium’s socio-political scope – for example, the acculturation

⁴⁰ Murdoch’s NZ news media assets appear relatively small at the time of writing. Apart from owning the parent company of NZ Sky TV, Murdoch’s major involvement in NZ media was that News Ltd. – an Australian subsidiary of Murdoch’s global NewsCorp media corporation – was a major stakeholder in the INL chain of NZ regional newspapers. However, News Ltd’s media holdings here were bought out by Australian media company Fairfax holdings in 2003. Information from the article ‘Who owns New Zealand’s news media?’ by Bill Rosenberg, <http://www.converge.org.nz/watchdog/03/07.htm>, accessed 25/09/09.

of the medium into the daily routines of domestic life so that it is relied upon as a particularly trusted and reliable information source – with technophobic anxieties regarding the deleterious effects of television as a viewing experience, such as theories that the flickering of the television screen somehow induces photo-chemical changes in the brain that in turn induce a kind of psychological and physiological stupor in viewers (e.g. Mander 1978). In this framework television is conceptualised as a highly effective tool of conspiratorial control, a significant part of citizens daily lives that helps to literally ‘dumb down’ their critical faculties and prevent them considering the conspiratorial truth of the world around them.

Swinney also presents ostensible proof for these ‘radical’ conspiracist takes on mainstream media power through the presentation of comments from media critics such as Aurora Wallace, Professor of Media Studies and Communication at the University of New York, and “Danny Schechter, former producer for CNN and ABC”, regarding the conflict between corporate ownership of multiple media platforms and the democratic functions of news media. Proof that mainstream media are under conspiratorial control is also provided in the form of (unsourced) insider comments by public figures regarded as linchpins of the Illuminati conspiracy elite, such as US billionaire David Rockefeller and ex-CIA head William Colby, as to their influence over the content of American mainstream media.⁴¹

Alongside these conspiracist critiques of mainstream media power, Swinney delineates the Internet as a countervailing influence against the conspiratorial power structures of mainstream media. In the concluding paragraphs, Swinney argues that conspiracy websites such as *Infowars.com* and *Prisonplanet.com* constitute “more reliable” news sources than those found in the mainstream media mainstream “corporate-controlled” newspapers, TV, and radio because their status as online ‘alternative media’ enables them to operate free of the ‘corporate control’ which limits the reliability of mainstream newspapers, television, and radio as news sources. The Solzhenitsyn reference – “As Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer who was imprisoned for eight years for criticizing Stalin in a personal letter, wrote: ‘The simple step of a courageous individual is not to take

⁴¹ Swinney’s use of quotes taken out of context and unsourced revelations by conspiratorial insiders are typical examples of the practices of conspiracist pseudo-scholarship (see Hofstadter’s outline of conspiracist practice in chapter 2 section 2.21), practices enhanced by the ‘digital library’ capacities of the Internet (see chapter 5, section 5.21).

part in the lie. One word of truth outweighs the world”” (ibid) - adds a mythic gloss to conspiracy theorists’ radical critiques and rejections of mainstream media. By suggesting that the mainstream Western media is controlled by conspiratorial forces in a repressive manner akin to that of Stalinist Russia, Swinney implies that conspiracy theorists, in their drive to uncover the conspiratorial truth that is otherwise suppressed in mainstream news media, are not ‘paranoid cranks’ but investigative journalists crusading for truth and justice on behalf of the public, as per the radical/romantic tradition of staff power outlined by Curran (see section 4.21 above).

Since the non-mainstream status of the Internet is one of the main factors informing such revisioning of conspiracy theory as ‘investigative journalism’, so Swinney here also imbues the Internet with this conspiracist aura of romantic radicalism. The significance of the Internet to conspiracy theory is also practically affirmed in the fact that almost all of Swinney’s points are referenced with links to websites and webpages, rather than other media such as newspapers, magazines, or TV, and that almost all of the websites and webpages cited are of conspiracist provenance or affiliation (as outlined in footnotes 37-46 above).

Jay Weidner’s article is a panegyric for the major American conspiracy news site *Rense.com*, which also forms the basis of the case study presented in chapter 8. Weidner links the revolutionary implications of the conspiracist information presented on *Rense.com* with the revolutionary implications of the Internet as a challenge to the established power structures of mainstream media.

Rebellion of the Intelligent: Jeff Rense and the Internet

By Jay Weidner

Why are the MSM and the people who run this place so afraid of Jeff Rense? How can one guy running a single web site be such a threat to the most powerful forces on the planet?

The answer goes beyond the excellent journalistic skills he brings to the site. It goes beyond the incredible daily revelations that he somehow manages to present in a coherent and understandable fashion.

What Jeff Rense and his site have achieved is more easily understood by a close study of a political movement that is only becoming apparent now. It is a completely new trend that this planet has never witnessed before. Before it is through this emerging movement will have kicked the legs out from under our failed society. As you will see this force cannot be stopped.

Before the advent of the Internet people were divided along the lines of race, creed, class, color, religion, sex and location. This made it easy for politicians to carve us up by playing one side against another. This made it easy for the Controllers to manipulate us.

But in the last few years this model of demographics has not only been completely undermined, it has nearly been destroyed. The weapons that decimated this old view of how we think and live are the Internet and more specifically sites like rense.com.

The way that the Internet has changed the game can give one a glimpse into the newly emerging 'McCluhanesque' [sic] reality that is going to soon overwhelm our politics, our lives and our future.

On the Internet the old paradigm of demographic reality no longer divide us. Instead of divisions based on old models like race, ethnicity, religion or the neighborhood where you lived, the Internet is divided by just two streams: Interests and Intellect.

No one knows who you are on the web. It doesn't give a damn about your race, creed, color, whatever, unless those subjects are your interests. The archaic and arbitrary borders, like race, creed and color that used to separate us are being replaced by new and much more profound alliances.

These new alliances will be the catalyst for a revolution that will sweep the world. And this is where Jeff Rense comes in. What Jeff has done is that he has created a web site that is so smart, so

ballsy and so informative that there is a massive re-education happening underneath the surface.

The ones being re-educated are the smartest and the most intelligent of us. That is why the next revolution will be a rebellion of the intelligent.

Smart people are also busy people. They don't have time to riffle through hundreds of web sites everyday looking for the news that they desire. Jeff Rense has solved this dilemma and created a one stop-shopping zone for the most intelligent of the population. They don't agree with everything on the site but they do appreciate the spectrum of revealing stories and information that he provides.

If this goes on – and it will – there will be a revolution. Hopefully it will not be a violent revolution, but it is coming never the less.

And this rebellion will be by the smartest people on the planet. The rebellion of the intelligent will not be found in Gallup polls; there will be little mention of this phenomenon in the media. In fact there is almost no one who actually understands the cultural change that is occurring right in front of us.

Smart people in the United States and the world are waking up to what is really going on. And they are not happy about it. Beginning with 9-11 the smartest people found that all of their suspicions were true. It is that realization which will be the catalyst for this forthcoming change.

And so this is why the Controllers are afraid of Jeff Rense. This is why they attack his site and call him names. He is the consummate journalist in the tradition of the great muckrakers through out the history of our country.

The difference between those great journalists and Jeff Rense is the Internet. Now we can all read and understand what is happening instantaneously.

There is another time in history where something of this magnitude occurred. The last time that a reformation took place that even approaches the one that is happening now began in 1440 when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. Naturally, being a good Christian, the first thing that Gutenberg published was the Bible.

But soon word got out and there were other printing presses. The De Medici family began printing other items of interest than just the Good Book. One of these volumes being the Corpus Hermeticum, which was ancient sacred and alchemical texts, translated from the Greek and Arabic.

The real results of Gutenberg's invention were two-fold.

The first had to do with the mass printing of the Bible. This single act undercut the Church's established authority and for the first time in Christian, European history anyone could read the Bible.

The printing press is what gave rise to Martin Luther and the entire Protestant rebellion.

The second result of the printing press was the publishing of the Corpus Hermeticum. These ancient alchemical and hermetic texts fueled the Neo-Platonic revolution that later became the European Renaissance.

Gutenberg had no idea that his invention would shake the very foundations of European society.

But it did.

In the 1950's John Von Neumann and his friends invented the first computer. This was the ENIAC and it was huge and used tremendous amounts of electricity. By 1965 IBM had created the first business computers and by the late 1970s the personal computer was born.

The Pentagon invented the first Internet for military purposes. Like Gutenberg's printing the Bible, the military's initial use of the Internet was evidence of who was in power at the time of the invention.

The Internet will undermine everything around us just as surely as Gutenberg's printing press did.

The Internet is Gutenberg's printing press multiplied by a few million.

The mass realization of what we have done to ourselves will shake the old structures that have held us together. Already they have developed fissures and their collapse is imminent. Each day brings us closer to the moment when enough intelligent people actually figure out exactly what is going on and do something about it.

At this moment it is difficult to say what will happen and when. The kettle had been boiling for a long time and it appears as if the lid is going to fly off at any moment.

But make no mistake. The Smart revolution is coming. It is only a matter of time now.

And this will not be a socialist revolution, or a rebellion of the workers.

This will not be a war between classes or races.

This will be a rebellion of the intelligent.

And that is why the Controllers are so afraid of Jeff Rense. They know that they cannot put the genie back in the bottle. They know that they cannot afford to make Jeff Rense a martyr.

They know that he has shown the way towards a larger truth that can no longer be denied. They know that his bravery is a beacon of light to all of us.

The next stage is up to us. (Weidner 2008)

Like Swinney, Weidner presents a conspiracist configuration of the Internet as a countervailing influence to the perceived conspiratorial control of the mainstream media, but also provides a particularly clear articulation of how the ostensibly radical status of the Internet as a medium which operates outside the structures of mainstream media is one which is ideologically resonant with the ostensibly radical attitudes towards mainstream media power inherent to the logic of classical conspiracy theory. This articulation is developed by linking the Internet and conspiracy together through the radical trope of social and political revolution. Weidner argues that conspiracy websites such as *Rense.com* are imbued with revolutionary potential because the conspiracist information they present is serving to ‘wake people up’ to “what is really going on” behind the scenes of modern life. This radical revisioning of *Rense.com* is reinforced by Weidner’s sycophantic description of Jeff Rense as a “consummate journalist in the tradition of the great muckrakers throughout the history of our country”, acting in the public interest to uncover the conspiratorial corruption of power within American society.⁴² *Rense.com* and sites like it are therefore re-educating

⁴² Although Weidner praises the journalistic attributes of *Rense.com*, I would argue that Rense’s style of journalism has little to do with traditional journalistic practices such as the research and writing of stories. Rense’s actual written contributions to the site that bears his name are minimal. Rather, he functions as editor, selecting pre-existing material from other Web-based sources (both conspiracist and mainstream) on the basis of their implications for various conspiracist ‘grand narratives’ (such as the ‘Illuminati’ superconspiracy) and compiling them as a resource base for other conspiracy theorists. Just as Hofstadter identified ‘pseudo-scholarship’ as a hallmark of the ‘paranoid style’ of conspiracy discourse (Hofstadter 1966), so the work of Rense could be considered a form of conspiracist ‘pseudo-journalism’ directly related to the nature of the Internet as medium: the gathering and re-presentation of news material from online sources becomes a substitute for original research and writing of such material.

the public into a state of genuine ‘intelligence’ by making them aware of the conspiratorial truth that is hidden by the lies of the mainstream media.

Alongside this Weidner outlines the revolutionary power of the Internet as residing in its freedom from the “old paradigm of demographic reality” that typifies conspiratorially-controlled mainstream media. In this paradigm, people are presented as divided from each other in relation to identity positions such as “race, creed, class, color, religion, sex, and location”. Such divisiveness enables people to be effectively manipulated against each other according to the purposes of the conspiratorial ‘controllers’, and prevents them from developing the sorts of solidarity that would enable them to join together and challenge the power of the conspiratorial elites. While the technical capacities of the Net are not explicitly delineated in the article, Weidner suggests, through comments like “no one knows who you are on the web”, that the interactive and decentralised nature of the Net constitutes an information environment free of these divisive identity positions. Instead, the Net promotes a sense of solidarity because people interact with each other according to their shared interests and understandings of reality – particularly the conspiracist awareness of reality that Weidner associates with genuine ‘intelligence’. In such respects, the Net undermines the conspiratorial socio-political paradigms perpetuated by mainstream media and provides the basis for new, more prospectively radical forms of socio-political organization.

Weidner argues that the revolutionary potential of conspiracy theory is inextricably linked to the revolutionary potential of the Internet. Weidner articulates this relationship through the technologically deterministic framework of new media technologies as socio-political paradigm shifts derived from the well-known ideas of Canadian media studies theorist Marshall McLuhan. In this respect Weidner discusses the mass production of written material that resulted from the development of the printing press in the 15th century as a revolutionary act against the dominant political and cultural power of the era, the Catholic church. Printing enabled people to access ideas that were outside officially sanctioned church doctrine (e.g. the ‘Corpus Hermeticum’) and to communicate ideas that challenged the authority of the church (e.g. Lutheran Protestantism). This combination of radical ideas with the new communication forms that resulted from developments in media technology led to the development of cultural movements – the Protestant reformation and the Renaissance – that constituted very clear paradigm shifts in the history of Western civilization. Weidner suggests

that the combination of the radical ideas of conspiracy theory with the more socially integrative modes of communication inherent to the Internet constitutes a paradigm shift on a comparable scale – a ‘rebellion of the intelligent’ that will help liberate humanity from the shackles of its conspiratorial ‘controllers’.

Weidner’s articulation of the Internet as an intrinsically radical medium – “Gutenberg’s printing press multiplied by a few million” – is therefore used to affirm the ostensibly ‘radical’ credentials of the conspiracist beliefs presented on a site such as *Rense.com* (see chapter 8, section 8.22). In this respect, Weidner can be seen to use the McLuhanesque discourses of technological determinism, that conceptualise the technocultural capacities of the Internet as constituting a socio-political paradigm shift, to *legitimate* the classical conspiracist ideas presented on *Rense.com* as radical ideas of democratic change. I regard this ‘legitimation’ dynamic as integral to the relationship between the Internet and conspiracy theory, as I will discuss further in chapters 6-8 regarding the Internet’s status as an alternative medium.

4.31 Conspiracist ideas of information freedom – political contexts

As argued in sections 4.21 and 4.22, radical/critical traditions of mainstream media power can be seen as forming an implicit level of affinity between conspiracy theory and the Internet, in the sense that the radical suspicion of mainstream media power that forms a central part of the logic of conspiracy theory envisages the Internet as a site of ‘information freedom’ – a medium free of the conspiratorial control structures that govern mainstream media. I would also argue that there are several political concepts affiliated with these radical/critical traditions which also inform conspiracist thinking, and that these constitute significant points of connection between classical conspiracy theory and the democratic discourses that have been articulated in relation to the technocultural capacities of the Internet, such as the Second Media Age framework that will be outlined in chapter 5 and the configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium that will be discussed in chapters 6-8. I will use the following sections to outline some of these political concepts, such as freedom and democracy,

democratic structures such as civil liberties and civil society, and politically influential but ideologically distorted variants of democratic thought and practice such as populism and libertarianism, and how these concepts are reconstituted in terms of the right-wing/extremist worldviews of classical conspiracy theory.

The discussions presented here regarding conspiracist articulations of ideas of freedom and democracy are not intended to argue that classical conspiracy theories are in some way progressive forms of political commentary and change. As outlined in chapter 2 section 2.51 and Appendix A, most classical conspiracy theories embody political beliefs that are highly conservative, if not explicitly far-right. As such, notions of freedom and democracy tend to be configured in distorted, if not outright contradictory, forms according to the different ideological permutations of classical conspiracy theory and the idiosyncracies of individual conspiracy theorists. For example, fundamentalist and nationalist conspiracy theories appear to conceptualise ‘freedom’ as consisting of the liberation of people of favoured religious and ethnic identity positions, such as ‘white Anglo-Saxon Protestants’, from the alleged control of groups identified with ‘outsider’ identity positions, such as Freemasons and Jews, from control by people of other religious and ethnic affiliations. My intention is merely to show that democratic concepts (albeit in distorted forms) constitute significant aspects of the logic of conspiracy theory, and that these concepts constitute major points of connection between conspiracy theory and the Internet in relation to critical configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere, as will be discussed in chapters 6-8.

4.32 Freedom – political traditions

Notions of freedom are integral both to ideas of democracy and the worldview of classical conspiracy culture. As already stated in section 4.21, a central aspect of conspiracy logic is that citizens are controlled by conspiratorial structures such as mainstream media systems. Classical conspiracy theorists perceive such conspiratorial control as a means to the desired end of the conspirators – their totalitarian power over most – if not all - aspects of society and the self (see

appendix A).⁴³ The conspiracy is therefore identified with those institutions that possess large degrees of political, economic, and social power, such as state governments, corporations, and religious organisations. Personal and collective freedom from such institutions is therefore a central tenet of conspiracist thought.

Like many terms in political usage, freedom and/or liberty have a variety of meanings in relation to different political philosophies. I will here refer to political theorist David Miller's outline of the three major conceptions of freedom that underpin Western political and social thought.

1 – **Republican**. Miller states that “this is the most directly political conception of freedom, since it defines freedom by reference to a certain set of political arrangements. To be a free person is to be a citizen of a free political community. A free political community, in turn, is one that is self-governing. This means, first of all, one that is not subject to rule by foreigners; second, one in which the citizens play an active role in government, so that the laws that are enacted in some sense reflect the wishes of the people” (Miller 1991: 2-3). A caveat here is that this perspective “does not imply strict democracy” (ibid: 3). Citizenship of a free political community may only be granted to certain members of a society on ideological grounds, as for example, 19th and 20th century struggles to extend suffrage rights to women and those of non-European ethnicity. Here freedom is identified with the nature of the political community or state, taken as representative of the collective consensus of its citizens.

2 – **Liberal**. In the liberal view, freedom is taken to be

a property of individuals and consists in the absence of constraint or interference by others. A person is free to the extent that he is able to do things if he wishes – speak, worship, travel, marry – without these actions being blocked or hindered by the activities of other people. This conception of freedom is also directly related to politics, but in a quite different way from the first. In the liberal view, government secures freedom by protecting each person from the interference of others, but it

⁴³ ‘Power’ here being defined differently according to the ideological beliefs of the conspiracy theorists involved. For example, fundamentalist Christian conspiracists may see the conspirators as representatives of anti-Christian faiths seeking ‘spiritual power’ over whatever sect or denomination is involved; nationalist conspiracy theorists may regard the conspirators’ goal as ‘political power’ over the country involved, such as deep-rooted American fears of Communist conspiracies.

also threatens freedom by itself imposing laws and directives backed up by the threat of force. So whereas the republican sees freedom as being realized through a certain kind of politics, the liberal tends to see freedom as beginning where politics ends, especially in various forms of private life (ibid).

In this perspective freedom is identified with the individual, with the state perceived in ambivalent terms as facilitator – but also potential oppressor - of individual freedoms.

3 – **Idealist.** Miller describes the idealist perspective on freedom as one in which the

focus shifts from the social arrangements within which a person lives to the internal forces which determine how he shall act. A person is free when he is autonomous – when he follows his own authentic desires, or his rational beliefs about how he should live. The struggle for freedom is no longer directly with the external environment, but with elements within the person himself which thwart his desire to realize his own true nature – weaknesses, compulsions, irrational beliefs, and so forth. Now it might at first seem as though this conception of freedom has nothing to do with politics. But a connection is made as soon as the idealist identifies certain political conditions as necessary for freedom in his sense – and in the history of political thought such connections have often been made (ibid: 4).

Idealist notions of freedom can thus be applied to a variety of political perspectives. For example, some “see political arrangements as providing the conditions under which individuals may achieve their own freedom, for instance by encouraging the cultural diversity which alone makes an authentic choice of lifestyle possible” (ibid: 4). Of particular note here is the idealist position in which politics is

the means whereby people can be disciplined to follow a rational mode of life. It is this last possibility which has preoccupied liberal critics of the idealist conception of freedom. As they see it, ordinary liberal

freedoms – of speech, movement, and so on – may be sacrificed in the pursuit of a ‘higher’ form of freedom, as the state eliminates all those options which it would not be rational for people to choose. Thus, in the liberal view, there is a close connection between (this definition of) idealism...and totalitarianism in politics, whether of the Right (Nazism) or of the Left (Stalinist Communism)(ibid: 4-5).

Most political systems are seen to incorporate elements from all three of these traditions, albeit with certain perspectives more dominant than others. For example, the liberal democracy model that has marked modern Western societies (see section 4.34 below) could be perceived to adhere mostly to the republican perspective in which the state is the dominant arbiter of freedom. Much emphasis is placed upon elections in which citizens vote for parties as representatives of the interests of broad social groups, thus actively participating in government, with the state being seen as a sovereign political entity which is independent of external control, unlike imperial colonies. However, modern Western societies are also marked by a strong liberal emphasis on the freedoms of the individual outside of ‘collective’ identity positions, while idealist influences can be seen in the co-option of liberal democracies to particular ideological notions of liberty, as with the late 20th century reconstruction of democratic states in accordance with the rational ideals of free-market economics.

A similar mixture of all three perspectives can also be seen to inform ideas of freedom as expressed in classical conspiracy culture. As Mark Fenster states, “conspiracy theory perceives the power of the ruling individual, group, or coalition to be thoroughly instrumental, controlling virtually all aspects of social life, politics, and economics” (Fenster 1999: xiv). The ultimate goal of the conspirators is perceived to be the total imposition of their power over successively greater levels of political organisation – societies, nations, the entire world. Since collective and individual freedoms represent a challenge to these totalitarian conceptions of power, a key aspect of conspiratorial control is the demolition or co-option of the structures of freedom within a given society. A profound fear of ‘enslavement’ is thus a trademark of conspiracist discourse. Many conspiracy theorists postulate an Orwellian future in which formerly free citizens will be enslaved through both physical and psychological means. For example, many contemporary American conspiracy theorists see the 9/11 terror

attacks as a ‘false flag’ operation staged by the conspiratorial US government for the purpose of removing collective and individual freedoms under the legitimate guise of the ‘war on terror’. The ultimate goal of such staged attacks is the implementation of a state of martial law in which armed troops from conspiratorial organisations such as the federal government and the United Nations physically ‘enslave’ American citizens under the pretext of protecting them from terrorist threats. This physical slavery is to be reinforced by psychological enslavement through mind control techniques, such as brainwashing through media content or the use of electromagnetic technologies (e.g. cellphone towers) to interfere with the natural processes of the human brain.

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In relation to such conspiracist worldviews, I would argue that conspiracist conceptions of freedom are rooted in the liberal position, in which the state is posited in opposition to the liberties of the individual and the specific identity groups to which they belong. For many classical conspiracy theorists, government activity of almost any kind is interpreted as a ‘forceful imposition of laws and directives’ that is concerned with advancing the totalitarian goals of the conspiratorial elites in power at the expense of the liberties of the individual and the general public. The conspiracist fear of totalitarian forms of power reflects what Miller describes as the liberal critique of the idealistic philosophies of freedom, in which “ordinary liberal freedoms – of speech, movement, and so on – may be sacrificed in the pursuit of a ‘higher’ form of freedom, as the state eliminates all those options which it would not be rational for people to choose”. The conspirators wish to gain ‘total power’ so that they can remake society according to the ‘idealised freedoms’ inherent to the ideological and religious positions they are seen to be affiliated with. The conspiracist conception of these ideals differs according to the ideological and religious affiliations of the conspiracy theorist in question. For example, many conspiracy theorists steeped in American nationalism regard the conspiratorial ideal as the replacement of the ‘freedoms’ of capitalist America with those of Communism.

While this liberal dichotomy between the freedoms of the individual and the repression of the state is central to classical conspiracy thought, much conspiracist

⁴⁴ Such ideas are ubiquitous throughout the American online conspiracy ‘community’; good examples of such tropes can be found in the news stories and commentaries regularly posted on two sites which served as prime research material for this study, Alex Jones’s *Infowars.com* and Jeff Rense’s *Rense.com*.

discourse also incorporates elements of republican perspectives on freedom. As Miller states of the liberal views of freedom, governments are ambivalent in that their notional threats to individual freedom often operate alongside their abilities to secure freedom “by protecting each person from the interference of others” through laws, social policy, etc. (Miller 1991: 3). This ambivalence towards the state as both oppressor and protector of freedoms is reflected in the republican subtext of many conspiracy theories, particularly those based in nationalistic worldviews. In these theories it is not the existence of the state per se that is the problem, but the fact that the mechanisms by which the state operates as a ‘free political community’, and which help guarantee individual liberties, have been corrupted or taken over by conspiratorial influences. The conspiracist identification of the conspiratorial elites as agents of power interests foreign to the ‘true’ identity of the nation-state in question reflects republican ideas of a free political community being one that is not subject to rule by foreigners. Similarly, the activist tone which many conspiracist theorists adopt, in which they admonish the ‘masses’ for their passivity in the face of the conspiratorially-controlled state, is in keeping with the republican belief that a free political community is one in which citizens play an active role in government.

A combination of all three traditions of political freedom can be clearly seen in the thematic and narrative structures of the American nationalist conspiracy theories that dominate contemporary conspiracy culture. Major examples of these are the New World Order conspiracy theories that flourished in the 1990s militia movements (Fenster 1999; Goldberg 2001) and which are still being propagated by prominent conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones⁴⁵ and Glenn Beck.⁴⁶ These theories hypothesise that internationalist political and economic groups such as the United Nations, which are secretly controlled by the Zionist Illuminati, are going to forcibly invade America and institute a totalitarian one world government. Other prominent examples include the 9/11 conspiracy theories that argue that corrupt elites within the US military-intelligence complex deliberately staged the 9/11 terror attacks, as typified by the theories of David Ray Griffin

⁴⁵ See Jones’s website *Infowars.com*: <http://www.infowars.com/>, accessed 31/8/10.

⁴⁶ Beck is a far-right demagogue who presents his own current affairs show on the conservative US news network *Fox News*. A typical overview of his NWO conspiracist rhetoric can be found in American media commentator Eric Boehlert’s article ‘Glenn Beck and the rise of Fox News’ militia media’ at *MediaMatters.org*, <http://mediamatters.org/columns/200904070009>, posted 7/4/09, accessed 31/8/10.

(Griffin 2004) and Richard Gage;⁴⁷ and the conspiratorial claims that current Democratic president Barack Obama is an Islamic militant or Communist agent.⁴⁸ The basic premise is usually one rooted in the liberal context of freedom, in which the liberties of the citizens of the United States (as defined by the constitution, regarded as the ‘sacred’ cornerstone of American identity and freedom, and thus above criticism) – and the status of the USA itself as global hyper-power that embodies the very essence of ‘freedom’ for the world as a whole – are threatened by the power structures of the US federal government. The theory then moves to a republican position. It is not the structure of the US government per se that is at fault (since this is constitutionally designed to work for rather than against the freedoms of ordinary citizens); instead the problem is the control of the US government by ‘foreign’, ‘un-American’ elites whose motivations are conceptualised in idealistic terms. The conspirators seek to transform America into a totalitarian state in keeping with their ideological ideals of a free society.

The identification of these conspiratorial foreign elements, and the nature of their threats to American freedoms, is shaped by the particular ideological worldview of the conspiracy theorists involved. Conspiracy theorists from a fundamentalist Christian background tend to portray the conspirators as rivals to essentialist notions of American Protestantism (e.g. Catholics, Jesuits, Jews, Masons) or as embodiments of anti-Christian beliefs (Satanists, Illuminati, secular humanists). The objectives of the conspirators are to undermine the Christian beliefs that are regarded as integral aspects of American identity and freedom – a common example being the threat posed to these beliefs by the forces of rationalism and secular humanism, as manifested in social movements such as feminism and gay rights. Conspiracists from a fundamentalist nationalist perspective (e.g. ‘patriots’) posit similar essentialisms. American freedom is identified with autonomy from foreign political influence (as per the formative nation-building struggle against the British in the War of Independence); capitalism as the economic system best suited to ensuring the liberties of the individual; a suspicion of state power in relation to individual freedoms; and nativist conceptions of cultural identity (e.g. ‘true’ Americans as white anglo-

⁴⁷ Gage is affiliated with the group *Architects and Engineers for 911 Truth*: <http://www.ae911truth.org/>, accessed 31/8/10.

⁴⁸ These anti-Obama conspiracy theories can be found across the classical conspiracy web sphere, particularly on leading American conspiracy news sites such as Jones’s *Infowars.com* and *Rense.com*.

saxon Protestants). Nationalist conspirators thereby see the US government as under the control of foreign agencies that represent the opposite of these freedoms. Standard identifications include: Communists (socialism as economic and ideological system ‘antithetical’ to capitalist/Christian conceptions of individual liberty); ‘Zionist’ Jews (America transformed into geo-political ‘puppet’ through which the ‘non-Christian’ state of Israel can achieve their goal of domination of the Middle East); and ‘globalist’ political and economic bodies such as the Trilateral Commission and Bilderberg Group (the political autonomy of the American nation-state, and the liberties entailed therein, destroyed by appropriation into a ‘New World Order’ of inter-dependence between states). New Age inspired conspiracy theorists offer extreme and fantastical versions of these foreign threats to America with claims that the US government is secretly controlled by extra-terrestrials, inter-dimensional beings or other occult/paranormal forces, using US hyper-power to enact their plans for the conquest of Earth and enslavement of the human race.

4.33 Democracy – key concepts

Democracy means political systems in which power is exercised in a collective manner incorporating all groups in a society - “the right of all to decide what are matters of general concern” (Bullock, Stallybrass & Trombley 1988: 211). Underlying this system are philosophical beliefs (deriving largely from Classical and Enlightenment thought) about “the value of the individual human being” (ibid). As is to be expected with such a historically and politically significant concept, there is no absolute definition of democracy as a singular theoretical object (Weale 2007). I will refer to John Keane’s view that “democracy is best understood as a system of procedural rules with normative implications” – such procedures designed “for arriving at collective decisions in a way which secures the fullest possible and qualitatively best participation of interested parties” (Keane 1991: 168). These procedural rules, or what are commonly termed democratic rights, include “equal and universal adult suffrage” – free elections open to citizens regardless of identity positions; “majority rule and guarantees of minority rights, which ensure that collective decisions are approved by a

substantial number of those entitled to make them”; “the rule of law”, which has to be agreed upon by citizens and applied equally to all citizens; and “constitutional guarantees” of civil liberties or the rights and freedoms of citizens (ibid: 168-169).

It is necessary to delineate notions of civil liberties in some detail here since these are particularly pertinent to conspiracist ideas of personal and individual freedom.

Civil liberties represent the rights granted to citizens for the purposes of maintaining citizen autonomy in relation to larger structures of power. Citizens are free to engage in certain activities and adhere to particular beliefs without these being controlled by the likes of state and corporate institutions. Most Western democratic states recognise the following civil liberties:

A – freedom of speech (or freedom of expression). Citizens are allowed to state and present ideas and viewpoints of any kind without fear of censure or punishment if the ideas are seditious or controversial. This is extended into the realm of the media to include ‘freedom of the press’ and other media systems.

B – freedom of assembly. Citizens have the rights to hold public meetings and engage in dialogue about topics of popular concern.

C – freedom of petition and of association – “the right to form parties, trade unions, and other societies” (Bullock, Stallybrass & Trombley 1988: 211).

D – freedom of movement – citizens are free to travel without unnecessary restriction (within their own national borders).

E – freedom of religion and teaching – citizens are free to practice a variety of religious beliefs according to their own desires without threat of persecution.

The implementation of civil liberties is associated with major institutional forces and pieces of legislation. A cornerstone of these is the legitimization of civil liberties via law, through “the establishment of an independent judiciary and courts to which everyone can have access” (ibid). In modern liberal democracies, the efficacy of civil liberties are associated with *pluralistic* conceptions of society and culture. As a general tenet of political thought, pluralism can be summarised as “a concern for the tolerance of difference (in beliefs and social practices)” within the operation of political and social structures of power (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999: 281). Expressed in more directly sociological terms, pluralism

refers to societies that contain “communities which are distinct in many (predominantly cultural) respects (such as racial background and religious beliefs)” which are unified as part of a general social collective by “an overall political authority” (Bullock, Stallybrass & Trombley 1988: 655).

Raymond Williams (in his standard reference work on key terms in modern critical thought) qualifies the practice of democracy in the West into two main traditions: the socialist tradition and the liberal tradition. The socialist tradition of democracy conceives of “a state in which the interests of the majority of the people were paramount and in which those interests were practically exercised and controlled by the majority” – the emphasis here on the direct participation of citizens in the democratic process. The liberal tradition differs in its emphasis on representation over direct participation: “democracy meant open election of representatives and certain conditions (democratic rights, such as free speech) which maintained the openness of election and political argument” (Williams 1988: 96). The socialist ‘direct democracy’ model, in which every individual member of a society is invited to directly participate in debate about issues of collective concern, is regarded as being virtually impossible to realise in modern societies marked by large population concentrations (e.g. urbanisation) and complex social relationships (e.g. cosmopolitanism). Thus most Western countries adhere to the liberal model of democratic representation. Liberal democracy is typified by two broad systems of organisation. Firstly, mechanisms of representation. The most obvious example of this is elections based on the party system, in which the parties are developed as governing constructs representative of the values and interests of specific groups. Secondly, a feedback system in which the state – as representative of the people - is able to be held accountable to the public interest instead of pursuing agendas that reflect an unrepresentative wielding of power. This system takes the form of a separation between the institutions of the state and the public with the latter configured in terms of a “pluralistic and self-organizing civil society” (Keane 1991: 169).

Civil society here refers to “the array of voluntary organizations and civic associations – parties, trade unions, religious organizations, cultural and educational bodies – that are to be found in modern liberal societies. A key aspect of these bodies is that, though public, they are not official or governmental. They enable individuals to discuss matters of public concern and to participate in the life of society without direction by the state. Civil society has therefore often been

seen...as the bulwark of liberties in modern societies” (Bullock & Trombley 1999: 126). The sphere of civil society is guaranteed by the institutions of the state (e.g. through legislation). Accountability takes place via mechanisms such as “political parties, legislatures, communications media” which serve to “keep open the channels” – that is, facilitate dialogue - between the public/civil society and the state (Keane 1991: 169). The political spheres of activity that constitute democratic societies can therefore be summarised as operating on three main levels: individual citizens; a civil society consisting of citizens organised into politically active groups; and the state as governing authority representative of the citizenry as a whole.

Concomitant with an emphasis on the accountability of political representatives to the public is an emphasis on the public’s ability to critique and debate the performance of their representatives. In a democratic system, citizens have the right to evaluate and judge decisions that are made on their collective behalf and act towards changing these decisions through such means as elections and referenda. As Keane states, “the chief and unsurpassed advantage of democracy is not that it guarantees peace and quiet and good decisions, but that it offers citizens the right to judge...the quality of those decisions. Democracy is rule by publics who make judgments in public” (ibid: 190). Democratic political systems thus serve as a means for such judgments to be put into political action by providing

citizens who are affected by certain decisions with the possibility of reconsidering their judgments about the quality and unintended consequences of these decisions. Democratic procedures sometimes allow the majority to decide things about which they are blissfully ignorant; but they also enable minorities to challenge blissfully ignorant majorities, to bring them to their senses (ibid: 178).

Debate and conflict of opinion are therefore regarded as integral to democratic life. Democracy is not a static form of government but a dynamic one, responsive to the considered judgments or criticisms of the public.

This reminder of the basic tenets of democracy is helpful to understanding the classical conspiracist mindset. The archetypal political theme of conspiracy theories - that the mass public is being secretly controlled in accordance with the

hidden agendas of sinister elites in charge of institutions of power such as governments and corporations – can be seen as a symbolic inversion of the democratic ethos. Instead of citizens having control over the state, the state (including associated power structures such as corporations) controls the citizens. Here the mechanisms of democracy, such as elections and the watchdog institutions of civil society, are little more than fronts disguising the conspiratorial reality of the nature of power. In this perspective ideas of democratic autonomy are reduced in scale from the levels of the state and community to that of the individual citizen and his/her immediate family/social group. As a political entity the conspiracy theorist can therefore be seen as an individual citizen who has become aware of the corruption of the democratic apparatus of civil society and the state by an unrepresentative group of self-serving elites – the conspirators. The individual – rather than the state or the society - is reinforced here as the critical centre of democracy. In this context the activities of the conspiracy theorist – the presentation of conspiracy theories as explanations for the true nature of power – can be seen to serve as substitutes for the watchdog functions of civil society that are perceived as inadequate due to conspiratorial influence and infiltration. Such activities can also serve as the basis for a conspiracist revitalisation of democracy in which power is reworked upwards from the level of individual autonomy. By propagating their conspiracy beliefs with enough efficacy, some conspiracy theorists can gain a large number of followers to their particular view of political reality; these followers in turn coalescing into bigger schools of conspiracy believers that can (under certain circumstances) form the basis of citizen-led collective movements on the civil society level. The ultimate permutation here is the realisation of these conspiracy-based civil movements into more directly political forms such as protest marches and even political parties.

Such processes can clearly be seen in the development of contemporary conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones and David Icke into demagogic political figures. Both figures have successfully proselytised their individual conspiracy beliefs to wider audiences through techniques such as websites and lecture tours; both have in turn been adopted as demagogic figureheads for micro-scale ‘citizen movements’ based upon their conspiracy beliefs. For example, Jones is regarded as a leader of the 9/11 truth movement, a coalition of citizen groups across the USA who believe that the 9/11 attacks were the work of the US government

rather than Al Qaeda network of fundamentalist Islamic terrorists.⁴⁹ The 9/11 truth movement has undertaken a number of civil society activities, such as protest marches, publishing journals, and making web documentaries, as a means of sparking an independent re-investigation into the 9/11 attacks based on their conspiratorial beliefs. In 2008 Icke stood as an independent candidate in a parliamentary by-election for the English constituency of Haltemprice and Howden, as a symbolic gesture regarding the ‘crackdown’ on civil liberties that he believes the conspiratorial forces controlling the UK government had implemented under the guise of anti-terrorism security measure.⁵⁰

Civil liberties are factors of specific importance in terms of configuring the relationships between conspiracy theories and democracy. Civil liberties are generally taken as sacrosanct principles of the rights and freedoms of citizens in relation to the activities of the state. Political activity that adversely affects civil liberties can therefore be readily construed by conspiracy theorists as indications of conspiratorial activity – the conspiratorial powers that control the state seeking to maximise their power and push through their sinister agendas by controlling the liberties of the citizenry. In a democratic sense, conspiracy theorists can be seen as civil libertarians operating primarily with regards to the freedom of expression. By speaking out with conspiracy theories that seem unbelievable or offensive, conspiracy theorists are none the less exercising their freedoms of speech, presenting their fellow citizens with ‘truths’ that they think the conspiratorial powers do not want revealed. Such information can then form the basis for political action and resistance against the conspiratorially-controlled state and

⁴⁹ Like any conspiracy ‘movement’, the 9/11 ‘truth’ movement is particularly captious, with various factions and splinter groups. Jones’s extensive advocacy of 9/11 conspiracy theories on his websites (e.g. *Prison Planet* and *Infowars.com*), syndicated radio show *The Alex Jones Show* and online/DVD conspiracy documentaries (*Martial Law-9/11: The Rise of the Police State*, 2005) has led to him gaining a reputation as a figurehead of the ‘9/11 truthers’. For instance, an article on Jones in the American political magazine *The New Republic* refers to Jones as “a leader of the 9/11 truth movement”: see ‘Truther Consequences’ by Michelle Goldberg at <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/truther-consequences>, posted 7/10/09, accessed 23/10/09.

However, Jones has also been heavily criticised by other ‘truthers’. For example, the US 9/11 blog *justgetthere.us* accused Jones of working to discredit the ‘true’ truth movement by the promotion of sensational news stories (in this instance a fabricated interview on the subject of 9/11 between President Obama and the actor Charlie Sheen that was presented as fact): <http://justgetthere.us/blog/archives/The-Alex-Jones-Deception-False-Flag-Journalism-Discrediting-The-Truth-Movement.html>, posted 9/9/09, accessed 23/10/09.

⁵⁰ See Icke’s statement on <http://www.davidicke.com/content/view/14120>, (n.d.), accessed 23/10/09. Needless to say Mr Icke did not win the seat, gaining a measly 110 votes in the by-election: <http://liberalengland.blogspot.com/2008/06/david-icke-to-stand-in-haltemprice> 23.html, posted 23/6/08, accessed 23/10/09.

institutions. Thus any idea presented by conspiracy theorists, no matter how offensive or false, such as anti-Semitic beliefs in Zionist conspiracies of world domination, can be argued to be legitimate according to their rights as citizens to freedom of expression. Attempts to censor and restrict offensive views, such as ‘hate speech’ or libel laws, are readily invoked by conspiracy theorists as proof that the conspirators in control of state power are deliberately trying to thwart individual citizens’ civil liberties are part of their plans for totalitarian control. Values and practices rooted in ideas of civil society can therefore be seen as important components of conspiracist content and beliefs, and, as I will argue in chapters 5 and 6, operate as an important link between conspiracy theory and the democratic principles that have been critically articulated as inherent to the technocultural capacities of the Internet.

4.34 Democracy and media

The ability of citizens in liberal democracies to participate effectively in democratic activities requires them to be well-informed about the activities of the state and the opinions of other social groups. Democracy thus “requires informed citizens. Their capacity to produce intelligent agreements by democratic means can be nurtured only when they enjoy equal and open access to diverse sources of opinion” (Keane 1991:176). Particular kinds of communication systems are therefore integral to the operation of liberal democracies. Such systems should be capable of transmitting information from the state to the citizenry in keeping with the large-scale, pluralistic social networks that typify the latter in modern societies; of transmitting information from citizen/group to citizen/group; and to enable dialogue to occur between citizens, groups and representatives.

The mainstream media systems that developed alongside Western democracies in the 19th/20th centuries are generally regarded as examples of communication systems that fulfil the above criteria. These systems, irrespective of their function as purveyors of entertainment, ‘mediate’ information across and between the realms of the individual citizen, civil society and the state in order to maintain existing democratic procedures and create an informed basis for decision-

making.⁵¹ The relationship between the media and democracy has traditionally taken the form of the following perspectives:

- **the utilitarian perspective** – “democratic mechanisms and a free press guarantee that the best interpreters of interests – the interested parties themselves – can sift through various options and decide for themselves” (ibid: 175). In other words, the media present a wide variety of political opinion, from which citizens and groups can make decisions as to how to engage in democratic activities.
- **the libertarian perspective** – “democracy and an independent media are justified by their ability to maximise freedom in the sense of individual or group autonomy” (ibid). The information presented through the media can be used by citizens to help in the development of their own autonomy, away from larger structures of political control.
- **the critical perspective** – “democracy and a free press ...are the strongest antidote to the abuse of power” (ibid). The media are a major part of the mechanisms of accountability, serving as a means of informing citizens about potential abuses of power in the representative state.

In each of these perspectives the media is seen to be serving the interests of the public by facilitating citizen’s abilities to make individual and collective decisions, and by ensuring the accountability of representatives within the different institutions of power. Public service media is the label given to media systems and content based upon these functions. As defined by Tim O’Sullivan,

public service broadcasting entails the provision and organisation of radio and television channels primarily as public utilities and resources rather than profitable commodities. This emphasis has entailed their organisation as national, cultural institutions, owned, regulated and run in the public interest and dedicated to the public provision of information and entertainment, part and parcel of the requirements of modern democratic societies. In contrast to the view of broadcast audiences as consumers to be attracted for profit – which is associated with the commercial model – public service broadcasting has been motivated much more by a commitment to the socially responsible provision of information and culture – to which, it is argued, all citizens

⁵¹ The press being the original model for this democratic function. See chapter 7, section 7.2.

have rights of access, above and beyond their abilities to pay (O'Sullivan in Fleming 2000: 193).

In this respect, public service media can be regarded as “reflexive means of controlling the exercise of power. They are unsurpassed methods of checking the unending arrogance and foolishness of those who wield it...They help to define and publicize risks that are not worth taking” (Keane 1991: 181-182). The close relationship between democracy and the media encapsulated by the public service model is also encapsulated in the ideas of the public sphere that are central to many contemporary debates about the political aspects of media systems (as will be discussed in detail in chapters 6 and 7).

4.35 Populism – key concepts

A manifestation of democratic politics that is particularly relevant to conspiracy culture is populism. I will here refer to the essays contained in Ionescu and Gellner's (1969) comprehensive overview of the subject to delineate several key aspects of populist thought and practice. Populism is here theorised as predicated upon nationalist beliefs of a past ‘golden age’ in which ordinary people were the main arbiters of their own prosperity and freedom (the pioneer mythologies of Western colonial nations, such as the ‘American frontier’, are key examples of such beliefs) (Macrae 1969: 155). In this respect essentialist notions of national identity - of ‘belonging’ to a particular nation and culture - are integral to the populist ethos (ibid: 156). This essentialist or idealised national identity is configured in relation to identity positions such as race, class, and cultural background (e.g. a rural/premodern past rather than an urban/modern one). Translated into socio-political terms, this populist ethos manifests a dichotomous ‘us and them’ worldview in which the ‘people’ of the nation are adversely affected by the activities of elite groups of ‘outsiders’ who have commandeered positions of power within the nation and are using such power to benefit themselves and the ‘outsider’ ideologies or interests they represent. Because it is suspicious of power, populism “distrusts the state and its bureaucracy” (along with corporations, the major institutions of power in the modern West) and

“would minimize them before the rights and virtues of local communities and the populist individual” (ibid: 162). Underpinning this nationalist worldview is a mode of address that interpellates the individual citizens who constitute ‘the people’ as a ‘mass’ unified by shared characteristics of national identity.

Political and economic changes that may have radical or deleterious effects upon large numbers of the populace are identified as the major forces leading to the development of populist discourses and movements as socio-political forces (Hofstadter 1969: 17). Such populist perspectives present the ordinary people who embody the true values of a nation as the victims of the machinations of elite groups of outsiders who control the institutions of political and economic power. In such respects populism can be considered a radical political force in that it typically seeks major social and political change to counteract such concentrations of power. However, it is also a reactionary one in that the changes advocated are not predicated upon progressive ideas of a new future but on regressive ones of an idealised national past (Macrae 1969: 159).

The populist idea that elite groups of outsiders have taken over institutions of power against the true interests of the people is one integral to almost all forms of classical conspiracy theory, which are “based on the perceived secret elite domination over and manipulation of the entirety of economic, political, and social relations” (Fenster 1999: 66). Such conspiracy theories explicitly reflect populist distinctions between the ‘bad’ elites and ‘good’ citizenry. Here almost anyone in a position of institutional authority, such as politicians, bankers, academics, and scientists, can be condemned as members of elites pursuing their own interests at the expense of the ordinary person.⁵² The populist disdain for such elites is augmented and amplified through the extremist or paranoid ideological positions of the conspiracy theorists. Those in power are no longer engaged in corrupt activity due to understandable human impulses such as greed and egotism; rather, such figures are regarded as members of supra-elite groups,

⁵² A specifically American populist ethos is a central theme to most contemporary conspiracy culture. The main premise here is that the ‘ordinary’ people of America, who are regarded as the embodiment of the ideals of liberty laid down in the Constitutional ideals at the heart of American identity, are finding that their ‘freedoms’ are under threat by conspiracies of ‘un-American forces’. This conflict is expressed in numerous ideological dichotomies readily apparent in an overview of American conspiracy theory; For example, the ‘true’ American ‘white Anglo-saxon protestant’ identity is threatened by conspiracies by ‘un-American’ racial and religious groups such as Jews and Catholics; all-American ‘free-market capitalism’ is threatened by communist and socialist conspirators; American manifest destiny is threatened by ‘internationalism’ in the form of groups such as the UN etc. (see Hofstadter 1966; Goldberg 2001).

such as the Illuminati and Masons, whose abuses of power are not opportunistic but intentional elements of such group's trans-historical schemes for world domination *et al.*⁵³ While populist movements may reflect genuine issues relating to imbalances in the democratic structures of power, their simplified 'us and them' logic is readily convertible to extremist interpretations, such as the populist conspiracist worldview of Nazi Germany in which 'the German people' were portrayed as victims of conspiracies by outsider groups such as Jews and Communists.

This is not, however, to say that conspiracy theories are synonymous with populist political perspectives *per se*. Many populist movements, such as workers solidarity or anti-globalisation movements, adhere to structural critiques of power imbalances without recourse to the extremist identity politics of conspiracist thought. Building on neo-Marxist formulations of power as hegemonic - fluid and dispersed throughout society – rather than concrete, Mark Fenster argues that populism is less a concrete political philosophy than “an assemblage of often contradictory elements and interpellations of ‘the people’”. These assemblages can take various political forms: “neutralized, articulated in specific directions, or infused with varying degrees of significance at particular (political and social) conjunctures” (ibid: 65). Conspiracy theories can therefore represent a particular articulation of populist elements into a coherent form or may serve as a force which ‘infuses’ populist movements with specific meanings related to the political and social concerns of a particular era. Thus, while recognising that conspiracy theory is “necessarily populist in its evocation of an unwitting and unwilling populace in thrall to the secretive machinations of power” (ibid: 63), the relationship between populist political perspectives and classical conspiracy theories should not be regarded as a direct or causal one - conspiracy theory “has played a role of varied importance in many, but not all, populist movements” (ibid: 66).

The populist components of classical conspiracy thought form an important point of affinity between conspiracy theory and the Internet. In particular, the

⁵³ Such ‘paranoid populism’ is further reflected in conspiracist beliefs of ‘elites behind elites’. In general, ‘elite’ political organisations, such as the US government or the United Nations, are regarded as fronts for even more secret elites such as the Illuminati, Communists, or Zionists. The Illuminati ‘superconspiracy’ that is the default belief system for most 21st century Western conspiracists takes this even further by arguing for the Illuminati as the uber-elite conspiracy group that operates a variety of subsidiary conspiratorial elites – the likes of the Masons, Zionists, Communists, etc.

populist dichotomy in which the freedoms of the ordinary people are adversely affected by the machinations of outsider elites can be seen as one resonant with the democratic ethos of the Internet discussed in chapter 5, in which the Internet is configured as empowering ordinary people through access to information and the ability for citizens to create their own media content. An extension of this dichotomy, in which online content derived from amateur/grassroots sources is perceived to possess more democratic integrity than content that derives from professional/mainstream sources, forms an important thread in notions of the Internet as an alternative medium that are discussed in chapters 6, 7 and 8 as a major legitimating framework for classical conspiracy theory.

4.36 Libertarianism

Alongside populism, libertarianism is another variant of democratic thought that forms a significant influence on conspiracist thought. With reference to section 4.32, libertarianism can be seen as an extension of the liberal tradition of freedom that associates freedom with the individual rather than the state, with the powers of the latter regarded as a potential threat to the liberties of the former. Libertarian theorist David Boaz defines libertarianism as “a species of (classical) liberalism, an advocacy of individual liberty, free markets, and limited government rooted in a commitment to self-ownership, imprescriptible rights, and the moral autonomy of the individual” (Boaz 1998: xiv). The notion of ‘limited government’ is an expression of the libertarian skepticism “about the effects of concentrated power” to guarantee individual liberties (ibid: xv). In this respect, libertarianism posits an extreme form of this liberal suspicion of the state as an affront to personal freedom. Libertarian Jan Narveson outlines this position as follows:

...the state is a public with a government; and a government is a smallish subset of the public that has somehow acquired the power to rule, that is to say, to make people do the things it wants them to. Membership in the public is not voluntary, and being under the control of its government is not voluntary. All must “join”, whether they like it

or not, and the “must” really means business, for the State may enforce its commands by outright force...It claims, indeed, a monopoly on the use of force, in the specific sense that private uses of force must be authorized by it, whereas its own employments of force, though they too need, in the favourable cases, to be authorized, are authorized by itself. In the case of nondemocratic states, this leaves the unwitting victim (= “citizen”) completely at the mercy of the government” (Narveson 1988: 208).

Libertarians thus “support institutions that limit and divide (centralised or totalising systems of) power, such as federalism, separation of powers, private property, and free markets. Capitalism, democracy, and the Western intellectual system are all competitive systems that give no one final authority” (Boaz 1998: xv).

Libertarian fears of excessive state power are significant ideological influences on contemporary conspiracy culture, particularly those based on American nationalist worldviews. In libertarian politics the state – as typically identified with the likes of the US federal government – is condemned for being large rather than limited, for possessing the ability to determine the freedoms of citizens without their active consent. The conspiracist demonisation of institutionalised bodies of governance as a totalitarian threat to social and individual liberty can readily be seen as a paranoid extrapolation of these libertarian anxieties. A good example of this tendency is the conspiracist worldview of the far-right militia/patriot movements that have been a cornerstone of American conspiracy culture since the 1990s (Fenster 1999: Goldberg 2001: Bratich 2008). The founding documents of the USA, such as the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, are perceived as codifying the USA as a libertarian nation in which the rights and freedoms of individual citizens, rather than conceptions of ‘big’, centralised government, are central to ideas of national identity.⁵⁴ However, conspiratorial forces constituted of ‘non-American’ elites have secretly gained control of the US government and are deliberately seeking to dismantle the

⁵⁴The American right’s fixation on the constitutional ‘right to bear arms’ is directly related to this libertarian ethos. An armed citizenry is regarded as a necessary corrective to potential abuses of state power. In other words, the democratic control citizens possess over the government should be literally manifested through implements of physical force, such as armaments. See section 3.2 this chapter for further discussion of such ideas in relation to contemporary conspiracism.

libertarian ethos of the constitution as a means of transforming America into a totalitarian state which in turn will form the basis of a New World Order (NWO) of global totalitarian government. This paranoid libertarianism formed the basis of the federal government/patriot community conflicts that were a crucial aspect of the American political landscape in the 1990s. The early 1990s saw a number of occurrences in which attempts by federal authorities to enforce gun control laws led to the deaths of American citizens. A significant example is the Ruby Ridge case of 1992. In this event an American family, living in seclusion in the state of Idaho in accordance with their nationalist/fundamentalist conspiracy beliefs in a New World Order takeover of America by a Communist-Zionist-Illuminist cabal, were raided by Federal officials investigating the father's alleged involvement in illegal gun sales. The raid turned into a siege in which several members of the family were killed by federal agents. This incident seemed the very embodiment of paranoid libertarian conspiracy beliefs that the US government is a conspiratorial agency bent on using force to make citizens give up their freedoms in order to submit to totalising government authority. These beliefs were reinforced in 1993 by the similar but more infamous situation that occurred in Waco, Texas. Here the compound of a Christian fundamentalist cult was raided by federal officials on arms charges; again, the situation ended in the deaths of most of the cultists at the hands of federal authorities. The conspiracist implications of this government activity against the 'liberties' of American citizens to freely bear arms directly motivated members of the patriot/militia communities to strike back at the US government via the fatal bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.⁵⁵

Despite the shared emphasis on ideas of individual freedom in relation to 'big government', classical conspiracist thought diverges from libertarianism in its ideological basis in identity politics. The libertarian emphasis on individual freedom through the removal of systems of state control – such as regulated financial markets and social welfare systems – marks libertarianism as an explicitly right-wing political philosophy against the ethos of state intervention and managerialism that marks leftist and centrist ideas of democratic government.

⁵⁵ Information on these events can be found in numerous academic and popular studies of conspiracy culture. Specific sources here include: British journalist Jon Ronson's *Them* (2002) regarding the Ruby Ridge incident; McConnachie and Tudge (2005) (pp207-216) per the Waco and Oklahoma City bombings. Chapter 5 of Bratich (2008) presents detailed cultural and political background of the militia/patriot movements of this period (albeit in the context of a postmodern legitimisation of such conspiracism – see chapter 2, section 2.42).

However, the liberal traditions of freedom that form the basis of libertarianism – the freedoms of individuals to live their private lives without interference or coercion from larger power structures – are also those which inform left-wing perspectives on individual and social rights. The individual is seen in universalist terms as possessing the freedoms of self-ownership and self-determination outside of identity positions such as race and religion. For example, “unlike orthodox conservatives, libertarians believe it is no part of the state’s duties to enforce private morality; prostitution, drug taking and sexual perversion not involving harm to others are all within the individual’s right to do what he chooses with his own resources” (Bullock, Stallybrass & Trombley 1988: 476).

By contrast, classical conspiracy theories explicate worldviews based on ultra-conservative forms of identity politics. The major types of classical conspiracy thinking (see chapter 2, section 2.51) associate political ideas of freedom with essentialist cultural identity positions, such as fundamentalist Protestantism or Anglo-Saxon ethnicity. Conspiratorial threats to freedom are lumped with identity positions – such as secular humanism or Judaism – that represent the ‘other’ in relation to these core fundamentalist identity positions. Activity by governments that accords with the liberal ideal of individual freedoms are interpreted by classical conspiracy theorists as evidence of conspiratorially-controlled government’s plans to undermine the freedoms of these specific ultra-conservative identity positions. For example, government legislation that seeks to improve the rights of women and gays in relation to liberal ideas of individual freedoms without constraint and interference from others is seized upon by fundamentalist conspiracy theorists as evidence of government efforts to destabilise Christianity as part of some grander anti-Christian conspiracy; social policies that support multiculturalism in keeping with both liberal conceptions of freedom and democratic ideals of pluralism are interpreted by nationalist conspiracy theorists as evidence of the conspiratorial takeover of the nation in question by ‘foreign’ powers. The anti-liberal nature of these essentialist ideologies is further augmented by conspiracist appeals to populist modes of political thought. The institutions of capitalism, democracy and the Western intellectual system that both libertarians and liberals regard as conducive to checks on state power (with widely differing degrees of emphasis) are generally condemned by conspiracy theorists as being under conspiratorial control because their operation is in the hands of professional knowledge ‘elites’ (e.g. bankers,

politicians, academics) who are out of touch or wilfully opposed to the wishes and needs of the common people.

In these respects it can be argued that libertarian views of the state as a threat to individual and social liberty are crucial to classical conspiracy culture in that they provide an ideological point of synthesis between liberal ideas of freedom as democratic ‘people power’ and far-right ideologies that posit the workings of liberal democracy as a threat to the ‘freedoms’ of essentialist identity groups. The ambivalence of the libertarian position, in which leftist ideas of social and personal liberty are combined with rightist disdain for the power structures of the liberal democratic state as the means by which such liberties are implemented and upheld, provides an ideological basis for the reconciliation of seemingly opposed ideological positions typical of the far-right belief structures that underlie classical conspiracist thought. Such ambivalence enables conspiracy theorists to present their critiques of power within the political framework of democratic traditions such as civil society and populism in ways that disguise and legitimate the extremist identity politics (of fundamentalist religion and nationalism) that form the basis of their conspiracist worldview. I will explore this theme in relation to the discussions of the Internet as an alternative medium in chapters 6 -8). ⁵⁶

As with populism, the libertarian components of classical conspiracy theory also constitute an important point of affinity between conspiracy theory and the Internet. As I will discuss in chapter 5, the mythic discourses that surround the democratic potential of the Internet have been shaped by libertarian arguments that the Net should be kept free from state and corporate control. The Internet is a space unregulated by state authority where people can create and access content in accordance with their own prospective individual and social liberty. A libertarian sensibility in which online content being presented in opposition to or produced

⁵⁶ A good contemporary example of this ambivalence can be seen in American conspiracy theorists’ almost unanimous support for US senator Ron Paul as the Republican nominee for president in the 2008 American elections. Paul’s political beliefs are a mixture of libertarian economics and anti-statism combined with a right-wing moral conservatism. Newsletters expressing this beliefs in far-right terms have garnered Paul a controversial status in American politics. For example, the *New Republic* magazine in 2007 printed an article that accused Paul of having “an obsession with conspiracies, sympathy with the right-wing militia movement, and deeply held bigotry”.

Whatever his actual beliefs, Paul has effectively been adopted as a ‘poster boy’ by American conspiracy theorists affiliated with nationalist conspiracy beliefs, with press releases and interviews regularly posted on conspiracy websites and his name gushed over in conspiracist essays. See: *Wikipedia* page on Ron Paul: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Paul, accessed 5/02/09; and the *New Republic* article ‘Angry White Man’: <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=e2f15397-a3c7-4720-ac15-4532a7da84ca> accessed 5/02/09.

outside of the structures of the state or other mainstream institutions of power, such as corporations, can also be seen to form a major part of the alternative media ethos that I argue in chapters 6-8 is integral to the relationships between classical conspiracy theory and the internet.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter I have presented a macro-focus outline of what I consider to be some the key ideas that constitute the underlying logic of classical conspiracy theory and which, as I will illustrate in the following chapters, also constitute the major points of connection between conspiracy theory and the technocultural capacities of the Internet. As the discussion in section 4.21 argued, a key aspect of conspiracist logic is an ostensibly radical suspicion of mainstream media power, which is perceived to be a major system of conspiratorial control over society. As illustrated by the conspiracist articles presented in section 4.22, the Internet is configured by conspiracy theorists as a countervailing influence to mainstream media power because it operates free of the organising structures of mainstream media and because its technocultural capacities, such as interactivity, facilitate more genuinely democratic means of communication that represent challenges to conspiratorial control.

In relation to the main arguments of this study, I have also (in the various subsections of 4.31 – 4.36) delineated some of the key aspects of democratic thought and practice that I consider, in ideologically permuted forms, to form cornerstones of classical conspiracy belief (such as populism and libertarianism). These also form the basis for cybercultural discourses which articulate the Net as a site of radical democratic practice in ways resonant with conspiracist thought, an important theme that will be delineated in detail in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

THE INTERNET AND INFORMATION FREEDOM

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 provided a macro-level overview of the radical suspicions of media power that form the basis of conspiracist attitudes towards mainstream media, and conspiracist conceptions of the Internet as an embodiment of ideals of information freedom in terms of its perceived technocultural status as a medium which operates outside mainstream media structures. It also discussed the ways in which ideas of freedom and democracy are articulated in relation to classical conspiracy thought, and considered how these articulations inform conspiracist attitudes towards the Internet.

This chapter will complement the ideas introduced in chapter 4 by presenting a macro-level overview of the technocultural discourses that constitute dominant configurations of the Internet as a ‘new’ medium which is structured around democratic principles of ‘information freedom’. I will suggest that these technocultural and socio-political conceptualisations of ‘information freedom’ constitute major points of connection between the Internet and classical conspiracy culture in relation to the ideas discussed in chapter 4. This chapter has two main parts. The first discusses the technical features that define the Internet as a ‘new medium’, and how the communicative potentialities of these features have led to the Net being conceptualised in relation to technocultural discourses of information freedom and democratic ‘empowerment’. The second part considers how these technocultural discourses have been articulated in relation to American cyberculture, and argues that the democratic ideals inherent in these discourses forms a key point of ideological resonance with the Amerocentric ideologies that form a key part of the logic of contemporary classical conspiracy theory.

5.21 The Net and discourses of the second media age

Technocultural discourses which articulate the Internet as the driving force of a 'second media age' can be seen as central to critical and cybercultural configurations of the Net as an embodiment of democratic ideas of information freedom – configurations which underlie conspiracist affinities with the Internet. In explicating this argument I will refer to David Holmes' (2005) critical account of new media history.

Holmes argues that media history has largely been conceptualised in terms of a McLuhanesque, technologically deterministic narrative in which new media technologies are portrayed as revolutionary forces of social and political change. He outlines this narrative in the form of dominant theoretical frameworks of the first media age and the second media age. The first media age is considered to incorporate most of the 20th century, and is defined by broadcast models of media communication as implemented via analogue communication technologies such as television, radio, and cinema. Broadcast media are typified by one-way transmission of content from a centralised source "to an indeterminate mass or audience" (Holmes 2005: 84). The second media age – associated with the 21st century – is predicated upon a shift to digital communication technologies, such as the Internet, that are organised around a network system in which information content is generated from multiple sources and disseminated in a non-linear fashion across a wide number of digitally interconnected pieces of media hardware.

Holmes identifies the interactive nature of the Internet and its decentralised operating structure as the key technocultural components underlying the utopian second media age discourses of the Net's radical democratic potential which have been developed by cyberculture theorists and academics such as Howard Rheingold (1995), Mark Poster (1995), and the writers presented in the American cyberculture magazine *Wired* (1993-), and which have remained highly influential in terms of shaping popular and critical perceptions of the Internet and society. Such discourses configure the Internet as a compensation for and corrective to the power imbalances that are perceived to be inherent to mainstream broadcast

media such as television,⁵⁷ offering “free-ranging possibilities of political expression and rights of electronic assembly” within a media environment ostensibly free of the “technical, political, and social” constraints of broadcast systems (Holmes 2005: 9). In this discursive framework the Net is conceptualised as facilitating democracy by providing new channels for democratic organization and new cultural spaces in which matters of cultural politics can be exercised and addressed. In terms of democratic organization, for example, the interactive capacities of the Internet are regarded as possessing the potential to facilitate direct democracy in the form of “two-way interaction” between the public and institutions of power, and to aid in the mobilisation of democratic activity against abuses of power in the form of online dialogue and organization between concerned citizens (ibid: 84). In terms of cultural politics, the Net’s capacity for personalised interactive communication, in combination with a decentered and non-hierarchical information environment is regarded as providing the basis for the development of “new kinds of [virtual] community that transcend modern forms of state control” (ibid: 10-11). Such communities could embody political and cultural beliefs that represent alternatives or challenges to the status quo, such as “oppositional subjectivities” based upon marginalised identity positions related to the likes of ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation (ibid: 11). The decentralised nature of the Internet can be seen to reinforce the democratic potential offered by such interactivity since it enables citizens to engage in communicative activity without having recourse to the centralised operating structures of the mainstream media and the power interests that influence such structures.⁵⁸

As the summary in figure 1 indicates, these second media age discourses offer articulations of the relationships between media power, democracy, and the Internet resonant with the suspicions of mainstream media which were discussed in chapter 4 as being central to radical/critical approaches to media power and

⁵⁷ Although newspapers are not technically broadcast media, they are still based upon the ‘one to many’ mode of content that is regarded as a defining principle of broadcast media, and so could be considered to operate in a broadcast mode on a social –cultural level.

⁵⁸ Of course, discourses articulating the Net as a socio-political paradigm shift tend to overlook the ‘digital divide’ that operates in many nations regarding access to communication and information technologies. As Stuart Allan states, “celebratory claims about the [likes of] ‘the global village’ engendered” by the Internet “ring hollow, especially when it is acknowledged that the majority of the world’s population have never even made a telephone call, let alone logged on to a computer” (Allan 2004: 190).

which, in ideologically distorted forms, constitute a significant component of the logic of classical conspiracy theory.

Figure 2. Differences between first and second media age media

First media age (broadcast)	Second media age (interactivity)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centred (few speak to many) - One-way communication - Predisposed to state control - An instrument of regimes of stratification and inequality - Participants are fragmented and constituted as a mass - Influences consciousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decentred (many speak to many) - Two way communication - Evades state control - Democratizing: facilitates universal citizenship - Participants are seen to retain their individuality - Influences individual experiences of space and time

(ibid: 10)

The mainstream broadcast systems of the first media age are delineated here in terms highly evocative of the conspiracist suspicions of mainstream media as systems of conspiratorial control. For example, their predisposition to state control is in keeping with conspiracist beliefs in the state as the main agent of conspiratorial agency; their instrumental function in promoting socio-political stratification and inequality is in keeping with the conspiratorial strategy of social division and manipulation (as discussed in the Weidner article in chapter 4, section 4.22); and their constitution of the public as a mass made up of ‘fragments’ implies an ethos opposed to the individual and collective activity required to challenge conspiratorial power structures. The delineation of the characteristics typical of second media age media such as the Internet reflects conspiracist conceptions of the Internet as a medium which operates outside mainstream conspiratorial control and which embodies the democratic principles that inform conspiracist conceptions of freedom. The Net’s position outside of the structures of state control is obviously highly resonant with conspiracist

imaginings of the state as the main agent of conspiratorial power; its technocultural capacities for facilitating universal citizenship reflect an innate adherence to the democratic ethos in opposition to the perceived conspiratorial agenda of totalitarian control; and the organisation of its information structures around notions of individual users rather than mass audiences affirms a commitment to ideas of personal liberty, a commitment well-suited to the dichotomy of personal liberty vs totalitarian power that forms one of the foundations of conspiracist belief.

The discourses of the second media age which configure the Net as a radical force for democratic change within a technologically deterministic narrative of socio-political progress through new media technologies, and which have proved highly influential frameworks in terms of popular and critical perceptions of the Net's role in society, can therefore be seen to inform conspiracist notions of the Internet as a site of information freedom from conspiratorial control.

5.22 The Net and myths of the digital sublime

The ostensibly revolutionary relationships between the Internet and democracy which inform discursive conceptions of a second media age can also be articulated on a more intrinsic level of socio-political imagining that has particular resonance with conspiracist notions of information freedom. In his overview of the conceptual and imaginary frameworks that have shaped popular and critical attitudes towards the Internet and influenced the applications of Internet capacities to contemporary social existence, Vincent Mosco (2004) argues that discourses such as those of the second media age have become dominant frameworks for articulating the relationships between the Internet and society because they embody mythic conceptions of the Net as a vehicle for socio-political transcendence and transformation – conceptions that he collectively designates as the 'digital sublime'. By 'sublime' Mosco means to evoke the theories of transcendent experience that were developed by Enlightenment thinkers such as Edmund Burke and which have become staples of Western cultural thought. The core ideas underlying such theories are that certain objects, environments, and situations are so complex and overwhelming in terms of their

aesthetic/experiential impact upon an individual or group that that appear to transcend the normally mundane nature of reality, inducing imaginative and metaphysical sensations such as “astonishment, awe, terror, and psychic distance” (Mosco 2004: 23).

Building on the work of other cultural theorists such as Carey (1992), Mosco argues that notions of the sublime have shifted in relation to the large-scale changes of modernity. While natural landscapes formed the Enlightenment basis for ideas of sublimity, modern and post-modern senses of the sublime have developed in relation to the scale and complexity of the technological systems upon which modern Western societies are based. Although modern technologies have been criticised for their negative characteristics and effects (e.g. the work of the Frankfurt School), the sense of the ‘technological sublime’ that predominates in Western societies is generally a positive one due to the deep associations made between technological systems and the utopian grand narratives, such as the concept of ‘progress’, that are integral to Western thought. The scale and complexity of the Internet and other ICTs have led to the development of a ‘digital sublime’ within contemporary Western culture in which the Internet, in particular, is perceived as a technology that can help individuals, communities and even whole cultures ‘transcend’ the limitations of the material, social and political realities in which they are situated.

These imaginative configurations of the Internet as a medium of transcendence and transformation have powerful mythic overtones in relation to ideas of democracy, power, and media. Mosco uses ‘myth’ in the socio-cultural and ideological senses within which it has been articulated within the contemporary humanities and social sciences fields via the influence of structuralist theorists such as Levi-Strauss and neo-Marxist/post-structuralist theorists such as Gramsci, Foucault and Barthes. In relation to these structuralist perspectives, Mosco delineates myths as “stories that help people deal with contradictions in social life that can never be fully resolved” (Mosco 2004: 28). Such contradictions may include the desire for people to express their individuality “and yet participate fully in a collective community”, and people’s wish to control their circumstances even as they “desire to give up some control to bring about a more democratic society” (ibid). The neo-Marxist/post-structuralist approaches to myth develop this structuralist theme by arguing that myth is “a political term that inflects human values with ideology” (ibid: 30). Myths serve to transform the innate

contradictions of social life and the “messy complexities of history” (ibid) into simplified and idealised versions of social reality. While these mythic ideals are often developed and/or appropriated by dominant power structures as discourses of normality and common-sense which serve to naturalise the ideology that underpins such power (an approach favoured by neo-Marxist theorists), they may also function as expressions of alternative modes of social existence (an approach more readily associated with the likes of postmodern theory and cultural politics perspectives). In this respect, myths may be seen to be catalysts for change in that they motivate people to instigate social and political change according to the mythic ideals in question.

For Mosco, technologically determinist discourses such as those of the second media age which configure the Internet as the basis of paradigm shifts in Western society are particularly powerful and appealing because they correlate the ‘digital sublime’ with mythic ideals of democratic revolution. In this articulation, “the Internet provides the basis for a powerful myth” (ibid) of transcendence over or transformation from the stagnant or corrupt cultural and political structures of modernity and late capitalism. Mosco labels this mythic configuration the ‘Internet revolution’, and delineates it as

a story about how ever smaller, faster, cheaper, and better computer and communication technologies help to realize, with little effort, those seemingly impossible dreams of democracy and community with practically no pressure on the natural environment. According to this view, computer communication empowers people largely by realizing the perennial dream of philosophers and librarians: to make possible instant access to the world’s store of information without requiring the time, energy and money to physically go where the information is stored. Moreover, the story continues, computer networks offer relatively inexpensive access, making possible a primary feature of democracy, that the tools necessary for empowerment are equally available to all. Furthermore, this vision of the Internet fosters community because it enables people to communicate with one another in any part of the world. As a result, existing communities are strengthened and whole new ‘virtual’ communities arise from

the creation of networks of people who share interests, commitments, and values. (ibid: 30-31)

The key mythic idea encapsulated in the 'Internet Revolution' myth that informs dominant cyber-discourses such as those of the second media age is that of transcendence and transformation in the form of democratic *empowerment*. The Internet is configured as a medium which empowers individuals and societies by facilitating communicative practices conducive to utopian ideals of "democracy and community" (ibid: 30).

Mosco identifies accessibility and interactivity as the two main technocultural principles of the Net which embody these mythic ideals of 'cyber-empowerment'. In terms of accessibility, the virtuality of the Internet - its ability to transcend the material barriers of time and space through the development of electronically created 'virtual realms' in cyberspace (such as the Web) – is regarded as the main factor enabling the Net to transcend the material limitations of "time, energy, money" and geography that have traditionally restricted most peoples access to information as presented through mainstream broadcast media (ibid: 31). The Internet enables information in a variety of forms (text, images, sounds) to be stored online as digital codes that are capable of being accessed by anyone around the world who possesses the appropriate and, (by Western standards), "relatively inexpensive" computer and telecommunications equipment (ibid: 31). In this respect the Internet can be mythologised as a 'digital library', a potentially limitless "storage house of information that is instantly accessible through any computer at any time" (ibid: 51), which empowers citizens by providing them with prospective access to the entire world's "store of information" (ibid: 30) and thus keeping them particularly well-informed and capable of making considered political decisions in relation to the tenets of public service media (as outlined in chapter 4 section 4.34). In terms of interactivity, the technocultural capacities of the Net enable it to facilitate interactive communication between people who would previously have been unable or unwilling to engage in direct interpersonal forms of contact due to the technical constraints and socio-political limitations of mainstream broadcast media. In these respects the Net can be regarded as empowering citizens by facilitating the development of virtual communities and thereby enhancing the sense of collective action which is a necessary requirement for democratic activity (see chapter 4 section 4.33). People can use the Net to

strengthen the existing communities to which they belong, while “whole new ‘virtual’ communities” may “arise from the creation of networks of people who share interests, commitments, and values” (ibid: 31).

I argue that the Net is conceptualised by conspiracy theorists in relation to these democratic myths of the digital sublime. The technocultural capacities of the Internet enable conspiracy theorists to transcend what they perceive as the conspiratorial control structures of mainstream media and develop information practices which empower them in their self-perceived radical struggle against the forces of conspiratorial control. For instance, the mythic configuration of the Net as a digital library can be seen to be integral to the conspiracist development of online information practices. The mythic notion that the Internet is an omniscient medium in that it has the potential to store vast quantities of information is reflected in the fact that conspiracy theorists rely upon the Net as their resource base in terms of researching evidence for their theories, and presenting such evidence through forms such as websites or online documentaries. For example, the conspiracy documentary series *Loose Change* (2005- 2009), something of an online *cause celebre* in its promotion of the conspiracy theory that the 9/11 terror attacks were an ‘inside job’ undertaken by conspiratorial forces in the US government, is constructed almost entirely from news and library footage sourced from websites. The development of conspiracy documentaries (either as downloads or DVDs) constructed from online footage by conspiracy theorists using the convergent and interactive technocultural capacities of the Internet (e.g. digital filmmaking software) has, over the last several years, become a staple of online conspiracist practice (Sargeant 2006). The ‘digital library’ myth configures the Net as a medium of free information which transcends the archival, economic, and institutional limitations that restrict conspiracy theorists’ ability to undertake similar practices in relation to mainstream media.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Conspiracist documentaries such as *Loose Change* also make clear some of the limitations of the digital library that render it a more mythic than realistic framework for Net practice in their belief that access to large amounts of information online equate with the qualitative veracity and worth of such information. In other words, it appears to be automatically assumed by conspiracy theorists— as an act of faith in the democratic potential of the Net, perhaps? — that information presented online by amateur users is somehow as truthful as that undertaken by mainstream information experts such as journalists, academics, and public intellectuals because of what they perceive to be the Net’s inherently democratic nature.

This conflation of the quantitative information capacities of the Net with the qualitative properties of information itself is also eminently suited to conspiracist practices of ‘pseudo-scholarship’ (Hofstadter 1966; Knight 2001). Of particular relevance to the digital library framework is the practice of ‘data-bombing’, in which conspiracy theorists present large amounts

Mythic conceptions of online communities as sites of democratic transcendence over the socio-political strictures of real world communities are also reflected in the development of conspiracist demagogues such as Alex Jones and David Icke. These figures make use of the interactive capacities of the Net in forms such as personal website forums and amateur streamed radio and television broadcasting⁶⁰ to present themselves as figureheads for an ostensible online community of conspiracy theorists who believe in superconspiracy theories regarding the Illuminati (as also discussed in chapter 7, section 7.32). These examples of the ways in which conspiracy theorists use the technocultural capacities of the Net to empower themselves outside of the mainstream media illustrate the ways in which discursive articulations of the Net as a radical democratic medium, such the myths of the 'Internet revolution' that are inherent to cyber-utopian discourses of the digital sublime, constitute a profound point of connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory.

5.3 American discourses of the Internet and information freedom

Mythic discourses of the Internet as an embodiment of democratic ideals, such as those of the second media age and the digital sublime, form a particularly prominent aspect of American cyberculture because such discourses resonate profoundly with the democratic ideals that constitute the mythic underpinnings of American political and cultural identity. In this section I will extend the arguments presented in sections 5.21 and 5.22 above to a consideration of how the democratic discourses of American cyberculture constitute a major point of connection with the Amerocentric worldview and values that predominate classical conspiracy thought.

As cyber-critics such as Richard Barbrook (2006, 2007) have argued, mythic associations between the technocultural capacities of the Internet and democratic empowerment, as articulated in cyber-discourses such as those of the second

of evidence in the form of decontextualised 'factoids' or pieces of information 'cherry-picked' from mainstream sources as collectively constituting qualitative evidence for the reality of the conspiracy in question.

⁶⁰ See Alex Jones's websites *Prison Planet.com*, <http://www.prisonplanet.com/> and *Infowars.com*, <http://www.infowars.com/>, and David Icke's website, <http://www.davidicke.com/index.php/>, accessed 15/9/10.

media age, have predominantly been articulated in relation to American democratic traditions. Barbrook identifies the American cultural mythology of the 'frontier' as a defining context for the development of such articulations. This frontier mythos equates perceptions of geographical and socio-cultural space with the democratic ideals that are enshrined in the founding texts of American nationhood such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In this mythos the 'wide open spaces' of the American continent that formed the physical frontier to American nation-building during the periods of colonialism and independence are configured as symbols of the democratic ideals that defined America as a nation against the old world of Europe. Because such frontier spaces exist outside of or on the edges of society, they represent a social and cultural space where individual citizens can express their democratic rights and freedoms to their fullest potential outside of the repressive structures of social and political control that are associated with the centralized state and established civilization. The frontier therefore symbolises the utopian possibilities of American democracy by contrast with the absolutist or statist power structures typical of early modern Europe or, to state their most influential modern permutation, communist Russia.

In this respect Barbrook, and other cultural historians such as Francois Cusset (2008), have delineated the historical development of the Internet in relation to American society as one shaped by the radical and libertarian perspectives of the computer engineers and cyber-theorists who constituted the "alternative cybercultures and political subgroups" which were formed around the "early days of the Internet" in late 80s/early 90s America (Cusset 2008: 253), and which drove the technological and socio-cultural processes that led to the Internet becoming established in its present form as a popular, everyday medium. As Cusset argues, the cybercultural perspective that "emerged victorious" as the dominant discursive framework for conceptualising the relationship between the Net and American society "was that of the civil libertarians" (ibid). This group configured the Internet in mythic terms as a 'virtual frontier' in which the democratic ideals underlying American life could be reclaimed and revitalized in response to the repressive structures of centralized state government. Referring back to the technocultural principles of cyber-empowerment outlined in the discussion of the digital sublime in section 5.22, and the outline of civil liberties presented in chapter 4 section 4.33, these discourses articulated the Internet as a medium which offered American citizens the potential to more fully realize their

civil liberties through more open access to information, which empowered citizens freedom of speech and expression, and interactive communication, which empowered citizens freedoms of assembly and association.

As Cusset notes, the civil libertarians successfully “argued for freedom of expression without regard to content, intransitive to the point of tautology”, and “for the abolition of copyright laws in favor of self-regulating use by communities” (ibid). They also

brandished the [libertarian] notion of a “Washington conspiracy” and called for general privatization and dismantling of state power, which allegedly policed communication and encrypted its own internal messages. Promoted by John Perry Barlow...and his Electric Frontier Foundation, along with several other white and regionalist lobby groups, the [civil libertarian] movement made the sacrosanct freedom of expression into the sole “content” of the Internet, instead of working toward an exogenous political program, some form of collective action *off* of the Internet – because [its’ libertarian ethos] denied the very notion of public space (ibid).

The name of the leading civil libertarian ‘cyber-lobby’ group – the Electric Frontier Foundation – makes explicit the symbolic affinities they perceived between the historical frontier of the American landscape and the virtual frontier of cyberspace typified by the Internet. This articulation of the Internet as an extension of American democracy is also evident in one of the seminal documents of American cyberculture developed by Barlow and the ELF, ‘A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’ (1996). As its title suggests, this document, written in response to then - proposed government legislation seeking to restrict and regulate Net content on political and economic grounds, uses the revolutionary mythology of American ‘independence’ from colonial rule to articulate cyberspace (and the Internet) as a similarly revolutionary cultural space independent of the perceived oppressive structures of American governmental power.⁶¹ In this radical cyber-cultural ethos, the Net is discursively configured as

⁶¹ The writing style of the document is explicitly referential to the tone and content of the original constitution; e.g. “These increasingly hostile and colonial measures place us in the same position

a democratically revolutionary space that operates outside of the repressive structures of mainstream media power and which possesses technocultural capacities that facilitate American citizens' abilities to challenge and critique government power. This is in accordance with the libertarian suspicions of big government – what Cusset delineates as the notion of a 'Washington conspiracy' – that are a prominent strand in American political thought.

These radical and libertarian impulses intrinsic to the dominant discourses of American cyber-culture constitute important affinities with the libertarian perspectives that inform classical conspiracist conceptions of the American government as the leading agent of conspiratorial power.⁶² To illustrate this I will present an article by American conspiracy theorist 'Jolly Roger', taken from the leading American conspiracy news website *Rense.com*, as an exemplar of conspiracist attitudes towards the American government. The author is affiliated with the 'American Resistance Movement', a grassroots network of 'patriot' groups across the USA whose worldview is predicated upon nationalistic conspiracy beliefs that the size and power of the federal government in the lives of American citizens is unconstitutional and therefore indicative of the fact that the government is under the control of conspiratorial forces opposed to the ideals of American democracy.⁶³

as those previous lovers of freedom and self-determination who had to reject the authorities of distant, uninformed powers." From <http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>, accessed 11/12/08.

⁶² The American socio-political contexts that inform most contemporary conspiracy theories are explicated in many of the conspiracy theory studies discussed in chapter 2 (e.g. Hofstadter 1966; Johnson 1983; Melley 2000; Goldberg 2001; Knight 2002). These contexts form the basis for the undeniably Amerocentric worldview of most classical conspiracy theories, which are predicated upon variants of the theme 'the plot against America'. For example, the Illuminati superconspiracy that is predominant in classical conspiracy circles is generally described as centering around the Illuminist takeover of the American government in order to implement their totalitarian New World Order/One World Government (see chapter 2 section 2.51). That this conspiracist worldview is heavily influenced by extremist notions of American national identity is evidenced by the identification of the conspirators with groups such as Communists, Zionists, Masons, Catholics, and internationalist bodies such as the UN, EU, and Trilateral Commission. Such groups and organisations represent outside alternatives or perceived threats to what the conspiracy theorists consider to be the essential American ideals of democracy, free market capitalism and 'white Anglo-Saxon Protestant' cultural identity.

⁶³ These 'patriot' groups "share in the belief that the Constitution is the supreme law of the land and that Government must abide by it, be limited by just powers derived therein and should never act outside its constitutional limitations. We have a common belief that Liberty and Justice is for all and extends to all the citizens of our great republic." From the *American Resistance Movement* website, <http://www.theamericanresistancemovement.com/about.php>, accessed 11/12/09.

Conspiracy Theorists

By Jolly Roger

2-20-9

Everyone has heard, and has probably used the term "conspiracy theorist," and the fact of the term being in common use, also indicates that we generally agree on what it means. I saw a movie by that name, and the title character was a raving lunatic who kept his food in thermoses with combination locks to reduce his chances of being poisoned by imaginary enemies.

Regardless of how the stupid movie turned out, what's important here is the common perception people have of someone to whom that label is applied, and just as important, is who it is that applies the label. The common perception is that someone who is labeled a "conspiracy theorist" is suffering from some type of psychological disorder, and that label is usually applied to people by our government, and our news media. The next thing to consider, is that the label is applied to anyone who questions our government's version of events in any matter. Doesn't it logically follow that the media are teaching us to assume that anyone who questions the government is insane? When that label is applied to a person, doesn't it become easy to dismiss everything they say without even hearing it? How convenient for them.

I think the label first became widely used to slander people who questioned the details surrounding the JFK assassination, and forty years later, there aren't too many thinking people who still believe the Warren Commission's "lone gunman" explanation. That explanation is doubted by everyone who has taken the time to look into the details, and believed only by people who refuse to.

Which is "theory" and which is fact? In the absence of a full confession, this can only be decided by a preponderance of evidence, and it would be silly to come to a conclusion on any

matter without looking at all the evidence available. This is only common sense, just as it is safe to assume some degree of guilt or complicity on the part of anyone who lies about an event, or tries to hide, plant, or destroy any type of evidence.

Conspiracy theories arise from evidence. After the government releases an explanation of a particular event, a conspiracy theory is only born because evidence exists to disprove their explanation, or at least call it into question. There's nothing insane about it, unless you define sanity as believing whatever the government tells you. In light of the fact that our government lies to us regularly, I would define believing everything they tell you as utter stupidity.

In July of 1996, flight 800 exploded over Long Island. Shortly after their terrorist explanation failed scrutiny, our government then explained the event by claiming that a faulty electrical system caused a spark that ignited a fuel tank, and the people who doubted this explanation were quickly labeled "conspiracy theorists." More than a hundred witnesses saw a missile travel from the ground up to the plane just prior to its explosion, but rather than being treated as eyewitnesses to an event, they were labeled "conspiracy theorists," which label allowed all subsequent investigation to ignore the strongest evidence in the matter.

Our "investigative" news agencies decided to accept and disseminate the official story, and they helped us forget the U.S. naval station nearby, the fact that missiles were regularly test fired there, and naturally, they paid no heed to more than a hundred "conspiracy theorists" who saw the plane get blown out of the sky by a missile. I believe that the U.S. Navy accidentally shot down flight 800, and that's my belief because it's the most sensible explanation that can be drawn from the available evidence. I'm not theorizing about conspiracies, but there are conflicting explanations of the event, and if the Navy did accidentally blow a passenger plane out of the sky, who would have a motive to lie

about it? The U.S. government, or a hundred witnesses?

Then of course, there were the "crazy conspiracy theories" arising from the bombing of the Alfred Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. In that matter, audio tapes and witnesses agree that there were two explosions, the first of which occurred inside the building between eight and ten seconds before the truck bomb exploded. Explosive experts agree that Timothy McVeigh's fertilizer bomb could not have destroyed the building, and the FBI's counter terrorism chief, and members of BATF lied about their whereabouts during and prior to the catastrophe. The evening news decided not to tell you any of this, and they will label anyone who tries to a "paranoid conspiracy theorist." In light of the evidence, we would be complete fools if a conspiracy theory didn't exist.

There were no conspiracy theories arising from the explosion of flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and there were no conspiracy theories arising from the work of the uni-bomber, so the newly invented psycho-babble that tries to explain the malady of conspiracy theorists, also needs to explain why millions of conspiracy theorists all decided not to theorize about those events. There is no psychological malady. There was simply no evidence to indicate a conspiracy.

The real question is not why people theorize about conspiracies, but why people choose to believe the government's version of events when it's obvious that they're lying. One reason is that most people never see the evidence because our "news" industry hides it, and another reason is that the same news industry will quickly associate anyone who questions the government with the people who see Elvis, Bigfoot, and UFO's.

But sadly, I think the main reason people choose to believe the government's version of events despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, is because it's easier, and safer. If you ignore most of

the evidence, and accept as plausible whatever ridiculous explanation the T.V. provides, your life remains simple, and you get to sit on your ass and watch more T.V. If on the other hand, you pluck your head from that same ass and realize you've been lied to, as a citizen in a democratic society, you're instantly burdened with being responsible for doing something about it. Every citizen of the United States has a civic duty to participate in their government, and keep themselves informed of its actions, or government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" isn't possible. You were warned that "eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, " but you chose to ignore your government, and believe whatever they told you, and because of this, Americans have lost their freedom. Although presidents and senators are public servants, unlike the dog catcher and mailman, they wield a lot of power over people's lives, and that's why they have to be watched, and scrutinized.

Statistical analysts from UCLA and Rutgers University believe that John Kerry won the 2004 presidential election by an estimated 1.3 million votes, and despite the fact that these learned scholars are probably the most qualified people alive to forward such an opinion, our news media dismisses this as "conspiracy theory." George W. Bush lost the 2000 election, and he lost the 2004 election, but he's occupying the White House, shredding our constitution, and stealing our wealth and freedom in a "war on terror" that's as fraudulent as his presidency because many Americans are too stupid to see it, too lazy to do anything about it, or both.

I'm sorry if I sound angry, but the fact of the matter is that I am angry. While you were staring into the television like an idiot, our freedom, wealth, and constitutional protections have been stolen from us, and because you're stupid enough to believe the manure being shoveled by our government, you've allowed them to commit bigger and more heinous crimes. Because you were too lazy to research their nonsensical economic policies, and see them for the

scams that they are, we'll all soon be living in poverty. And because you're so lazy, apathetic, and easily lied to, millions have died for the profits of a few. I have every right to be angry, and only a fool wouldn't be.

Only a small portion of my anger is reserved for the government of the United States, because they only did what can be expected of any government. They grabbed money, power and control where it was easy to do so. Most of my anger is directed toward my fellow American citizens, because they allowed it to happen by believing whatever they're told, and not doing what's expected of them. Patriotism in America does not mean waving the flag in blind loyalty to the government. As an American citizen, you have a civic duty to question your government, and hold them accountable for their actions, not use the flag as a blindfold. The American people have been duped once again, and it doesn't seem like it's a difficult thing to accomplish.

America's latest "conspiracy nuts" are better known as the 9-11 truth movement. The news media are doing their usual job of slandering them with their usual childish name calling, but for more than three years, they have refused to show you the documented fact, scientific data, expert testimony, photographic evidence, or the credible eyewitness accounts that prove U.S. government complicity in the events of September, 11, 2001. If this were just a "crazy conspiracy theory," I don't think people in our government would have worked so hard to destroy, hide, and lie about the evidence. The White House tried to derail every investigation into the matter. If we had an honest government, we wouldn't have conspiracy theories. We would have honest investigations, and fair trials, but these things are disappearing from America.

There are disturbing facts regarding the events of September 11 that every American needs to be aware of, but naturally, none of it

will be on T.V. I've met a lot of people in the 9-11 truth movement, and I can assure you that none of them are crazy, paranoid, or even "conspiracy theorists." One generalization I can make about them is that they all seem to be very intelligent. Maybe the smartest thing you could do would be to start listening to them. The Arabs don't "hate your freedom." The White House hates your freedom, because it's the only thing that stands between them, and unlimited power. - Jolly Roger

"Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Freedom" - Thomas Jefferson

911truth.org 911review.org 911review.com physics911.org wtc7.net

Anything written by "Jolly Roger" is the property of the American Resistance Movement, and the author hereby grants permission to anyone who so desires to post, print, copy, or distribute this letter as they see fit, and in fact, the author encourages you to do so. (Roger, 2009).

The libertarian suspicion of government evident in the ‘cyber-libertarian’ critique of the US government as a ‘Washington conspiracy’ because of its intentions to regulate the Internet, is on explicit display in Jolly Roger’s article. He takes for granted that the US government would engage in conspiratorial acts such as 9/11 and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing because such activity is what “can be expected of any government” – to grab “money, power and control where it [is] easy to do so” (Roger 2009). Since conspiracy and corruption are conceptualised in these libertarian terms as the natural state of government, the upholding of the ideals of democracy lies with the people rather than the state. In this respect Jolly Roger argues that American citizens have “a civic duty to question [the American] government, and hold them accountable for their actions” (ibid), in accordance with the libertarian ideal that forms a cornerstone of American democratic mythology: ‘eternal vigilance is the price of freedom’. ⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Although this adage is commonly attributed to Thomas Jefferson, its historical provenance is that of a speech given by 19th century American abolitionist Wendell Phillips. Internet references:

However, Roger excoriates his fellow citizens for failing to exercise such vigilance and allowing themselves to be ‘duped’ into accepting the official version of events such as 9/11, rather than the conspiracist explanations of government conspiracy which he assumes to be the truth. He therefore considers that the most important epistemological question raised by the likes of 9/11 conspiracy theories “is not why people theorize about conspiracies, but why people choose to believe the government’s version of events when it’s obvious that they’re lying” (ibid). In keeping with the conspiracist suspicions of mainstream media articulated in the conspiracist articles by Swinney and Weidner outlined in chapter 4 section 4.22, Roger identifies the answer as the implication of mainstream journalism within the conspiratorial apparatus of state power.

The mainstream news media are perceived as a propaganda arm of the government rather than a public service (see chapter 4, section 4.34), using tactics such as the suppression of information - “most people never see the evidence because our “news” industry hides it” - and socio-cultural marginalisation - “the same news industry will quickly associate anyone who questions the government with the people who see Elvis, Bigfoot, and UFOs” (ibid). As evidence that the mainstream news media plays such a propaganda role, Roger provides a representative example in the form of mainstream journalists’ dismissal as ‘conspiracy theory’ of the purported analysis undertaken by statisticians at UCLA and Rutgers University – “probably the most qualified people alive to forward such an opinion” – which indicated that John Kerry, rather than George W. Bush, won the 2004 presidential election in terms of votes. Roger also reflects the conspiracist animus against television as the mainstream medium most-suited to the practices of conspiratorial information control (clearly expressed in the Swinney article in chapter 4 section 4.22) by associating television news with the wilful ignorance of the public to face up to the conspiracist truth about government : “if you ignore most of the evidence, and accept as plausible whatever ridiculous explanation the T.V. provides, your life remains simple, and you get to sit on your ass and watch more T.V.” (ibid).

As a countervailing influence to this mainstream media control, and in keeping with the American libertarian ethos which underpins the civil libertarian cyber-culture discourses of Internet independence and information freedom, Roger

configures the Net as a radical medium that empowers American citizens to fulfill their civic duty of ‘eternal vigilance’ against the conspiratorial power of government through engagement with democratic information practices akin to those outlined in section 5.22 above. In its mythic configuration as a digital library, the Net has the capacity to make conspiracist information accessible to the public that would otherwise be unavailable through mainstream media channels. Thus, the “documented fact[s], scientific data, expert testimony, photographic evidence” and “credible eyewitness accounts that prove U.S. government complicity” (ibid) in the 9/11 terror attacks – and which have been suppressed by the mainstream American news media – can be made available online for the edification of the American public as to the conspiratorial truth of American government power. The idea that the interactive capacities of the Net can facilitate virtual communities and collective action online as forms of radical opposition to mainstream media control is also evident in the disclaimer at the end of Jolly Roger’s article, in which he “grants permission to anyone who so desires to post, print, copy, or distribute this letter as they see fit, and, in fact, the author encourages you to do so” (ibid). Roger sees the free online circulation of his article online as contributing to American citizens’ abilities to fulfill their civic duties of ‘eternal vigilance’ because his conspiracist arguments make people aware of the conspiratorial ‘truth’ of American government power and the ways in which the mainstream media are working to render them passive in the face of such power. As the title ‘American Resistance Movement’ signifies, such conspiracist knowledge can be translated into radical collective action which challenges and resists the conspiratorial power of ‘big government’. Through its capacities to provide American citizens with access to conspiratorial information about the conspiratorial nature of the US government, and to facilitate collective action between citizens as a means of critiquing and resisting such power, Jolly Roger’s article configures the Internet in libertarian terms as a major tool of the ‘eternal vigilance’ that American citizens must exercise as part of their civic duties regarding the preservation and maintenance of the democratic ideals of American nationhood.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ A prime example here are the so-called ‘tea-bagger’ citizens movements that manifested in the American political landscape in 2009. The tea-baggers were groups of rightwing Americans opposed to what they regarded as the ‘un-American’ policies of the Obama administration, such as ‘socialistic’ proposals to overhaul the largely privatised healthcare system in favour of a state-governed scheme. The political perspective of the tea-baggers was one rooted in nationalistic conspiracy theories, such as those in which President Obama (in particular) is accused of being the head of a communist or Islamic plot to ‘take over’ America, and was inspired and supported by

As this section illustrates (as an extension of the ideas presented in sections 5.21 and 5.22 regarding the discursive framing of the Net as an embodiment of radical democratic ideals), the American cybercultural discourses which configure the Net as a 'virtual frontier' where the libertarian impulses that underpin the mythic ideals of American democracy can be realised can be seen to constitute a major point of affinity between the Net and the libertarian suspicions of the US government that are an integral part of the logic of contemporary classical conspiracy theory.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has examined cybercultural discourses which have been particularly influential in terms of shaping Western perceptions of the Internet as a revolutionary medium of democratic empowerment, and has argued that these configurations constitute major points of connection with radical ideas of information freedom from mainstream media control that were discussed in chapter 4 as central aspects of the logic of classical conspiracy theory. Technologically deterministic discourses of the second media age, which configure the technocultural capacities of the Internet as the basis for a paradigm shift from mainstream broadcast media systems and their affiliated structures of media power to digital network systems predicated upon utopian notions of radical democracy, can be seen to present important points of connection with the ideas presented in chapter 4 regarding conspiracist configurations of the Internet as a radical medium of 'information freedom' which operates in opposition to the power structures of mainstream media. The associated discourses of the digital sublime, which articulate the democratic potentials of the Net in mythic terms of transcendence and empowerment, further this sense of connection by providing a discursive basis for conspiracist configurations of the Net as a medium through

leading American far-right conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones and Fox News pundit Glenn Beck.

Right-wing websites served as organisational points for the tea-baggers to engage in direct political activity such as protest marches on Washington DC in October 2009. For background on this movement, see, for example, 'Fake Teabaggers Are Anti-Spend, Anti-Government: Real Populists Want to Stop Banks from Plundering America' by Mark Ames, Yasha Levine, and Alexander Zaitchik, at *Alternet.org*, http://www.alternet.org/story/136688/fake_teabaggers_are_anti-spend%2C_anti-government%3A_real_populists_want_to_stop_banks_from_plundering_america/, posted 15/4/2009, accessed 18/12/09.

which conspiracy theorists can empower themselves in relation to mainstream media power. American cybercultural discourses of civil libertarianism, which conceptualise the Net as a virtual embodiment of the 'frontier' mythos central to American democratic traditions, can also be considered significant points of connection in that they articulate ideas of online information freedom in relation to the libertarian perspectives that underpin the Amerocentric worldview of classical conspiracy theory.

These cyber-cultural configurations of the Net as a site of radical information freedom which serves to empower citizens against mainstream media power structures function as the discursive underpinnings for radical configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere, which I will argue in chapters 6-8 constitute the most integral point of connection between the Internet and the logic of classical conspiracy theory.

CHAPTER 6

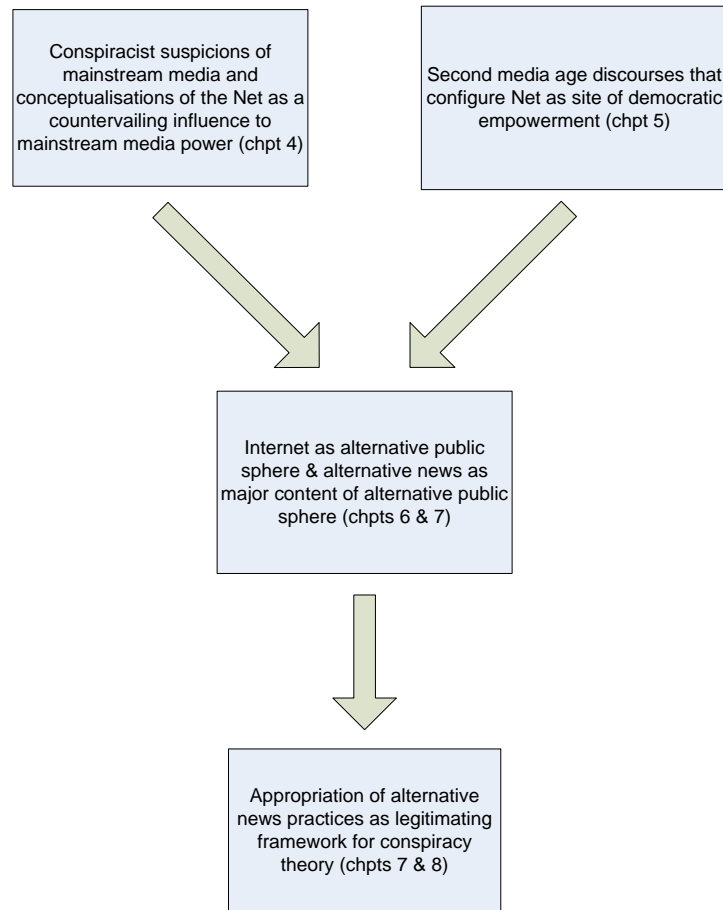
THE INTERNET AS AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIUM

6.1 Introduction

Chapters 4 and 5 presented macro-level overviews of two major discursive frameworks - the radical critiques of mainstream media power implicit in conspiracy theory and cybercultural configurations of the Internet as an embodiment of radical democratic ideals - that I argue constitute the major points of affinity and connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will develop these arguments in a more in-depth fashion by presenting a micro-level examination of discursive configurations of the Internet as an 'alternative medium' in which radical democratic practices are enacted in response to the perceived failings of mainstream media to enact its public service duties and principles. In these chapters I will argue that not only do these discursive configurations of the Net as an alternative medium serve as an important point of connection with the ostensibly radical ethos of classical conspiracy theory (thus extending arguments introduced in chapters 4 and 5), but that these configurations of the Net as an alternative medium are appropriated by classical conspiracy theorists as a means of *legitimizing* their conspiracist ideas in relation to the democratic apparatus by presenting them as genuinely radical democratic perspectives rather than expressions of far-right/extremist ideologies.

Below is a graphic representation of the structure delineated above as a means of aiding the reader's comprehension of my arguments at this mid-way point:

Figure 3. Outline of thesis argument.



Chapter 6 has three main parts. The first part outlines alternative media concepts as articulated in relation to critical discourses of the democratic functions of the media as a public sphere. The second part discusses configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere. The third part considers how these configurations not only present a point of connection with the ‘radical’ democratic ideas that have been discussed in chapters 4 and 5 as forming part of the underlying logic of classical conspiracy theory, but also constitute a framework through which conspiracy theorists can legitimate their ideas as radical democratic practices. Chapter 7 will further this micro-level focus on the Internet as an alternative public sphere by delineating the integral role played by news in relation to the public sphere ideal, and the articulation of this relationship with regards to alternative media configurations of the Net as an alternative public sphere. I will then consider how online alternative news practices are appropriated

by classical conspiracy theorists as the key legitimating framework for their conspiracist beliefs in relation to the alternative public sphere. Chapter 8 will present empirical evidence of the conspiracy theory/alternative media appropriation-legitimation dynamic in the form of a case study of the ‘alternative’ news practices of the American conspiracy news site *Rense.com*.

6.21 The public sphere - background

Cyber-cultural configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium are predicated upon critical configurations of the public service functions and responsibilities of media in democratic political systems. Arguably the most influential and prominent theoretical articulation of these ideas are the notions of the ‘public sphere’ developed by the German political philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The following sections from this one to section 6.24 will outline the key concepts of the public sphere in order to establish the theoretical context for subsequent discussions of the relationships between conspiracy theorising and alternative media.

In Habermas's conception, the public sphere refers to the central role played by media systems in the communicative practices which are integral to the operation of democratic forms of governance:

By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines,

radio and TV are the media of the public sphere. We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. Although state activity is so to speak the executor, it is not a part of it....Only when the exercise of political control is effectively subordinated to the democratic demand that information be accessible to the public, does the political public sphere win an institutionalized influence over the government through the instrument of law-making bodies. (Habermas 1974: 49).

With reference to the principles and practices of democracy outlined in chapter 4 , sections 4.31 – 4.36, Habermas here outlines the public sphere as a specific kind of social or cultural space (“realm”) within modern societies predicated on pluralistic democratic principles (“access is guaranteed to all citizens”), in which citizens engage in communicative activity (“conversation”) about issues of democratic importance (“matters of *general* interest”). The public sphere is defined by civil liberties, in that citizens should be free to gather together in the appropriate spaces (“freedom of assembly and association”) and to discuss and disseminate any topic (“freedom to express and publish their opinions”); furthermore, these freedoms should be codified as rule of law (“guaranteed”). In these respects media systems are articulated as a public service that enable citizens to engage in communicative activity as a means of exercising and reinforcing their democratic rights and responsibilities. Writing in the pre-digital era, Habermas clearly denotes “newspapers and magazines, radio and TV” as “the media of the public sphere” (ibid). Described in more general terms, the public sphere can be “broadly understood as a general context of [media] interaction where citizens get informed and public discussion takes place” (Karppinen 2008: 31). In this interactive space the “voicing of diverse views and access to a wide range of information and experiences” are regarded as “a precondition for citizen’s effective participation in public life” (ibid). Habermas also conceptualises the public sphere as a median space between what he considers the two other major ‘spheres’ of modern social power: the government sphere of the state and the private sphere of the individual (or, by extension, the family group) (Crossley & Roberts 2004: 3). In this respect the public sphere can be articulated as a communicative realm “that mediates between society and state,

in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion” (Eley 1992: 290).

Habermas's conceptions of the public sphere are positioned in relation to the socio-historical contexts that have shaped modern Western society since the Enlightenment. The public sphere initially developed around early modern concepts of the state as a representative system of power on behalf of the public. The ‘private public sphere’ of the Enlightenment consisted of “private individuals (coming) together to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual interest and concern, creating a space in which both new ideas and the practices and discipline of rational public debate were cultivated” (Crossley & Roberts 2004: 2). In the 18th century the rise of printing technologies and the mass production of literary media, such as novels and newspapers, led to this private public sphere evolving into the ‘literary public sphere’ in which “art and literature became a focus of public discussion and debate” (ibid: 3). Such communicative activity occurred in specific public spaces (e.g. the much evoked coffee houses and salons). This literary public sphere subsequently gave way to the ‘political public sphere’ of 19th/20th century modernity. The political public sphere was typified by two major developments. Firstly, the establishment of a physical and social infrastructure for public debate “as topics of debate shifted from art and literature to politics and economics” (ibid). Secondly, the establishment of a public culture of debate as a means of “generating the cultural resources necessary for critical and rational political debate” (ibid). Central to both of these developments were the rise of broadcast media systems such as radio and television. The ability of these media systems to present the same information to audiences over wide geographical areas and through audio-visual – rather than purely literary or oral - forms of communication meant that they formed an effective virtual and social space for public debate in relation to the social changes of 20th century modernity, such as the establishment of urbanised mass society and the rise of liberal democracy as the dominant political form.

As an extension and synthesis of these earlier configurations of the public sphere, distinguishing characteristics of the political public sphere include public discussion regarding the activities of the state and its operation ‘free’ from state interference (“although state activity is so to speak the executor, it is not a part of it”: Habermas 1974: 49). Habermas argues that the role of the political public sphere is in maintaining the democratic balance of power between state and

public, and that this role is dependent upon notions of transparency. The ability of citizens to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities requires the public communication of information regarding the workings of state power through the public sphere. Transparency - public access to information regarding the workings of the state - is therefore the basis of democratic principles of accountability – that the activities of the state are a reflection of the public interest (“only when the exercise of political control is effectively subordinated to the democratic demand that information be accessible to the public, does the political public sphere win an institutionalized influence over the government through the *instrument* of law-making bodies”) (ibid). In such respects the Habermasian public sphere can be said to represent “a set of political norms crucial for democratic practice” (Dean 2003: 96). In Jodi Dean's summation, these norms are “equality, transparency, inclusivity, rationality” (ibid).

6.22 The public sphere - principles and practices

The Habermasian foundations of public sphere theory outlined above have been further articulated by democratic theorists in terms of communicative principles and practices held to be typical of public sphere communication. The principle of *deliberative democracy* can be considered a cornerstone of public sphere debate in practice. As defined by Phil Neisser, “the theory of deliberative democracy holds that a democracy fully worthy of the name needs face-to-face, public dialogues regularly held in a multitude of different kinds of spaces, both within and without the state, allowing for the formation of multiple “publics”, some more narrow than others, so that the public sphere writ large is constituted by contesting discourses” (Neisser 2007). The rational deliberations of political opinion central to the democratic process are presented in Neisser’s definition as contingent with democratic ideas of plurality. The public is constituted as a plurality of voices (“contesting discourses”) and interest groups (“multiple publics”); such plurality is in turn reflected through a diversity of communication channels (“different kinds of spaces”). Explicit in Neisser’s definition is the positioning of one particular type of communicative activity – “face to face public dialogue” - as that best-suited to this style of democracy. Related to this principle

of deliberative democracy is an idealised view of public communication labelled *ideal speech*. As defined by Seyla Benhabib,

the procedural constraints of the ideal speech situation are that each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, and explanations; all must have equal chances to express their wishes, desires, and feelings; and finally, within dialogue, speakers must be free to thematize those power relations that in ordinary contexts would constrain the wholly free articulation of opinions and positions. Together these conditions specify a norm of communication that can be named that of *egalitarian reciprocity* (Benhabib 1992: 89).

A third guiding principle here is that of *rational-critical debate*. The public sphere is conceived as both a communicative space where citizens are informed about the workings of the state and society and a deliberative space where the public is able to debate possible courses of action relating to these political and social situations, and communicate these decisions to the state for implementation via the democratic political apparatus. The public (both as individuals and as a collective) is therefore envisaged as making ‘rational’ decisions on political and social matters based on access to information and spaces for deliberation: “the public as a whole can generally form policy preferences that reflect the best available information” (Page 1995, quoted in Bohman 2004: 142). The implication here is that the public sphere – and, by association, democratic systems of government – requires publics capable of making critical evaluations and rational judgments according to the information presented to them. Concomitant with rational-critical debate are ideas of *publicity*. These are the cultural processes whereby the socio-political interests of particular groups within society are articulated in the public sphere as democratic issues. Media systems are therefore integral both to publicity processes and the realization of the public sphere ideal itself (Dean 2002).

These guiding principles of public sphere communication require certain conditions in order to be implemented as media practices. A fundamental condition for such practices is the configuration of media as a “forum, that is, a social space in which speakers may express their views to others and who in turn

respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns” (Bohman 2004: 133). In other words, the socio-cultural space in which public sphere communication is to take place must provide the potential for *interpersonal* communication between members of the public. A second prerequisite for public sphere media is that they should facilitate some degree of *interactive* communication. As defined by James Bohman,

a democratic public sphere must manifest commitments to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction in the forum. Such interaction takes the specific form of a conversation or dialogue, in which speakers and hearers treat each other with equal respect and freely exchange their roles in their responses to each other. What makes dialogue so crucial is that it not only proceeds as a communicative exchange, in the form of turn-taking, but also that it is guided by the mutual expectation of uptake; that is, speakers offer reasons to each other and expect that others will consider their reasons or concerns at least to the extent that their speech acts contribute to shaping the ongoing course of the interaction, without anyone exerting control over it or having special status (ibid).

Communication in the public sphere is not merely people talking to each other: rather, such communication is deemed to take a specific politicised form – in this case, that of a dialogue in which two or more people engage in measured, balanced debate about ideas or issues of political or social significance. Furthermore, efforts are made to ensure that the dialogue adheres to rules of freedom and equality, in that it is open to speakers from a variety of backgrounds and respectful of each speaker’s participation.

A third condition for public sphere media is that they should be *inclusive* with regards to the public. In this respect, “communication must address an indefinite audience. In this sense, any social exclusion undermines the existence of a public sphere. This indefiniteness is required even of face-to-face interaction, since a conversation is public not simply because it could be heard by others but to the extent that it could be taken to address anyone” (ibid: 134). The types of dialogue presented by media operating in the public service mode should therefore be perceived as having universal relevance and appeal to other citizens. A variety of

“technologies and institutions” are also required to “secure the continued existence” of public sphere communication, and to “regularize opportunities and access to it” (ibid). Such technologies include the production and distribution networks of specific media systems, such as the transmission apparatus necessary for broadcast media such as television to reach most households within a nation. Such institutions include the likes of government departments and media organisations which serve to secure public sphere communication through the implementation of laws that ensure citizens have adequate opportunities and access to public sphere media, and codes of conduct that regulate the activities of media professionals in relation to public sphere principles. In Bohman’s overview, “a public sphere depends upon the opening up [through media principles and practices] of a social space for a particular kind of repeated and open-ended interaction” (ibid).

6.23 The public sphere - criticisms and revisions

The establishment of Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere as something of a template for theoretical discussions of the relationships between democracy and media power in post WWII Western thought has led to a variety of critical challenges and revisions being developed in relation to public sphere ideals, particularly by critics affiliated with postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives on media. Given that I am positioning my delineation of the Internet as an alternative medium in relation to this traditional public sphere template, I will here discuss some of these criticisms and revisions in order to signal my awareness of the broader critical contexts of public sphere theory, and to indicate the critical significance some of these revisions have for conspiracy culture.

Postmodern and cultural studies theorists have criticised the Habermasian public sphere for its essentialist identity politics and adherence to Enlightenment ideals of a grand narrative of social progress (refer to the discussion of postmodern ideas in chapter 2, section 2.31). For example, Habermas's claims that the public sphere as communicative ideal reached its fullest realisation in early modern Europe (Habermas 1989), a period when politics was the almost exclusive domain of males and the wealthy, has been critiqued for implying that the public sphere is the provenance of the “white male bourgeoisie”(Crossley &

Roberts 2004: 13). Similarly, the key principle of 'rational-critical debate', in which all members of a society have the potential to "deliberate as if they were social equals" (Fraser 1992: 117), has been attacked for advocating a totalising and essentialist view of society. Other theorists have argued against the very concept of the public sphere itself on postmodern and poststructuralist grounds (Calhoun 1992: Dean 2002).

Various theorists, notably Habermas himself (1992), have offered revisions of the public sphere template that address these criticisms. The most significant area of revision in relation to discussions of the relationships between the Net as an alternative medium and classical conspiracy theory is that regarding the notion of the public itself. In his formative delineations of the public sphere concept, Habermas configures the public as a unified collective of individuals whose identity is articulated in relation to modernist notions of a socially unified and cohesive nation-state. The post-structuralist and post-modern emphasis on the multiplicity and fluidity of personal and cultural identity, along with the changes to traditional models of the unified nation-state wrought by such historical processes as neo-liberal globalisation, has led to democracy being redirected away from universal models to fragmented ones in which society is configured as a collection of different interest groups, defined by specific identity positions such as class, ethnicity, and gender. In this new democratic configuration, such groups tend to equate the furthering of their specific socio-political interests as something beneficial to the democratic development of society as a whole. Rather than one singular public defined according to their shared status as citizens of a nation, there are now multiple 'publics' defined according to differing socio-cultural identity positions. As Klaus Eder states, "with the growing pluralization and heterogenization of modern societies, the requirement of a defined set of people as the carriers of a public sphere is no longer met by constructing a 'nation'. Transnational and subnational publics are expected to emerge that no longer coincide with the nation as the community constituting a nation-state" (Eder 2006: 337).

These factors have led to the public sphere being revised in relation to what Neisser (2007) refers to as a "public of publics". Instead of one universal public sphere enacted in relation to one universal public, there are now multiple public spheres which are enacted in relation to the multiple publics that collectively constitute a 'society' or 'nation'. In Atton's words, the "different groups and

movements” that constitute these multiple publics create “their own particular fora for discussion, opinion-formation and political action” (Atton 2004:10) within the larger political grouping of ‘society’. However, the interests of these multiple publics may coincide, leading to these publics forming alliances with each other which manifest in socio-political form as something akin to the “bounded national public spheres” associated with traditional conceptions of the unified nation-state (Bohman 2004: 135). As Bohman argues, such co-operation is likely to be based upon shared concerns with wide-ranging issues of power and citizenship, such as “citizens demands for mutual accountability” in relation to wider issues with “the state and the economy” (ibid: 137). Citizens can therefore participate within the multiple public spheres of their respective identity-based groups, and also in the traditional or mainstream public sphere of the wider society.

In these respects conspiracy theorists can be seen to constitute a specific transnational or subnational public with their own conspiracist public sphere which attempts to influence national democratic activity in relation to their own interests (for example, the attempts by 9/11 conspiracy theorists to instigate new public investigations into the 9/11 attacks in relation to their beliefs that it was an ‘inside job’ by the US government). In relation to the democratic concepts discussed in chapter 4, sections 4.31 – 4.36, conspiracy theorists occupy a highly ambivalent position in relation to mainstream democratic practice in that they are concerned with democratic principles such as transparency and civil liberties, but articulate these concerns in relation to extremist ideologies that are inherently anti-democratic, such as anti-Semitism, thus consigning themselves to the margins of mainstream democratic discourse. The appropriation by conspiracy theorists of alternative media configurations of the Internet as an ‘alternative public sphere’ which operates as a corrective to the traditional public sphere of mainstream media (as will be discussed in the next section) can therefore be seen as a means of legitimating the public sphere of classical conspiracy theory in relation to the mainstream public sphere of established democratic practice.

6.24 The public sphere and the Internet

As discussed in chapters 4 and 5, cyber-discourses such as those of the second media age articulate the Internet as a countervailing influence to mainstream

media power, an articulation predicated upon radical conceptions of mainstream media power as implicated within the structures of state and corporate power (as discussed in chapter 4, section 4.21). Articulating these themes in relation to the public sphere concepts outlined in sections 6.21 – 6.23 above, the mainstream media can be conceptualised as failing to adhere to its public sphere duties, such as the provision of public service content (see chapter 4, section 4.34) or the development of its public sphere potential (e.g. in facilitating public communication between, as well as within, nations) because of its ‘situatedness’ within the structures of state and corporate power. For example, many media theorists argue that the privatisation of mainstream media systems in Western nations has resulted in the decline of the mainstream public sphere due to the commercial imperatives of media corporations. As expressed by Crossley & Roberts,

as the mass media began to establish itself as a viable economic market...it was both hijacked for the purpose of selling goods, via advertising, and became a considerable saleable commodity in its own right. This has meant that public communication, by this means at least, has been moderated by the demands of big business and it has led to a regressive 'dumbing down' of the level of public debate as editors, pursuing new and larger markets, have been inclined to play to the lowest common denominator. Where the early public sphere, as a domain of self-education and cultivation, tended to 'level up', the modern media, in its pursuit of the widest audience, is inclined to 'level down' (Crossley & Roberts 2004: 6).

With the democratic capacities of mainstream public sphere media such as television and newspapers seen as irrevocably compromised by commercial forces, the Internet – as a medium which operates outside structures of mainstream media control, and which is equipped with technocultural capacities for interactive communication – has been configured in relation to the cyberdiscourses of the second media age and digital sublime discussed in chapter 5 as a site for the reconstitution and revitalisation of the public sphere ethos. Referring to Hubertus Buchstein’s delineation of this position,

if one accepts the claims of the optimists, the new technology seems to match all the basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory of the democratic public sphere: it is a universal, anti-hierarchical, complex, and demanding mode of interaction. Because it offers universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet looks like the most ideal speech situation (Buchstein 1997, quoted in Dean 2002: 2).

James Bohman develops this configuration of the Net as a public sphere further by suggesting that the Internet's combination of "many-to-many communication with newly increased interactivity" (Bohman 2004: 134) creates a "network-based extension of dialogue" (ibid: 135) between citizens. Such networked dialogue can potentially overcome "the specific linguistic, cultural and spatial limitations of the bounded national public spheres that have up to now supported representative democratic institutions" (ibid) – limitations which have contributed to a contemporary democratic environment in which "there is a lack of congruity between existing political institutions and the wider potential for public communicative interaction" (ibid) – by offering "the possibility of re-embedding the public sphere in a new and potentially larger set of institutions" (ibid).

An example of the Net's potential to reconstitute and revitalise the public sphere ideal in relation to these conceptualisations is the application of the Net's technocultural capacities for interactive communication to facilitate processes of publicity and networking on behalf of the 'multiple publics' that are outlined in section 6.23 as the basis for revised theoretical conceptions of democracy and the public sphere. Where certain publics may have previously found their interests marginalized within the mainstream public sphere because of factors such as their identity positions and ideological beliefs, the ability of the Net to operate as a public sphere outside of the limitations of mainstream media means that such publics can utilise the Net's low-cost interactive capacities and non-hierarchical information structures to 'publicise' their ideas in more readily visible and potentially democratically influential forms. The interactive capacities of the Net which Bohman describes as forming the basis for "network-based extension[s] of dialogue" (ibid), as expressed in forms such as web forums and the comments

pages of blogs, which enable individuals belonging to different publics to engage in virtual dialogues with each other on a multitude of topics, can be seen to facilitate prospective networking between multiple publics and the translation of such alliances into mainstream democratic activity (see section 6.23 above).

As Bohman notes, such critical articulations of the potential of the Internet to revitalise national notions of the public sphere and contribute to the development of “global democracy” (ibid) are highly idealistic and must be considered in relation to some of the problematic aspects of Net communication. Two factors he regards as pertinent in this regard are, firstly, the fact that “many-to-many communication may increase interactivity without preserving the essential features of dialogue, such as responsive uptake” (ibid), and, secondly, that the Internet “may be embedded in institutions that do not help in transforming the communicative space into a public sphere. Even if it is a free and open space, the Internet could simply be a marketplace or commons” (ibid). However, as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.22 in relation to ideas of the ‘digital sublime’, critical discourses of the Net’s democratic potential tend to be configured in mythic terms, so that these pragmatic viewpoints are subsumed within utopian conceptions of the Net’s perceived capacities to transcend the limitations of the mainstream public sphere and radically improve the public communication necessary for the functioning of democracy. While not utopian in tone, critical conceptions of the Internet as an alternative medium are predicated upon such mythic configurations of the Net as a medium capable of transcending the mainstream public sphere and revitalising democracy – configurations which, as also outlined in chapter 5, serve as an integral point of connection between the Net and the radical impulses that constitute part of the logic of classical conspiracy theory. Such configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium, and their relationship to conspiracist thought and practice, will be discussed in the following sections.

6.31 Alternative media - definitions

Theoretical configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium, such as those developed by Chris Atton (2004) and which form the basis for my discussion of alternative media ideas, are attempts to reconstitute the public sphere as a cultural space that can operate free from the power imbalances of mainstream media, and to reinvigorate the public sphere through the application of the Internet's radical potential for democratic activity. In these respects, conceptualisations of the Internet as an alternative medium can be seen as extensions of the radical articulations of the Internet as a countervailing influence to mainstream media power discussed in chapter 4, and of the cyber-cultural discourses of the Internet as a radical site of information freedom outlined in chapter 5.

Atton defines 'alternative media' as "a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing' media" (Atton 2004: ix), and which are "produced outside the forces of market economics and the state" (ibid: 3). Alternative media are here conceptualised in relation to radical traditions of media power, as media systems which operate outside of and in opposition to the structures of mainstream media power which shape the activity of the mainstream public sphere. As Atton states, "rather than media production being the province of elite, centralised organisations and institutions, alternative media offer possibilities for individuals and groups to create their own media 'from the periphery'. Such media formations, through their very practice, will tend to critique notions of truth, reality and objectivity that we find at the heart of mainstream media practices" (ibid: 9). Therefore, "it is perhaps in addressing radical questions of citizenship in the public sphere that alternative media are most powerful" (ibid: 3).

With reference to the notion of multiple publics discussed in section 6.23, the individuals and groups that are the focus of alternative media discourses are those subnational publics that operate as challenges to the dominant discourses presented in the mainstream public sphere, such as "protest groups" and "dissidents", and publics such as "'fringe' political organisations" whose political perspectives and beliefs consign them to the margins of mainstream public sphere debate (ibid: 3). While these publics may have developed their own public

spheres, alternative media networks may also help form alliances between these different publics so that a collective ‘alternative public sphere’ is developed which expresses the interests and concerns of these groups in relation to the dominant discourses of mainstream society. For example, environmentalists, feminists, and indigenous peoples can be seen as distinct subnational publics that may each have developed their own public spheres, but which all also operate collectively as part of a wider ‘alternative public sphere’ that advocates democratic change based on shared issues with existing structures of citizenship and power (see section 6.23 above). In this respect, the term ‘alternative’ is thus “employed to denote media practices [by such subnational publics] that ‘strengthen democratic culture’” (Downing 2001:95, cited in Atton 2004: 62) by publicising the voices and perspectives of groups that may have been traditionally marginalised or distorted in the mainstream media. However, Atton also notes a problematic aspect of the term alternative, which is that it has the potential to incorporate publics such as the far-right and fundamentalist groups which constitute the main constituency for classical conspiracy beliefs (see chapter 2, section 2.51). These groups may be considered alternative in their ostensibly radical opposition to the publics who dominate mainstream democratic activity, but they are also opposed to the liberal and progressive values of democracy which underpin the alternative media ethos (Atton 2004: chapter 3).⁶⁶

Drawing on Gramscian notions of hegemony where relations between actors are seen as “unstable and non-unitary ...where ideology is mobile and dynamic, and where strategic compromises are continually negotiated” (Gramsci 1971: cited in Atton 2004: 10), Atton articulates the oppositional relationships between alternative media and mainstream media as ‘negotiated’ rather than ‘fixed’ due to the ‘movable’ nature of media practices. By this he considers that the same media practices may be articulated in relation to mainstream media values at one point of media production and with alternative media values at another (Atton 2004: 10). For example, alternative media may use the same technological and

⁶⁶ Atton's discussion of the Net as alternative medium is positioned within a cultural studies framework with a particular emphasis upon subcultural practices. Atton refers to the seminal work of Hebdige (1979) in which a subculture is “taken as a movement that is at once in opposition to aspects of a dominant culture, is oppressed or marginalised by it and yet is related to it structurally and historically” (Atton 2004: xi-xii). I have elided this aspect of Atton's work as I feel the delineation of conspiracy theory in terms of the cultural politics of subcultures is critically problematic (see discussion of Bratich (2008) in chapter 2 section 2.42), and that an engagement with notions of conspiracy theory as subculture is, given the complex historical, ideological, and cultural contexts of conspiracist thought, beyond the scope of this study.

distribution infrastructure as mainstream media; while mainstream media may appropriate ideas originating in the alternative realm according to commercial imperatives for new or sensational content. However, a side effect of the negotiated nature of alternative media practices is that such practices, and the ideas associated with them, are capable of being *appropriated* by other publics or groups who may reconfigure such ideas and practices according to their own interests. Thus, far-right and fundamentalist groups may appropriate alternative media practices as a means of legitimating their extremist and anti-democratic ideas as radical democratic activity within the alternative public sphere.⁶⁷ As I will argue over the course of the next two chapters, this dynamic of appropriation and legitimation can be considered an integral aspect of the relationship between classical conspiracy culture and the Internet.

In relation to the alternative media concepts delineated above, Atton builds upon critical conceptions of the public sphere potential of the technocultural capacities of the Internet (as outlined in section 6.24) to configure the Internet as the basis for the development and realisation of an alternative public sphere. In this configuration the Net embodies an opportunity for those publics whose voices have traditionally been marginalised in relation to the mainstream public sphere to empower themselves by using the Net's technocultural capacities to create and access information free of the institutional and ideological constraints of mainstream public sphere media. Such empowerment may be considered in relation to a variety of media practices, such as the ability for groups to create and disseminate their own media content as a means of publicising their interests and concerns in relation to broader democratic processes; the ability for groups to present ideas and perspectives which constitute forms of progressive critique and challenge to the groups whose interests and values tend to dominate mainstream democratic thought and practice; and the ability of groups to develop networked alliances with other publics as a means of contributing to collective debates within the mainstream public sphere. Atton identifies "radical political web sites and discussion lists", "net radio sites", "personal web sites", and alternative news sites such as *Indymedia* (ibid: 12) as prime examples of such alternative media practices. As will be discussed in the next section, this configuration of the

⁶⁷ Atton examines the online practices of the racist British National Party as an example of such dynamics (Atton 2004: chapter 3).

Internet as an alternative public sphere is one that is particularly resonant with the logic of classical conspiracy theory.

6.32 The Internet as alternative public sphere and conspiracy theory

Atton's radical configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere can be seen to form important points of connection with classical conspiracy theory on two levels. On the first level, the configuration of the Internet as an alternative public sphere which operates in opposition to the democratically compromised mainstream public sphere presents an affinity with the 'radical' conspiracist suspicions of mainstream media power discussed in chapter 4. On the second level, the configuration of the Internet as an alternative public sphere where marginalised or excluded publics are able to publicise themselves and contribute to democratic debate is one which puts into practice the theoretical articulations of the Internet as a mythic space of democratic empowerment which were discussed in chapter 5 in relation to influential cyber-cultural discourses such as the second media age. In these respects, the alternative public sphere can be seen to constitute a specific framework of radical media practices that can serve to legitimate classical conspiracy theories as forms of public sphere discourse by either overlapping with existing online media practices of conspiracy theorists, or by being actively appropriated by conspiracy theorists in order to present their ideas as legitimate discourses of radical challenge and critique, rather than expressions of extremist ideologies and outré belief systems (as described in chapter 2 section 2.51).

As evidence for the argument that the media practices of the alternative public sphere can legitimate conspiracy theories by overlapping with the online practices of conspiracy theorists, it is apparent that the types of websites singled out by Atton as mainstays of alternative media practice, such as "radical political web sites and discussion lists", "net radio sites", "personal web sites", and alternative news sites such as *Indymedia* (Atton 2004:12), are also the types of sites most typical of online conspiracy practices. Examples of each of these include:

- **radical political web sites** – *Freedom Force International*. Political group formed in relation to American nationalist conspiracy beliefs that the federal government is a conspiratorial organisation run by elites who seek to transform the USA into a totalitarian state. FFI is concerned with changing the government through direct political action. To quote from the FFI ‘welcome’ page: “The mission of the members of Freedom Force is to shape public policy within their respective countries in favour of personal and global freedom. The method is threefold: (1) dissemination of ideological and issue-related information, (2) instruction in how to become influential within community and national organizations, and (3) instruction in how to lawfully and constitutionally convert that influence into public policy. Members seek to become change agents so they truly can make a difference in the world.”⁶⁸

- **discussion lists** – *Above Top Secret.com*. This website describes itself as “the Internet's largest and most popular discussion board community dedicated to the intelligent exchange of ideas and debate on a wide range of "alternative topics" such as conspiracies, UFO's, paranormal, secret societies, political scandals, new world order, terrorism, and dozens of related topics with an [impressive demographic mix of members](#).”⁶⁹

- **Net radio sites** – *Radio Liberty*. American nationalist/fundamentalist Christian conspiracism. Users can listen to the radio shows online via the website.⁷⁰

- **personal web sites** – Jordan Maxwell. Web site operated by the titular conspiracy researcher outlining his research into religious/occult conspiracism.⁷¹

- **alternative news sites** – *Propaganda Matrix*. Web site specialising in news stories from around the Net that are regarded of conspiracist significance.⁷²

Such sites are used by conspiracy theorists for a variety of information practices that serve to empower them in relation to the structures of information control evident in the mainstream public sphere. Such empowering practices include the

⁶⁸ <http://www.freedom-force.org/>, accessed 21/4/10.

⁶⁹ http://www.abovetopsecret.com/about_abovetopsecret.html, accessed 21/4/10.

⁷⁰ <http://www.radioliberty.com/>, accessed 21/4/10.

⁷¹ <http://www.jordanmaxwell.com/>, accessed 21/04/10.

⁷² <http://www.propagandamatrix.com/index.html>, accessed 21/04/10.

presentation of conspiracist information which conspiracy theorists regard as being normally suppressed by mainstream media because of the threat such information presents to conspiratorial power interests; the facilitation of dialogues between conspiracy theorists; and the organization of conspiracy theorists towards real world civic action (e.g. 9/11 truth petitions and protest marches).

It is also evident from observations of online conspiracy culture that many conspiracy theorists undertake to position their ideas and information practices within the alternative public sphere by actively appropriating the term 'alternative' and the language of alternative media practice. Examples of this strategy include:

- the byline of the *Above Top Secret* conspiracy discussion site: "the most popular website for alternative topics".⁷³
- the byline of the *Conspiracy Planet* site : "The Alternative News & Media Network: your antidote to media cartel propaganda".⁷⁴
- the byline of the *End Game Now* site – "what mainstream media won't tell you".⁷⁵
- the byline of the *Web of Evidence* site: - "what they don't want you to know: exposing media manipulation and how the system works".⁷⁶
- the byline of the *Rense.com* conspiracy news site – "the world's #1 alternative news service",⁷⁷ and the description of its alternative credentials: "Thanks to the program and site, listeners, researchers and information seekers from across the US and around the world are being exposed to information and learning about the most important issues of our times they rarely, if ever, encounter in the controlled corporate world of mainstream broadcast and monopoly print media".⁷⁸

⁷³ <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/>, accessed 21/04/10.

⁷⁴ <http://www.conspiracyplanet.com/>, accessed 23/09/08.

⁷⁵ <http://endgamenow/>, accessed 20/08/2010.

⁷⁶ <http://clareswinney.wordpress.com/> , accessed 21/04/2010.

⁷⁷ <http://www.rense.com/>, accessed 21/4/10.

⁷⁸ <http://www.rense.com/aboutnew1.html>, accessed 08/10/08.

- the description of the *openUReyes* site as an “alternative news blog” with the motto “alternative news headlines free minds for freedom”.⁷⁹
- the homepage of the conspiracy site *Outside the Box* which presents two columns of online information sources. The left hand column is a list of conspiracy sites under the heading “Alternative media and the quest for truth”; the right hand column is a list of mainstream news sites under the heading “mainstream media and the official view of reality”.⁸⁰
- the list of news sources presented on the *Propaganda Matrix* site.⁸¹ This list is divided into ‘mainstream media’ and ‘alternative media’. The former contains sub-sections such as ‘Major US Newspapers’ that features links to news sources such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The ‘Alternative News Sites’ section combines alternative media of the progressive type identified by Atton as typical of alternative public sphere content (e.g. *Press Esc.*;⁸² *The Raw Story* ⁸³), with conspiracy news sites (e.g. *Rense.com*,⁸⁴ *Cremation Of Care*,⁸⁵ *Prison Planet*⁸⁶).
- the description of the *Prison Planet* news site (part of Alex Jones’s *Infowars* online conspiracy news network) in radical alternative public sphere terms: “Seven years after the attacks of September the Eleventh, a global awakening has taken place, the likes of which the world has never seen. As the corporate-controlled media dwindles into extinction, a new breed of journalists and activists has emerged.”⁸⁷

In these examples conspiracy theorists can be seen to have appropriated the radical connotations of alternative media practice as a ‘re-branding’ exercise, a discursive ‘makeover’ that attempts to legitimate the conspiracist content

⁷⁹ <http://www.openureyes.org.nz/blog/>, accessed 21/04/10.

⁸⁰ <http://alexansary.com/links.html>, accessed 21/4/10.

⁸¹ <http://www.propagandamatrix.com/>, accessed 21/4/10.

⁸² <http://pressesc.com/>, accessed 4/11/08.

⁸³ <http://rawstory.com/>, accessed 4/11/08.

⁸⁴ <http://www.rense.com/>, accessed 4/11/08.

⁸⁵ <http://www.cremationofcare.com/>, accessed 4/11/08.

⁸⁶ <http://www.prisonplanet.com/>, accessed 4/11/08.

⁸⁷ <http://www.prisonplanet.tv/subscribe.html>, accessed 08/10/08.

presented on such sites as part of the radical democratic discourses associated with the alternative public sphere.

6.4 Summary

This chapter has discussed critical configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere with reference to Habermasian notions of the public sphere as the principles and practices by which media systems work to facilitate democracy, and Atton's (2004) critical articulations of the Internet as an alternative medium. I regard this configuration of the Net as an as alternative public sphere as constituting one of the most integral points of connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory, in that it presents a radical framework of democratic empowerment through online 'information freedom' that is able to be appropriated by conspiracy theorists in order to legitimate their conspiracist beliefs as radical democratic discourses. The significance of online news as the key type of alternative media content which underpins this appropriation-legitimation dynamic will be discussed in chapter 7, and empirically examined in the case study presented in chapter 8.

CHAPTER 7

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND ALTERNATIVE NEWS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter is an extension of the arguments introduced in chapter 6 regarding conspiracy theorists' appropriation of critical configurations of the Internet as an 'alternative public sphere' as a legitimating framework for their conspiracist ideas. In this chapter I will develop these arguments in more detail via a discussion of news as the type of media content most integral to the operation of the alternative public sphere, a status which makes it the main focus of the strategies of appropriation by which classical conspiracy theorists attempt to legitimate their conspiracist beliefs as part of the alternative public sphere.

This chapter has two main parts. The first part is an outline of the integral role played by news media in relation to the Habermasian public sphere concepts delineated in chapter 6. The second part discusses the problems with mainstream news media that have led to the development of alternative news practices as a central facet of the alternative public sphere, and considers the ways in which these practices serve to facilitate the conspiracist appropriation of the alternative public sphere ethos as a legitimating framework for their beliefs. The arguments presented here will then be empirically examined via the case study of the conspiracist news site *Rense.com* presented in chapter 8.

7.2 News media and the public sphere

News media can be configured as central to the operation and maintenance of the public sphere. In relation to the public sphere theory outlined in chapter 6, section 6.21, Habermas states that the efficacy of the public sphere as part of the democratic apparatus is contingent upon "the democratic demand that information

be accessible to the public” (Habermas 1974: 289). The practices of news journalism are critically articulated as the embodiment of this public sphere imperative. As delineated by Stuart Allan in his overview of contemporary news culture, news can be defined in this public sphere context as “an object of public opinion” related to a democratic culture of “rational-critical debate within the realm of the public sphere” (Allan 2004: 3). Its democratic significance resides in “the decisive role the news media play in establishing a discursive space, one framed by the state and economic domains on either side, for public deliberation over social issues. The formative influence of the news on popular attitudes is accentuated by conceiving of the news audience as citizens engaged in public dialogue” (ibid).

The traditional critical configuration of the relationship between news and the public sphere is the ‘fourth estate’ model. As outlined by Jim Willis (2007), Enlightenment era political philosophers such as Thomas Carlyle envisaged British society as made up of three main institutions of ‘estates’ of power – “the aristocracy, the House of Commons, and the priesthood”. Such philosophers theorised that the job of the press “was to explain the workings of these three powerful institutions and, by that public explanation, to involve the citizenry more in the process of government and to let them know what their leaders were doing and how well (or badly) they were doing it. Only by so doing could the people hope to attain their measure of power themselves by retaining the good leaders and ousting the bad.” (Willis 2007: 139). Within pluralist liberal democracies such as the UK and USA, the news media was therefore configured as the ‘fourth estate’, keeping tabs on the activities of the other three dominant institutions of political power “for the public good and the good of democracy” (Willis 2007: 138).

Willis also notes that the public sphere role of the news media as a fourth estate is informed by two major critical models of the relationships between media systems and democracy – the libertarian model and the social responsibility model. I will here refer to the standard template of these models as developed by American communication scholars in the 1950s (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1956). These scholars identified two main tendencies by which news media operates in relation to the dominant political ideology or systems of a nation. The oldest was identified as the authoritarian model. Here the news media operates in a ‘top-down’ fashion, being produced by ruling power structures, such

as the monarchy or the state, as a means of social and political control. Decisions as to the content and intention of news – what types of subject matter are reported as news, the manner in which news is presented, and the political and social purpose of the news itself – were perceived in this model as being carried out by dominant power structures to suit their own interests. In short, the news is a form of propaganda, designed to condition the public into upholding the dominant structures of power by suppressing and manipulating the information provided to the public.⁸⁸

Contrasting with this authoritarian perspective, and underpinning democracy, is the libertarian model of the news. In this model

the press is not an instrument of government, but rather a device for presenting evidence and arguments on the basis of which the people can check on government and make up their minds as to policy. Therefore, it is imperative that the press be free from government control and influence. In order for truth to emerge, all ideas must get a fair hearing; there must be a “free market place” of ideas and information. Minorities as well as majorities, the weak as well as the strong, must have access to the press (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1956: 3-4).

The political imperatives guiding news produced under this model were to service democracy “by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs”; to enlighten the public “so as to make it capable of self-government”; and to safeguard “the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government” (Peterson in Siebert *et al* 1956: 74). The ‘watchdog principle’ can be seen as particularly significant to conceptions of the public sphere in that the news media scrutinize and investigate the workings of those in positions of political power in accordance with the principles of transparency and accountability which are part of the democratic ethos (see chapter 4, section 4.33). The ability of the news media to function as a watchdog is determined by the degree of independence or ‘freedom’ such media has from government influence. The news media is thus one of the prime embodiments of the democratic ‘will’

⁸⁸The presentation of the Soviet news system as the example of this authoritarian model reflects the Cold War environment in which the Siebert *et al* study was produced.

and rights of the public. This libertarian model reflects a particularly American conception of democracy in its association of the individual and social freedoms of democracy with the economic freedoms of ‘free market’ capitalism. “Financial self-sufficiency” is outlined as a prerequisite for the efficient functioning of news media as part of the democratic apparatus in that it ensures the news remains “free from the pressures of special interests” within the institutions of the state (ibid). Private ownership of media companies is therefore seen as conducive to the news media’s public sphere functions because of the ways in which it ensures such ‘financial self-sufficiency’. In this perspective, ‘free market’ capitalism is equated with the ‘free market place’ of ideas and information necessary for the functioning of the public sphere. In terms of radical/critical attitudes towards media as discussed in chapter 4, section 4.21, such a position can be seen to merely exchange one power structure – the state – for another – the capitalist free market.

The social responsibility model is presented as a response to the freemarket ethos which underpins the libertarian model. Since mainstream media systems serve as the major source of information for the public in modern western societies, such systems therefore have a large degree of power in terms of the functioning of democracy. In the social responsibility framework, such power places an ethical and political obligation upon the owners of media systems to be ‘socially responsible’ in terms of ensuring that news content is produced in accordance with public sphere principles. For instance, news media should present a plurality of voices on issues in keeping with the egalitarian ethos of the ‘ideal-speech’ principle, and also provide a diverse range of information on topics so that citizens are best able to engage in rational-critical debate regarding the implications of political and social issues. Since media systems run as privately-owned businesses can easily place the financial interests of their owners above the public interests of the citizenry, they can be criticized for being deficient in terms of enacting their public service duties. Forces outside of the free-market framework are therefore required to ensure that private media owners meet their public sphere obligations, in forms such as self-regulation through professional codes of journalistic practice, or government regulations regarding the types and amounts of news media content to be presented. Public service media – news media that are operated by the state on a non-commercial basis (see chapter 4, section 4.34) - represent a more direct articulation of this social responsibility approach.

The profession of journalist, as in those who research and present current events and happenings in the form of mediated news items and stories, is thus one integral to the effective operation of the public sphere. As elaborated by Allan, journalism

is charged with the crucial mission of ensuring that members of the public are able to draw upon a diverse 'market place of ideas' to both sustain and challenge their sense of the world around them. This responsibility for giving expression to a richly pluralistic spectrum of information sources places the journalist at the centre of public life. Thus it is the news media, to the extent that they facilitate the formation of public opinion, which are said to make democratic control over governing relations possible.

The performance of this democratic function is contingent upon the realization of 'press freedom' as a principle safeguarded from any possible impediment associated with power and privilege. The news media, according to the liberal pluralists, must carry out the crucial work of contributing to the 'system of checks and balances' popularly held to be representative of democratic structures and processes. More specifically, by fostering a public engagement with the issues of the day, they are regarded as helping to underwrite a consensual (albeit informal) process of surveillance whereby the activities of the state and corporate sectors are made more responsive to the dictates of public opinion. As arenas of arbitration, the news media are said to allow for clashes over decision making to be expressed, adjudicated and ultimately reconciled in such a way as to ensure that neither cumulative nor continuous influence is accorded to a single set of interests" (Allan 2004: 47-48).

The significance of journalism to the operation of the public sphere can be further configured in relation to institutional notions of news values (ideas about what constitutes news) and news practices (how the news is researched and presented). McQuail (1992) defines the news values of public sphere journalism in terms of responsibility (keeping citizens actively informed as to the activities of government), diversity (reflecting a wide range of social and cultural identity

positions and ways of life) and objectivity (trying to present information in a balanced or neutral manner so as not to shape citizen's attitudes towards an issue in a particular way). McQuail suggests that the 'canons of journalism' developed by the American Society of Newspaper Editors "provide a good indication of what is currently regarded as good practice" in relation to ideas of public sphere journalism (McQuail 1992: 38). These canons are presented as follows:

- 1- Responsibility: the aim of serving the 'general welfare' by informing people and enabling them to make judgments about issues of the time.
- 2 – Freedom of the press.
- 3 – Independence from vested interest.
- 4 – Truth and accuracy.
- 5 – Impartiality, in particular a clear distinction between news reports and opinion.
- 6 – Fair play, meaning respect for the rights of people involved in the news. (ibid).

The first three principles relate to the institutional and professional structures within which news is produced, and state that journalism should promote an ethos of responsibility to the public interest, and be able to operate free of the influence of specific power interests. The last three principles relate to the practices by which news items are actually produced, and state that journalism should be as truthful and accurate as possible in terms of relating the details and circumstances of events; should strive for 'impartiality' or 'objectivity' in terms of addressing the news in relation to the general public; and should aim for fairness in how people are treated and presented in their status as the subjects of news stories.

7.31 Mainstream news media and alternative news media

Configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere are to a large degree predicated on critical understandings that the public sphere duties of mainstream news media have been irrevocably compromised by the structures of state and corporate power. This critical perspective on the decline of journalism

and the public sphere is a well-established tenet of contemporary media studies scholarship (e.g. Chomsky & Herman 1988; Dennis & Merrill 1996; Curran 2002; Winter 2007; Davies 2008). Such studies generally posit the decline of the mainstream public sphere as a late 20th century/early 21st century trend that corresponded with the corporatization of mainstream media systems that occurred in relation to the rationalization of neo-liberal economic ideologies as the dominant paradigm for the development of Western democracies. In this corporatized media environment, it is argued that the private interests of shareholders take priority over public service interests (Allan 2004: 201), resulting in a consequent shift in news values from those associated with public sphere functions, such as an emphasis on ‘hard news’ and investigative journalism dealing with political and social issues, to news values associated with the propagation of a consumerist mindset, such as sensationalism, celebrity, and an emphasis on human interest stories. Such corporate formulations of mainstream news are labelled ‘tabloid news’ or ‘infotainment’ by comparison with public sphere news. To cite Allan’s (2004) overview of this perspective,

critics contend that processes of ‘tabloidization’, to the extent that they erode ‘serious’ principled’ journalistic criteria of newsworthiness, threaten to undermine the integrity of the ‘quality’ end of the news reporting spectrum. In addition to the conflation of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news agendas, and with it the privileging of scandal, gossip, celebrity and sports over and above politics and economics, ‘information’ is said to be merging with ‘entertainment’ into an ‘infotainment’ muddle. Much is made, therefore, of how editorial commentary (features and opinion columns) appears to be flourishing at the expense of ‘proper’ reporting. These critics observe that it is evidently much more ‘cost effective’ to hire someone to sit at their desk and wax philosophical about the pressing issues of the day, as opposed to employing journalists to actually investigate what is happening. Quality reporting requires sufficient human investment, but also time, effort and specialized knowledge, amongst other human resources (ibid: 206).

This critical perspective on public sphere news argues that the journalistic ethos and associated news practices necessary for the maintenance of ‘public sphere’ news are now seriously lacking in mainstream news media. In relation to the ‘canons’ of public journalism outlined in section 7.2 above, mainstream news media is critiqued for inaccurate or ideologically unbalanced reportage of events, for forsaking impartiality in favour of subjectivity, and for disrespecting citizens in terms of how they are presented in news items. Examples of such critiques include the relationship between ‘truth and accuracy’ and the changing nature of the practices of news reportage. The pressures placed upon journalists in commercial news environments are considered to promote reportage practices that revolve around speed and quantity – producing news stories as commodities to fill up the required print space or airtime – rather than a more measured approach in which reporters are given time to understand events so that they can report them more accurately. For instance, Allan (2004) cites Bell’s (1991) study of journalistic practices in New Zealand that revealed many journalists “regularly rely on reprocessing or repackaging source material as news” (Allan 2004: 69). The time and financial pressures placed upon journalists leads them to use sources such as press releases and press conferences, which are written and staged by specific groups as a means of managing their media profile, as information sources despite their obvious biases in terms of the ‘truth and accuracy’ of the information they present (Bell 1991: cited in Allan 2004 68-69). Similarly, critics with professional experience as journalists, such as Nick Davies (2008), have argued that the commercial imperatives of contemporary mainstream news organizations have led to newsroom environments in which public sphere values of neutrality, balance and impartiality are downplayed in favour of ‘infotainment’ news constructed and presented so as to provoke emotional responses from the audience.

In relation to radical critiques of media power discussed in chapter 4, section 4.21, these changes in mainstream news ownership and practice can be seen to reconstitute the news as one of the major factors reinforcing the media power of state and corporate interests. Of particular concern to this radical perspective and notions of the alternative public sphere is the perceived re-articulation of news values and practices from public sphere principles of the fourth estate, where the news operates on behalf of the public as a ‘watchdog’ on the activities of those in power, to news values and practices that appear to enact a propagandistic agenda

in relation to dominant power interests. Key issues of radical concern in this regard include the construction of news stories in accordance with the ideological beliefs of the state/corporate owners of news media, and the suppression of investigative journalism that seeks to expose corporate malfeasance by news executives who fear losing revenue as a result of consequences such as the imposition of lawsuits from the aggrieved parties or the withdrawal of advertising. An exemplar of both these issues is Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch, whose multinational corporation *NewsCorp* owns or has interests in a multitude of news media outlets in a variety of countries. A mini-industry exists within the fields of popular and academic media criticism that not only accuses Murdoch of promoting a news culture of celebrity-centric 'infotainment' that propagates an ultra-consumerist worldview, but also argues that Murdoch brazenly uses his news outlets to propagate political points of view that reflect his own right-wing ideological perspectives (e.g. Chenoweth 2001: Page & Potter 2004: Kitty 2005: Davies 2008). Murdoch's status as an object of radical opprobrium regarding his corporate news practices is reflected in the reference made to his name in the conspiracist article of mainstream media control by Swinney discussed in chapter 4, section 4.22.⁸⁹

This radical concern with issues of political economy and the shift in mainstream news media from public sphere values to 'propagandistic' ones is also articulated in relation to the critical perspectives on the techniques and modes of news reporting and presentation discussed above. For example, mainstream news emphasis on emotional identification can be seen as antithetical to public sphere principles in that it serves to constitute public attitudes towards political, economic and social issues in terms of affective or subjective factors which are much more amenable to manipulation by dominant power interests, rather than attitudes based upon the 'objective' Habermasian ideal of rational-critical thought. In terms of the radical attitudes towards cultural politics that inform alternative media discourses, the ways in which subjects are represented in mainstream news stories can be considered a key part of the process by which particular publics are

⁸⁹ Many online alternative news sites offer good criticism of mainstream journalism in relation to these themes of corporate influence and public sphere news functions. For example, the recent article 'Corrupt Practices Accelerating the Decline of American Journalism' by David Sirota featured on the leading American alternative site *Alternet.org*: http://www.alternet.org/media/146506/corrupt_practices_accelerating_the_decline_of_american_journalism posted 17/04/2010.

rendered marginal in relation to mainstream public sphere debates. A prominent example of such news practices in Western countries is the heavy representation of non-white ethnic groups in relation to news stories focussing on negative subjects such as crime and violence (Allan 2004: chapter 7). In this radical perspective, the mainstream news media is no longer a bastion of public sphere ideals such as dialogue and free speech, but a control system where the public sphere capacities of news media are manipulated by dominant power structures in their own interests.

In relation to these critical/radical perspectives on mainstream news media, the revitalization of news practice as a foundation for the realisation of public sphere ideals is one of the key projects of Attonian conceptions of the Net as an alternative public sphere. Atton argues that contemporary debates in countries such as the USA regarding the reformation of mainstream news as ‘public journalism’ which operates in accordance to traditional public sphere principles are likely to be ineffectual because such public journalism will still be configured “within the market and within long-standing organizational, institutional, and professional structures” of mainstream news (Atton 2004: 26). Atton singles out the public journalism emphasis on the journalist as the institutional ‘voice of the people’ as an example of the power imbalances institutionally entrenched in mainstream news systems, in that the “power of telling society’s stories” is placed “in the hands of journalists” rather than the people themselves (Woodstock 2002: quoted in Atton 2004: 26).

Instead of reforming the mainstream media in relation to traditional public sphere principles, Atton argues that a more genuinely radical and democratically empowering approach is to develop alternative news media and alternative news practices within the alternative public sphere of the Internet, in relation to his articulation of alternative media as “an ideology that holds that only through more egalitarian, inclusive media organizations is it possible to even think about a socially responsible journalism” (Atton 2004: 26). In relation to the social responsibility model of news outlined in section 7.2 above, Atton configures online alternative news as

journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices. Its practices emphasise first-person, eyewitness

accounts by participants; a reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspapers to recover a ‘radical popular’ style of reporting; and collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organization which eschew demarcation and specialization – and which importantly suggest an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism (ibid).

Alternative news media is further conceived as being “opposed to [the] hierarchical, elite-centred notions of journalism as a business” that typify mainstream journalism. (ibid). Thus, “where public journalism seeks to effect change from within current practices and organizational regimes, alternative journalism seeks to do so freed from the constraints that limit the development of social responsibility in mainstream journalism” (ibid: 41). Some of the key characteristics of alternative news as articulated by Atton, and which I will discuss below, include an emphasis on “radical critiques of government policies, government actions and the mass media; the occasional use of mainstream and ‘radical mainstream’ sources; and the creation of spaces for discussion and debate” (ibid: 59).

Of central importance to Atton’s outline of alternative news principles and practices is a critical concern with the cultural politics of journalistic notions of objectivity. Atton argues that mainstream journalism’s emphasis on ‘objectivity’ – the reporting of news events in a neutral tone that encompasses a supposedly balanced take on the events in question through the presentation of different viewpoints (such as those representing for and against arguments in relation to political issues) – downplays the critical and radical argument that objectivity is an ideological construction – that news facts can never be fully separated from the values of mainstream news media which are shaped in relation to the interests of their state/corporate owners. For instance, the ‘objective’ content of mainstream news stories may be shaped to fit commercial media formats, such as the ‘soundbite’ model, or shaped in relation to the perceived values of dominant publics, such as arguments that Western news reflects a dominant ‘white’ sensibility in that non-white ethnicities are regularly portrayed in a negative light. In this sense, news reports can only ever capture a semblance of the reality of a news event or the event from a particular perspective – generally one based upon

the worldview and values propagated by dominant power structures within society.⁹⁰

In terms of the radical oppositional politics that underpin the alternative media ethos, Atton delineates alternative journalism in terms of ‘non-objective’ news practices which are biased towards radical/progressive topics and specific subnational publics which are both usually marginalised and misrepresented in mainstream news. As he argues,

alternative media projects tend to be set up in order to provide a counter to what alternative journalists consider an already biased set of reports. Sceptical of what counts as balance in the mainstream media, they seek to set up their own counter-balance. Hence, the argument runs, the viewpoints already dominant in the mainstream media do not need repeating, what appears as bias and the absence of balance in the alternative media is to be considered not as a set of absolute truths; instead it comprises a set of accounts told from different perspectives (ibid: 39).

Atton presents the anti-globalisation critiques of the Mexican Zapatista movement, and the anti-imperialist coverage of the 9/11 attacks presented through the *Indymedia* online alternative news network as examples of the radical subject matter towards which alternative journalism is ‘biased’ (Atton 2004: chapter 2). In such respects alternative news can be seen to articulate the ‘watchdog’ function, associated with libertarian models of news, that is reconstituted within the social responsibility framework that informs the alternative news ethos (see the discussion of news models in section 7.2 above).

The notion of ‘non-objective’ news practices which are biased towards the representation of marginalized publics is configured in the form of ‘citizen-centric’ processes of news reportage and news production, in which the subject-position of the citizen is prioritised over the subject-position of the journalist. In terms of processes of news reportage, Atton configures alternative media as inverting “the hierarchy of access” (Glasgow University Media Group 1976: quoted in Atton 2004: 40) typical of mainstream news media, in which the

⁹⁰ The use of poststructuralist theory as one of the pivots of cultural politics perspectives is also significant here. In poststructuralist terms objectivity can be critiqued as a ‘totalising narrative’ that reinforces a sense of a dominant shared social reality, rather than a reality in which events are experienced and interpreted in relation to multiple reference points of the participants.

“visibility” of citizens “in the mainstream media tends to be obscured by the presence of elite groups and individuals” (Atton 2004: 40). Alternative news reportage can achieve such inversion by “explicitly foregrounding the viewpoints of ‘ordinary’ people (activists, protesters, local residents), citizens whose visibility in the mainstream media tends to be obscured by the presence of elite groups and individuals” (ibid), through practices such as ‘native reporting’, “where social actors, instead of being subjects of the news, become their own correspondents, reporting on their own experiences, struggles, and ideas” (ibid: 42). Such self-representation “of ordinary people in alternative journalism seeks not to set them apart as either heroes or victims but as a set of voices which have as equal a right to be heard as do the voices of elite groups” (ibid: 40). Such citizen-based reportage, as mediated via the interactive and multi-media capacities of the Internet in forms such as amateur video footage posted on blogs, can be seen as more fully realising public sphere principles such as ideal speech and rational-critical debate (see chapter 6, section 6.22) in that it facilitates dialogue based on first-person knowledge and experience. This is in opposition to the mainstream news positioning of professional journalists as ‘objective’ representatives of the public at large, who speak for and of behalf of citizens. In relation to radical critiques of mainstream news, this practice is ideologically suspect given the embeddedness of mainstream journalists within the greater institutional structures of mainstream news power.

Atton also argues for citizen-based, rather than institutional-based, news production. The specialization and demarcation typical of professional journalistic practices can be criticized for not only enforcing the authority of mainstream journalists, but for contributing to a news culture in which news is reported as fragmented events removed from the broader historical, political, and social contexts of which they are part. As a response to these problems, Atton advocates ‘citizen journalism’ as a framework for alternative news production. The site of news production is here conceived in terms of citizen-based collectives which are non-hierarchical in their organization and which undertake their news-making activities in relation to a radical identification “with specific causes or ideologies” and “the particular, activist communities in which they are actors” (ibid: 41), rather than an identification with professional or institutional bodies typical of mainstream news. In keeping with public sphere ideals, news produced along these lines would be more pluralistic, in terms of enabling citizens to

contextualize news stories in relation to their own knowledge and experience, and inclusive, with citizens operating as active participants of the news process rather than passive audiences of institutionalised news interests. Such news practices would help affirm the public sphere ethos by reconstituting a sense of “the journalist as citizen, with a sense of loyalty to other citizens” (Harcup 2002: quoted in Atton 2004: 41).

Despite this emphasis on citizen-centric news practices, Atton also configures alternative journalism as making “occasional use of mainstream and ‘radical mainstream’ sources” (Atton 2004: 59). The ideological essentialism inherent in positing alternative news as a system that only makes use of information from alternative sources is a position that is both reductive and counter-productive. Mainstream news sources can be considered useful to alternative journalism in that they may possess a resource base that enables them to get extensive coverage of a news event (such as the 9/11 terror attacks of 2001) in ways which may be unavailable to small-scale or localised alternative journalists. Similarly, there are also mainstream news sources which operate within the capitalist structures of the newspaper industry yet still adopt leftist or progressive perspectives towards news and current affairs in forms that are often compatible with the more radical alternative media ethos. For example, the British newspaper *The Guardian* features a variety of columnists, such as civic and environmental activist George Monbiot, who critique modern capitalist power in fairly radical terms.⁹¹

Atton’s outline of alternative journalism as a cornerstone of the alternative public sphere can therefore be seen as a much more thorough realization of public sphere ideals than mainstream journalism since it configures news practices in forms such as ‘citizen journalism’ which more directly articulate public sphere principles such as interactive and inclusive communication between citizens (see chapter 6, section 6.22). With reference to the work of Deuze (2003), Atton discusses “interactivity, hypertextuality and multimediality” (ibid: 53) as the technocultural capacities of the Net most important to the facilitation of alternative news practices. Such capacities facilitate citizen-centric news practices in that they enable “Internet publics to respond to, interact with or even customize the content presented to them” (ibid). In terms of interactivity, citizens are able to use news sites and blogs to present the alternative news content that

⁹¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>, accessed 14/9/10.

they have produced outside of the institutional and professional barriers that restrict such contribution in mainstream news environments. Similarly, citizens are also able to use the interactive features of websites, such as comments boxes and forum pages, to facilitate dialogue on radical subjects that would probably be avoided in mainstream news. Hypertextuality enables alternative websites to form a network of related sites in different geographical and cultural territories (as with the *Indymedia* network),⁹² “and to provide access to other, original sources of ...news and commentary”, such as the ‘radical mainstream’ news sources discussed above (ibid: 54). The multimedia capacities of the Net enable citizens to access news information from a wide variety of news sources, such as online newspapers and archived television footage and radio interviews.⁹³ Multimedia software and the convergent nature of digital technologies, such as digital video cameras and computers, also facilitate alternative news practitioners’ abilities to make their own news content in forms that are comparable to those of online mainstream news sites. This can counteract the association between production values and the quality of news that separates mainstream from alternative news content in terms of broadcast and print media. For example, sites like *Indymedia* or *Alternet* have modes of presentation comparable to mainstream news sites such as those for the *New York Times*⁹⁴ or *BBC News*⁹⁵, while amateur documentaries on alternative subjects can be posted on popular file-sharing sites such as *YouTube*⁹⁶ alongside mainstream documentaries or news footage. In such ways the democratically empowering applications of the Net’s technocultural capacities, in combination with the Net’s ostensibly radical status as a medium which operates outside of mainstream media control structures, underpin radical configurations of the Net as the alternative public sphere within which alternative news practices can be implemented.

⁹² <http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>, accessed 14/9/10.

⁹³ The capacity of the Net to function as an information archive being articulated in relation to mythic concepts of the Net as ‘digital library’, as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.22.

⁹⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/>, accessed 15/9/10.

⁹⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>, accessed 15/9/10.

⁹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/>, accessed 14/9/10.

7.32 Alternative news media and conspiracy theory

The radical configuration of the Internet as an alternative public sphere that facilitates alternative news practices is one well-suited to appropriation by classical conspiracy theorists as a means of legitimating their ideas within the alternative public sphere as manifestations of radical democratic politics rather than right-wing extremist ideologies. As discussed in chapter 6, section 6.32, conspiracy theorists have explicitly appropriated the ‘alternative’ label, with its connotations of radical and oppositional information practices, as a signifier for their online activities. In this respect the radical connotations of the Net as an alternative public sphere can be applied to classical conspiracy theories and thus serve to legitimate the extremist/anti-democratic beliefs of such conspiracy theories as forms of radical democratic discourse. Building on theoretical discussions of the significance of news to the Habermasian public sphere ideal, Atton’s articulation of alternative news as the main form of online content through which the alternative public sphere ethos is enacted can be seen as a framework integral to the conspiracist appropriation-legitimation dynamic.

As is clearly evident in the Swinney and Weidner articles discussed in chapter 4, section 4.22, and the ‘Jolly Roger’ article discussed in chapter 5, section 5.3, conspiracy theorists view mainstream news as being irrevocably compromised in carrying out its public sphere duties because such news is perceived to deliberately ignore, suppress, or manipulate information regarding the conspiratorial ‘truths’ of socio-political power. Such information is conceptualised in conspiracist terms as forming the basis for popular revolutionary activity against the conspiratorial elites towards a more ‘pure’ realisation of democratic ideals.⁹⁷ In these respects radical configurations of online alternative news practices, as attempts to counteract and correct the compromised nature of mainstream news, constitute existing frameworks of democratically legitimate media practice that are not only resonant with conspiracist conceptions of news practice but which can *empower* conspiracy theorists in terms of facilitating their ‘civic duty’ to inform the public - through

⁹⁷ These democratic ideals being configured in relation to the extremist/fantastical beliefs of the conspiracy theorist in question. Refer chapter 4, sections 4.31 - 4.36.

the ‘free’ medium of the Internet - of the conspiratorial truths which are suppressed by the conspiratorially-controlled mainstream news media. Alternative news practices of the types delineated by Atton can therefore be considered a prime subject for appropriation by conspiracy theorists.

There are several key characteristics of the alternative news framework, as outlined in section 7.31 above, that can be regarded as potentially empowering in relation to classical conspiracy theory. A central factor is the *raison d’être* of alternative news as part of the broader framework of the alternative public sphere - the presentation of “radical critiques of government policies, government actions and the mass media” (Atton 2004: 59). As already discussed, alternative news can be seen to function as a ‘watchdog’ on state power in keeping with the libertarian impulses that are incorporated into the ‘social responsibility’ model of news upon which notions of the alternative public sphere are based. This function is obviously highly attractive to conspiracy theorists in terms of the libertarian suspicions of government power that constitute a core part of the logic of classical conspiracy thought (see chapter 4, section 4.36, and chapter 5, section 5.3).

The main areas of alternative news practice delineated by Atton, news reportage and news production, can also be readily appropriated for conspiracist purposes. In terms of alternative practices of news reportage, Atton advocated a non-objective style of reportage that was explicitly biased towards the voices of ordinary citizens or marginalized groups as a countermeasure against the perceived socio-political biases of mainstream news reportage. Such reportage could be achieved through practices such as ‘native reporting’, which emphasised the use of “first-person, eyewitness accounts by participants” (ibid: 26). This emphasis on the perspectives of citizens over those of professional journalists is resonant with the libertarian and populist impulses that shape the worldview of classical conspiracy theory (see chapter 4, sections 4.35 and 4.36). News derived from popular sources, such as eyewitness and first-person accounts, is treated by conspiracy theorists as possessing a higher degree of truthfulness than the ‘official’ news presented in mainstream journalism because ordinary citizens are outside the conspiratorial biases of mainstream news reportage. This is reflected in the evidential emphasis placed by conspiracy theorists upon first-person testimony from eyewitnesses to conspiracist events or conspiratorial insiders who have come out as ‘whistleblowers’. For example, 9/11 conspiracy theories rely heavily on eye-witness accounts of the attacks. The figurative language used by

ordinary citizens to describe their observations of the chaotic events of the day, such as descriptions that the collapse of the World Trade Centre buildings sounded like ‘bombs going off’ or looked like a ‘controlled demolition’, are interpreted by conspiracy theorists as literal descriptions of the true nature of the events in question.⁹⁸ Similarly, ufological conspiracy theories which argue that the US government is covering up the truth about an alien presence on earth, such as those surrounding the alleged Roswell UFO crash of 1947, are predicated on multiple variations of eye-witness testimony, such as deathbed confessions or whistleblowing by ex-US military personnel.⁹⁹ In these respects, alternative news practices of citizen-based news reportage can be appropriated by conspiracy theorists as a means of legitimating conspiracist ideas presented in popular forms such as anecdotes or ‘first impressions’, that present highly subjective (and thus distorted) versions of the ‘truth’ of a news event, as radical correctives to the ideological biases of mainstream news reportage.

This alternative emphasis on citizen-based news reporting can be further seen as significant to classical conspiracy theory in that it enables conspiracy theorists to present themselves as ‘citizens’ and their conspiracist ideas as popular truths or beliefs. In relation to the radical approaches to media power discussed in chapter 4, section 4.21, radical journalism, in which the journalist presents themselves as a citizen representing the voices of fellow citizens who may be dispossessed and marginalized in relation to the mainstream public sphere, can be seen as a significant point of connection with conspiracy theory. The populist and libertarian impulses inherent in the logic of classical conspiracy theory shape conspiracy theorists into presenting themselves not as extremist ideologues but as concerned citizens trying to educate their fellow citizens to the reality of the conspiracy that is threatening to undermine their democratic freedoms (a good example of this self-image is the ‘Jolly Roger’ article featured in chapter 5, section 5.3). In this respect the ethos behind alternative citizen-centric news – to present citizens’ perspectives on news events that are normally invisible due to mainstream news bias towards the perspectives of powerful groups – can be

⁹⁸ For example, the page entitled ‘Explosion Witnesses’ contained on the *Fire Fighters For 9-11 Truth* website: <http://firefightersfor911truth.org/?cat=4>, accessed 15/9/10.

⁹⁹ A detailed overview of Roswell informants which highlights the problems with their eyewitness accounts is presented at *The Roswell Files*, <http://www.roswellfiles.com/witness.htm>, accessed 15/9/10.

applied to online conspiracy theory presented under the appropriated banner of alternative news. In this alternative context conspiracy theorists can present themselves as authentic or representative ‘voices of the people’ of the kind normally biased against in mainstream news. Conspiracy theorists can therefore use the citizen-based reportage practices of alternative media to legitimate themselves and their ideas within the alternative public sphere. The implicit tendency for conspiracy theorists to present themselves as demagogues rather than ideologues can be seen in the online practices of conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones. For example, Jones’s website *Infowars.com* provides a self-profile that presents Jones as a consummate American citizen, whose ‘radical’ investigative journalism is undertaken as part of his civic duty to uphold the constitutional values that define American democracy:

As a dedicated and aggressive Constitutionalist, Jones consistently defends the Bill of Rights, property rights, and our nation's borders. In the spirit of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, Jones passionately argues against foreign entanglements and wars for the sake of corporate and banking interests. Jones avoids the bogus political labels of “left and right” and instead focuses on what really matters — what’s right and wrong. As a tenacious journalist, Jones has broken hundreds of national stories over the span of his career.¹⁰⁰

The alternative practices of citizen-based news production which Atton describes as ‘citizen journalism’ can also be configured as significant legitimating frameworks for online conspiracy theory. Such citizen journalism is delineated in opposition to mainstream journalism as news produced by citizen-based collectives, which is biased in subject matter towards “specific causes or ideologies” and “the particular, activist communities” that the citizen journalists identify with (Atton 2004: 41), both of which may be marginalized in mainstream news production. These practices of citizen journalism can also be articulated in relation to online conspiracist news practices. Much conspiracist news is presented on blogs or news sites which are operated by and feature news by volunteers committed to the specific conspiracist beliefs of the site in question.

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.infowars.com/alexbio.html>, accessed 15/9/10.

For example, the New Zealand conspiracy news site *Uncensored.co.nz* makes much use of material from local conspiracy theorists such as Clare Swinney (see article featured in chapter 4, section 4.22) who present themselves as independent ‘investigative journalists’ in the mode of citizen-centric reportage discussed above;¹⁰¹ while the American *Rense.com* conspiracy news site has a submissions page that contains information for readers wishing to contribute material to the site such as articles, images, and artwork (in in-depth examination of this site will be presented in chapter 8).¹⁰² As discussed above in relation to the populist and libertarian aspects of conspiracist logic, conspiracy theorists also articulate themselves as belonging to activist communities of other conspiracy theorists concerned with maintaining citizens freedoms in the face of conspiratorial power structures. This tendency is made explicit with the likes of the online 9/11 truth movement, which is based upon ‘ordinary citizens’ engaging in political activism to heighten awareness of the ‘truth’ that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job enacted by the US government.¹⁰³ The multi-media capacities of the Net also enable conspiracy theorists to forsake the eccentric or low-budget production values generally associated with conspiracy media by using generic multi-media and web software to produce conspiracy news sites with production values comparable to alternative (and mainstream) news sites. For example, the look of Alex Jones’s *Info Wars* site,¹⁰⁴ with its slick graphics, prominent display of rotating headlines, and organisation of stories under sub-categories with generic subject headings such as ‘Science and Technology’ and ‘Economic Crisis’, renders it comparable to a leading alternative site such as *Alternet.org*.¹⁰⁵

Atton’s advocacy of blogging as an online form well-suited to citizen production can also be discussed as a legitimating framework for conspiracy theory. As Atton notes, the personalized nature of blogs is well-suited to this ethos of citizen production in that such sites make the biases of the news producer

¹⁰¹ This ‘investigative journalism’ stance is much in evidence on Swinney’s personal website *Web of Evidence: What They Don’t Want You to Know*: <http://clareswinney.wordpress.com/>, accessed 15/9/10.

¹⁰² <http://www.rense.com/sub.htm>, accessed 15/9/10.

¹⁰³ For example, the ‘Activist Resources’ page at *9-11 Research.com*, <http://911research.wtc7.net/resources/web/activism.html>, accessed 15/9/10.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.infowars.com/>, accessed 15/9/10.

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.alternet.org/>, accessed 15/9/10.

readily visible to audiences, and also interpellate the reader in the journalistic process by creating the sense of a virtual dialogue between the blogger as citizen and the reader as citizen (a sensibility enhanced by the use of interactive features such as comments boxes to enable readers to directly engage in dialogue with the blogger). The visibility of bias and the presence of interactive dialogue help configure the blogger (and those with other forms of personal website) as an 'informed citizen' who constitutes a potentially trustworthy and reliable news source by comparison with mainstream journalists (Atton 2004: 56; Barlow 2007).¹⁰⁶ This alternative configuration of blogs and other personalized web sites as ones that facilitate citizen-centric dialogue, in keeping with alternative news practices, is one that can be readily seen as a useful legitimating framework for conspiracy theorists.¹⁰⁷

As the above discussion illustrates, the conspiracist appropriation of the alternative media framework can mean that their conspiracist information practices can be articulated as forms of alternative news practices, thereby legitimating their conspiracist beliefs within the alternative public sphere. Chapter 8 will explicate these critical and theoretical arguments in practical terms through an in-depth examination of conspiracist news practices of the American conspiracy news site *Rense.com*.

7.4 Summary

This chapter has developed the arguments presented in chapter 6 regarding the configuration of the Internet as an alternative public sphere as major point of connection with the logic of classical conspiracy theory through a discussion of alternative news. In relation to theoretical configurations of news as the type of media content central to the effective operation of the public sphere model, and critical beliefs that the public sphere functions of mainstream news media have been irrevocably compromised by powerful political and economic interests, theorists such as Atton (2004) have conceptualised online alternative news

¹⁰⁶ Mainstream journalists obviously make use of blogs as much as alternative ones, but a debate around this point is outside the scope of this study.

¹⁰⁷ Typical examples of conspiracy blogs include *Femacamper*, <http://femacampr.wordpress.com>; *openUReyes*, <http://www.openureyes.org.nz/blog/>; *Truth Gone Wild*, <http://truthgonewild.blogspot.com>, all sites accessed 15/9/10.

practices as a means of counteracting and correcting the biases of mainstream news media and underpinning radical configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere. Conspiracy theorists' appropriation of the alternative media ethos means that their online information practices can also be configured as forms of alternative news practice, thus helping to legitimate their conspiracist beliefs within the alternative public sphere of the Internet. The following chapter will examine this appropriation-legitimation dynamic on an empirical level through a case study of the news practices of the conspiracy news site *Rense.com*.

CHAPTER 8

ALTERNATIVE NEWS CASE STUDY – *Rense.com*

8.1 Introduction

This chapter is a case study of the American conspiracy news site *Rense.com* that is intended to illustrate the arguments developed in chapters 6 and 7 regarding how conspiracy theorists engage with ideas of alternative media in accordance with a dynamic of appropriation and legitimation. As stated above, these arguments are related to the dominant theme of the study – that configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere operate as the most significant point of connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory.

This case study is structured in three parts. The first part presents background material pertaining to the *Rense.com* site in order to explain why I selected this site as an example of online news analysis. The second part outlines the methodology for the survey of *Rense.com* news practices. The third part presents the data from the *Rense.com* survey, and analyses the data in relation to the conspiracist appropriation and legitimation dynamic developed over the preceding two chapters.

8.2 *Rense.com* – background

My selection of the *Rense.com* site for this example was based on two main factors. The first was the classical conspiracist worldview evident in the site content. The second was the way in which the *Rense.com* site – and its explicitly conspiracist content – was presented to readers as an alternative news site.

8.21 The conspiracist worldview presented on *Rense.com*

Rense.com is a website that is directly concerned with the propagation and dissemination of classical conspiracy theories. My identification of *Rense.com* as a conspiracy site is based upon my long-term perusal of the site as part of my researches into online conspiracy culture. While the conspiracist worldview behind *Rense.com* is obscured by its operation as a news site, incorporating a wide variety of material from numerous sources and contributors, it is apparent from regular observation that the site advocates a ‘superconspiracy’ worldview typical of much post-war American conspiracist thought. As per the conspiracist typology outlined in chapter 2, section 2.51, this worldview combines several main strands of conspiracism: traditional far-right anti-semitic beliefs about ‘Jewish/Zionist plots for global domination’; the paranoid ‘libertarian populism’ of American nationalism that sees the US government as an institution under the control of ‘un-American’ forces such as communists and the Illuminati; and paranormal/occult ideas, such as the existence of UFOs or the ‘satanic’ nature of the Illuminati, derived from New Age and fundamentalist thought. The underlying conspiracist framework of *Rense.com* can be summarised along the following lines. Elite institutions of global power, such as the US government and large corporations, are secretly run by a small group of Zionist Illuminists who wish to establish a totalitarian new world order as part of some transhistorical, occult-based plot of global domination (both Zionists and Illuminati being perceived as innately ‘evil’). This plot involves killing off most of the human race in order to preserve natural resources for the use of the conspiratorial elite, and subjugating the rest as mind-controlled slaves. This totalitarian scheme is being enacted on both micro and macro levels of society. On a macro-level large-scale historical events such as wars, economic depressions and pandemics are being deliberately engineered by the conspirators as means of population control and pretexts for implementing new systems of social control. On a micro-level the basic institutions of everyday civic existence, such as public health and education, and the media, are being transformed into vehicles for the physical and mental control of the populace. The conspirators are also suppressing potentially revolutionary ideas, such as alternative health and technology and the reality of paranormal phenomena such

as UFOs, as a means of preventing the development of alternatives to the current political, economic, and social systems that they control.

Rense.com is also significant as a major information ‘node’ for online conspiracy culture. *Rense.com* functions as a ‘one-stop information shop’, presenting conspiracy-related news stories from other conspiracy sites across the Net, as well as presenting site-specific material. Some of the sites regularly used as content sources in this way include far right American news sites *News With Views*, *World Net Daily*, and *American Free Press*, and the personal websites and blogs of Illuminati conspiracy theorists such as Henry Makow, Paul Drockton, and Joan Veon.¹⁰⁸ Regular readers of the site thereby get a good spread of conspiracist news from across the conspiracist web sphere. Because of the wide range of news stories featured on the site, *Rense.com* is also regularly used as a source of news by other conspiracy sites. Notable examples of these include the website of leading British conspiracy theorist David Icke, the New Zealand conspiracy news site *Uncensored*, and the New Age conspiracy site *Sign of the Times*.¹⁰⁹ Since each of these sites is in turn linked to many other conspiracy sites, news information gathered from *Rense.com* may be considered to have a wide degree of circulation throughout the conspiracy web sphere.

In these respects, I thought that *Rense.com* is a good exemplar of the superconspiracist worldview that dominates 21st century American conspiracy culture (and, by extension, the conspiracy web sphere). My study of the information practices of this site could therefore be taken as indicative of the information practices of other conspiracy websites that present themselves as ‘alternative news’ sites.

¹⁰⁸ News site references:

NewsWithViews, <http://www.newswithviews.com/>,
World Net Daily, <http://www.wnd.com/>,
American Free Press, <http://www.americanfreepress.net/>;

Personal site references:

Henry Makow, <http://www.henrymakow.com/>,
Paul Drockton, <http://www.moneyteachers.org/Deadmanmusings1.htm>,
Joan Veon, <http://www.womensgroup.org/>, all accessed 14/5/10.

The Illuminati conspiracy advocated by Drockton, Veon, and Makow is based in American nationalism and fundamentalist Protestantism. New Age beliefs are usually condemned by these theorists as parts of the Illuminati plot. While Makow gets a lot of coverage on American conspiracy websites such as *Rense.com*, it is worth noting that he is Canadian (Drockton and Veon being American).

¹⁰⁹ References for these sites;

David Icke’s site, <http://www.davidicke.com/index.php/>,
Uncensored, <http://uncensored.co.nz>,
Sign of the Times news, <http://www.sott.net/>, all accessed 14/5/10.

8.22 The presentation of *Rense.com* as an alternative news site

Rense.com explicitly positions itself as an alternative news site. A banner on the main news page, just above the news headlines, reads ‘Rense.com – World’s #1 Alternative News Service. Your First Source For Reality & Honest Journalism’. The description of the show presented on the site’s ‘About the Show’ page outlines the nature of the show as an oppositional one in the alternative tradition, providing citizens with information that they are unlikely to encounter in the controlled world of mainstream journalism: “Thanks to the program and site, listeners, researchers and information seekers from across the US and around the world are being exposed to information and learning about the most important issues of our times they rarely, if ever, encounter in the controlled corporate world of mainstream broadcast and monopoly print media (sic)”(*Rense.com*, n.d.).¹¹⁰ In other words, *Rense.com* is predicated on an awareness of the failure of the mainstream news media to fulfil its public sphere duties in keeping the public effectively informed in issues of political and social importance. In relation to the radical ethos of alternative media outlined by Atton, this failure is attributed to the co-option of mainstream broadcast and print journalism by corporations who control the information provided to the public in accordance with their commercial interests. In this respect *Rense.com* can be seen to operate as part of the alternative public sphere that has developed as a means of redressing the inadequacies of the mainstream public sphere. It seeks to provide audiences with access to information that they “rarely, if ever, encounter in the controlled corporate world of mainstream broadcast and monopoly print media.”: such access to information in turn leading to audiences developing their understanding of the world in a manner redolent of the ‘rational-critical worldview’ of the public sphere ideal, i.e. “learning about the most important issues of our times” (ibid).

Jeff Rense, the show’s originator, is described in terms befitting the citizen journalist model:

¹¹⁰ <http://www.rense.com/aboutnew1.htm>, accessed 14/5/10.

As an award-winning television News Director and News Anchor for over ten years, Jeff continually pushed for higher standards of journalism and responsible, intelligent reporting and inquiry. Regrettably, those goals were often at odds with the irrevocable tv news obsession for tabloid exploitation of the trivial, the tragic and the sensational. The situation became so dubious and distasteful that one day he walked away from his highly-successful news anchor/news director career (as high as a 53 Share of the audience - Nielsen) and moved to radio, recognizing it as the last viable approach to bringing reality to the American public...and now with the internet, to the world (*Rense.com*, n.d.).¹¹¹

In alternative media terms, Rense is presented here as a journalist committed to the ideals of the public sphere – “Jeff continually pushed for higher standards of journalism and responsible, intelligent reporting and inquiry” (*Rense.com*, n.d.). However, the commercial nature of mainstream journalism, in which public sphere values are downplayed in favour of easily packaged ‘tabloid’ journalism – “exploitation of the trivial, the tragic, and the sensational” – led to Rense leaving mainstream TV journalism and setting up his own talkback radio show and online news site outside of mainstream control as a means of conveying serious information about the nature of political and social power – what is referred to here as “reality” – to “the American public...and the world” (*Rense.com*, n.d.).

The efficacy of the site as an alternative public sphere news source is implied in the statistics presented which attest to the site’s popularity. The site is described as “one of the world's elite and most referenced 24-hour news services. It is the world's number ONE talk radio site and records close to 10 million total hits per month. Rense.com archives over 150,000 pages of stories, articles, reports and features. Rense.com is a powerhouse and sits firmly in the top .001% of the 20 million websites on the internet. ([World rankings as of March 1, 2007](#))” (*Rense.com*, n.d.). Its radical credentials, in terms of presenting information about the dominant power structures of society that is poorly reported in the mainstream public sphere, are also reflected in the claims that “the site and program are constantly visited by globalist elite, government agencies, military

¹¹¹ <http://www.rense.com/aboutnew1.htm>, accessed 14/05/2010.

and intelligence agencies and worldwide defense industry sources ... all confirmed by electronic monitoring of site visitors” (*Rense.com*, n.d.).¹¹² The implication here is that these ‘power elites’ are keeping tabs on the nature of the information presented by *Rense.com* because of the potential threat such information poses to their power.

The presentation of *Rense.com* as an alternative news site is also evident in the format of the site. News information is presented in formatting modes that are established signifiers of news media in both mainstream and alternative forms. Such ‘news formatting’ includes:

- **news headlines.** That these are the major feature of the *Rense.com* site is signalled by the way in which they dominate the layout of the homepage. The headlines are positioned in the centre of the homepage and extend the entire length of the page. The news headlines are updated several times a day in keeping with generic expectations of ‘breaking news’ as a key index of a news site.
- **news features.** The side bar to the left of the news headlines box is made up of ‘topic boxes’ that provide in-depth information on particular conspiracist topics related to current affairs. Under a heading outlining the particular topic in question are presented specific pieces of relevant information in the shape of news stories, conspiracist commentary and other material. This is similar to newspaper formats in which certain news topics are deemed to be particularly important in relation to the social and institutional contexts within which the news media operate (for example, government policy may be covered in depth in a feature article as this would have wide-ranging impacts upon all sectors of society). Such subjects are therefore singled out for more in-depth journalistic coverage in the form of feature articles rather than news stories.
- **columnists.** A sub-section within the ‘features’ section presents a list of conspiracy theorists who regularly contribute to the *Rense.com* news headlines in the form of news stories and commentary. This mirrors mainstream news formats in which various journalists write regular columns expressing their opinions on various topics or their specialised knowledge of a particular field.
- **editorial cartoon.** The *Rense.com* banner usually appears at the top of an illustration by conspiracist artist David Dees which provides graphic commentary

¹¹² <http://www.rense.com/aboutnew1.htm>, accessed 8/06/07.

on particular conspiracist themes or issues. This is in keeping with the newspaper tradition of editorial cartoons which offer commentary on current events.

The large amount of advertising on the *Rense.com* homepage is important to discuss here in relation to ideas of news formatting and alternative media credentials. As outlined by Atton, the radical ethos of alternative media sites means that many of them try and avoid advertising as a means of preserving their ideological integrity and journalistic autonomy, since the manipulation of news in relation to the interests of advertisers is regarded as being one of the major problems affecting the public sphere functions of mainstream journalism. Even most mainstream news sites do not feature as much advertising as *Rense.com*. On a *prima facie* basis, the amount of advertising on *Rense.com* could be taken to suggest that the site is as much a commercial news site as the mainstream journalism it purports to be an alternative to. However, I would argue that the advertising does not undermine the alternative status of the *Rense.com* in terms of the content and tone of the products being promoted. The products and services advertised on the site are directly related to the conspiracist worldview of the site in that they are produced by ‘alternative lifestyle’ companies. Such companies are concerned with providing products and services to help citizens free themselves from corporate-controlled structures of consumption. For example, conspiracist fears of the control and manipulation of the food supply as a means by which the conspiratorial elites can physically control the population are reflected in advertisements for products such as heirloom seeds.¹¹³ Citizens can use such seeds to grow their own crops and preserve genetic diversity in the food supply in opposition to the agricultural monoculture of large food companies and the attempts to directly control food through genetic engineering and patents practiced by multinational corporations such as Monsanto. Similarly, conspiracist concerns about the conspiratorial control of the banking and finance industries as a means of ‘enslaving’ the citizenry via such forms as taxes, credit ratings, and debt repayments are evident in advertisements for ‘alternative’ financial services that promote legal loopholes for citizens to use to challenge and avoid such systems.

¹¹³ ‘Heirloom Organics 100% Non-Hybrid/GMO Survival Seed Banks’, <http://www.non-hybrid-seeds.com/>, advertised on <http://rense.com>, accessed 14/5/10.

¹¹⁴ The establishment of economic autonomy is here presented as being a prerequisite for personal freedom from the conspiratorial system. The advertising can thus be seen to function as an integral part of *Rense.com*, reinforcing the conspiracist ethos of the site rather than contradicting or undermining it through the promotion of unrelated products and the practicalities of owning and operating a website in general. Such subject-related advertising can also be seen as a method for *Rense.com* to continue functioning as an ‘alternative’ news source in regards to the various costs involved in operating a website (e.g. server space rent, employment of news editors etc).

8.3 Methodology

This examination of the news practices of *Rense.com* took the form of a content analysis of the news material presented on the site. My interest was in ascertaining patterns and trends in the ways in which news content was presented on the site as evidence for the idea that classical conspiracy theorists could be seen to appropriate the ethos of alternative news practices as a means of legitimating their conspiracist beliefs in relation to ideas of the public sphere.

I collated the news updates presented on *Rense.com* each day over a 9-day period. I thought this period (just over a week) suitable as the basis for a piece of exploratory research into this relationship since the time period was long enough to indicate the development of particular trends in relation to news cycles and stories. This was concomitant with the fact that large amounts of news stories were posted on *Rense.com* on a daily basis, so that the 9-day period provided a large amount of material to examine from which could be extrapolated critical observations regarding wider trends related to the ways in which *Rense.com* made use of news sources.

The patterns ascertained from noting the content of each news item in relation to the criteria outlined in the following sections was plotted against the total number of news items presented on *Rense.com* in turns of each day and collectively across all nine days. The ratios involved were as follows:

¹¹⁴ ‘Redemption Process – Legally Eliminate Debt via America’s #1 UCC Secured Party’, <http://www.redemption-service.com/>, advertised on <http://rense.com>, accessed 14/5/10.

Day 1 – 30 news items

Day 2 – 44 news items

Day 3 – 45 news items (47 stories listed, but two deleted/unavailable at original links)

Day 4 – 37 news items

Day 5 – 28 news items

Day 6 – 61 news items

Day 7 – 58 news items (60 items listed, two deleted/unavailable at original links)

Day 8 – 45 news items (46 listed, one deleted/unavailable at original link)

Day 9 – 60 news items (61 listed, one deleted/unavailable)

Collectively: 408 news items over the 9 day period.

I listed different aspects of the content of the individual news stories presented on *Rense.com* in relation to several criteria pertaining to the content of each news story. These criteria were deemed to be significant in ascertaining possible patterns involved in *Rense.com*'s news coverage and its presentation as an alternative news site. I developed these criteria in accordance with factors noted across previous observations of *Rense.com* and other conspiracy sites.

In the following sections I will outline the criteria by which I analysed each news item.

8.31 The address of each individual news webpage

This was for reference purposes (i.e. the need to go back and recheck the link if checking/further research was required).

8.32 The headline under which the news story was presented at its original source

The headlines under which news stories were presented on the *Rense.com* site often differed from the original headline of the article. From my overviews of *Rense.com* and other conspiracy sites, it was noted that news stories – particularly those originating from mainstream sources – were often listed under headlines that were notably different from the original titles of the articles themselves. These site-specific headlines made clear to fellow conspiracists the conspiratorial significance of the events featured in the news stories. I was therefore interested to see how this practice was exercised at *Rense.com*. Questions here included: how widespread was this practice? Were new headlines provided for news stories dealing with certain subjects more than others? What did these substitute headlines signify in relation to the ostensible nature of the site as an ‘alternative news’ source?

8.33 The types of news story featured on *Rense.com*

This typology was divided into two sections:

A – the format of the news item. This refers to the style of writing and mode of presentation by which the news information was presented to readers. My format categories constituted the following:

- **news report** – standard ‘objective’ descriptions of events
- **commentary** – pieces by columnists/specialist journalists/experts etc. offering personal and/or indepth opinion and facts on particular news items and trends
- **letters** – letters from readers to the news journal
- **essay** – long research pieces on specific topics presented by contributors
- **press release** – information presented by institutions or groups that is presented in a direct form ‘clear’ of journalistic rewriting
- **online video** – news items presented in the form of online audio-visual clips.

B – the subject matter of the news item. My interest here was in seeing the patterns involved in the relationships between the subject matter of news stories

and the selection of news stories for the *Rense.com* site. Questions here included: were stories dealing with specific subjects selected more than others? What did these emphases (if any) reveal about the conspiracist beliefs informing the *Rense.com* site? How might these emphases relate to conspiracist attempts to legitimate their activities under the guise of ‘alternative’ media?

I classified each story according to the following subject categories:

National politics – stories dealing with political events within the nation-state that the news source is based in, e.g. news stories originating from American websites discussing US national and local politics.

International politics – stories dealing with political events in countries outside of the nation-state where the news source is based e.g. American news-sites discussing political events in China. I also filed stories dealing with events such as the Feb 2010 Haiti earthquake in this category (given that reportage of such events is generally extricated with the geopolitics of relief efforts *et al*).

Middle East politics. While this subject area would normally be filed under the International Politics section outlined above, the anti-semitic conspiracy beliefs that informed the *Rense.com* site meant that a large proportion of stories dealt with Israel and the whole sphere of Middle East politics. I therefore placed stories dealing with ‘the Middle East’ in a separate category.

War on Terror – again, this was a specific area of international political news that appeared of major interest to the *Rense.com* webmasters.

Economics – stories dealing with economic policy and the social effects of such policies. Included in this category were stories dealing with the global economic depression of 2008 - 2010 brought on by the collapse of the US finance sector.

Business – stories that dealt specifically with the workings of companies, the business community e.g. corporate machinations, companies recalling faulty products.

Society – stories dealing with issues and trends pertinent to specific social groups or general conceptions of society as a whole, e.g. stories about ‘declining moral standards’ amongst youth.

Culture – stories that deal with creative/cultural aspects of human life e.g. festivals and the arts.

Media – stories related to media fields such as television, film, newspapers.

Internet –stories specifically dealing with Internet/Web topics, such as social changes wrought by the Web, the introduction of new Web forms etc. Given the focus of this thesis on the relationships between the Internet and conspiracy culture, I thought it important to consider *Rense.com* stories dealing with Net/Web topics as a category separate from other media.

Health – stories dealing with health topics e.g. pandemics, obesity.

Environment – stories dealing with environmental issues e.g. global warming

Science & Technology – stories dealing with scientific surveys and discoveries and new technological developments e.g. sociological studies of human interaction.

History – stories presenting recent updates or reappraisals of historical events e.g. new information about events of World War II.

Religion – stories dealing with issues pertaining to religious groups and institutions e.g. Catholicism, Islam.

Crime – stories dealing with policing, criminal activity etc.

Human interest – stories presented more for their entertainment/filler angle than their information/facts e.g. the infamous ‘cute animal’ type stories.

8.34 The source of the news items listed

More specifically, the cultural/ideological positions of the news sources from which the *Rense.com* editors gathered their news. Such identifications are obviously central in discussing possible relationships between conspiracist thought and cultural conceptions of the Net as an alternative public sphere. I categorised each news item in relation to three general types of source which I will outline here.

The first type were what I labeled **mainstream** news sources. These were corporate/state operated news outlets that operate within the realm of readily accessible/popularly recognized ‘mass media’ culture. Most online sources of this type are the Web versions of established newspaper and television news sources, for example the *BBC* or the *New York Times*. I also included news originating from sources that specialise in particular types of subject matter but which do so in forms readily accessible to the general public (in terms of factors such as

writing style and distribution). Examples here may include financial news such as *The Wall Street Journal*, or popular science periodicals such as *Nature*.

The second type were **alternative** news sources. In keeping with Atton's definition of 'alternative' media, I classified as 'alternative' those news sources whose production base, informational practices, and choices of subject matter signified a commitment to the radical/progressive ethos that Atton identified as typical of 'alternative media'. Sites that may have presented radical or unusual political and cultural views without any intrinsic conspiracist worldview were categorised as alternative sites. For example, news originating from left and right-wing groups, such as neo-Marxist activists or libertarian organisations, were treated as 'alternative' because the political ideas presented are generally deemed too radical by mainstream media standards that strive to reflect the political views of the 'mass' public. However, I also classified as 'alternative' news that originates from sites dealing with subjects that are generally relegated to the fringes of mainstream culture because of their paranormal or trans-rational subject matter, such as ufology and pseudo-science.

Given their shared *modus operandi* in terms of presenting an alternative to mainstream culture and beliefs, my categorisation of a site as alternative or conspiracist was difficult at times since there was often some degree of thematic overlap between the two. For example, the website *GlobalResearch.ca* was a regular source of *Rense.com* news items.¹¹⁵ The website presents news and commentary dealing with critical views of globalisation issues such as American imperialism and international economic organisations. As edited by Canadian academic Michel Chossudovsky, this combination would suggest the site to be a bastion of serious left-wing critique of the type associated with the American academic and activist Noam Chomsky and websites such as *Indymedia*. However, the site also features stories that deal with distinctly conspiracist topics. Major examples here include stories arguing that the 9/11 terror attacks were false flag operations by the US government, and that global warming is a scientific hoax implemented by global elites as part of a international power grab. I was thus forced to decide if I should classify *GlobalResearch.ca* as an alternative or conspiracist website. I chose to classify it as an alternative site for two main reasons: firstly, that the bulk of the material featured on the site did not

¹¹⁵ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/>, accessed 14/5/10.

deal with conspiracist themes; secondly, that the site appeared to express no distinctive classical conspiracist agenda (e.g. Illuminati/Zionist/Communist conspiracy narratives). My distinction between ‘alternative’ and conspiracist’ categories was therefore often subjective - a matter of discernment and judgment based upon my observations of alternative and conspiracist websites. While I freely acknowledge the problematic aspects of this approach – for instance, someone else repeating this news survey may well see fit to classify *GlobalResearch.ca* as a conspiracy site – I feel that my separation of conspiracist from alternative news sources was fairly accurate.

The third type were **conspiracist** news sources. As outlined above, my identification of conspiracy sites as news sources for *Rense.com* was based primarily upon the explicitly conspiratorial beliefs evident in the news items listed (e.g. discussions of the Illuminati or 9/11) and/or the conspiracist background of the news source (e.g. blogs of known conspiracy theorists). I also included in this category material that was presented directly under the *Rense.com* banner. Such material consisted of a text presented in a standard ‘*rense.com*’ page format as a piece of news that originated internally from the site, without linking to any external news source. The problematic aspect with such material was that some of it was not overtly ‘conspiracist’ in content but rather consisted of such things as political commentary from bloggers or journalists in alternative modes. However, I decided to classify such material as ‘conspiracist’ due to its presentation as a product of the *Rense.com* site rather than an external source, and because there may have been editorial factors behind such presentation. For example, the writers of the material presented may have given permission to *Rense.com* to present the material on their behalf (this was suggested by the listing of copyright information and similar details of authorship as part of these articles). In such cases, the writers have allowed their work to be presented under the banner of an explicitly conspiracist website.

There were also a number of subsidiary factors related to these news sources that I thought worthy of noting in regards to the ideas about sources outlined above. In relation to mainstream news sources, I noted separately if the news source originated from a news site specialising in regional news (e.g. city, province, state-wide) and/or international news (sourced outside the US or UK press). This was based upon an awareness (from my own experience and reading about news institutions) of the relationships between the geographical/social

scope of news sources and the types of news stories they carry. For example, the big newspaper and television news outlets are designed to address large-scale national audiences. Their choice of news items, and the ways in which they report news stories, are likely to be more general and less specific than regional news sources that consider stories within a much smaller geographical and social range. Similarly, mainstream news sources from countries outside of the US/UK may have developed their own news content and particular 'takes' on news stories in keeping with their own national political, social and cultural perspectives. My interest here was in seeing if the *Rense.com* news compilers made much use of such sources as means of providing more specific information or examples on topics of conspiracist interest. For example, a local newspaper may have an in-depth article about local economic or cultural trends that could be taken as a specific example of conspiratorial machinations. This reasoning was also behind my noting whether news items were sourced from what I term above as 'mainstream specialist' publications, e.g. mass-market magazines specialising in certain subject areas (e.g. science and technology), or journals/websites related to particular professions or institutions (e.g. medical and business journals).

From previous overviews of the *Rense.com* site, it was also apparent that the websites of leading UK national newspapers were a major source of news items. Given that *Rense.com* is a website based in the USA, I found it interesting that mainstream British newspapers should be a major news source for a conspiracy website based in the USA. Such a relationship suggested that the news team at *Rense.com* regarded the mainstream British news media as possessing a cachet of quality, in terms of such factors as the veracity of the facts being reported, that its US equivalents lacked. Noting the frequency with which mainstream British newspaper sites were used as source material for *Rense.com* was a way of examining this point in detail.

In relation to the alternative categories, I also noted if the news sources referenced had distinctive liberal or conservative political stances, i.e. did the news come from the websites of conservative groups (such as far-right 'patriot' organisations) or liberal groups (such as civil rights/anti-globalisation groups)? My intention here was to see if there were any notable ideological patterns involved in the selection of source material in relation to ideas of conspiracism as a form of 'alternative media'. For instance, the regular use of liberal alternative sites may have suggested a tactic by the *Rense.com* web crew to position itself in

relation to left-wing political perspectives, thereby obscuring the extremist/far-right nature of the conspiracist worldview that permeates the site. While I am aware that the mainstream news media can also be divided into liberal and conservative sources (e.g. the liberal British newspaper *The Guardian* and the conservative *Daily Telegraph*), alternative media are usually much more direct and partisan in the expression of their political views since they are not bound by institutional and industrial notions of appealing to ‘mainstream mass audiences’.

8.35 The country of origin of the news items featured on *Rense.com*

This information was intended to complement the hypothesis regarding the geographical/cultural origins of the online news material used by *Rense.com* outlined in the section above. For example, does the *Rense.com* site use more non-American news sources than American ones (despite its own American identity)? If so – what might such patterns indicate in regards to the *Rense.com* site and conceptions of the Net as an alternative medium?

8.36 The relationship between the news stories presented and the conspiracist themes that inform the *Rense.com* site

Given the theoretical ideas underlying this study – that conspiracy sites use ideas of alternative media as a means of legitimating their conspiracist content - it was obviously important to consider how the news items presented related to the conspiracist worldview of the *Rense.com* site. In other words – why did the *Rense.com* news compilers select these stories and not others for the site? What was the conspiratorial significance of the news stories presented (in relation to the conspiracist worldview of the *Rense.com* site)?

I classified the news items presented on *Rense.com* in relation to specific sub-themes (e.g. government corruption) that related to a more general thematic framework of conspiracist belief (e.g. the conspiratorial control of the US government). I will outline these thematic categories below.

1 – Conspiracy theories about the US government and corporations.

Rense.com presented numerous stories dealing with the activities of the American ‘power elites’ of government and business as a means of showing how these groups are working to implement a Zionist/Illuminati ‘New World Order’. I categorised news items related to this theme according to the following subjects/sub-themes:

A – ‘Hard’ politics. The workings and policies of the US government are evidence of conspiratorial control of the US political system.

B – Government/corporate corruption. Abuses of power within governments and corporations are evidence of conspiratorial control of these organisations.

C – President Obama. The President of the USA is a conspiratorial agent who is secretly promoting a conspiratorial, ‘un-American’ political agenda.

D – 9/11. The 9/11 terror attacks were secretly carried out by the US government as a means of instigating international conflict, thereby furthering the development of a conspiratorial ‘new world order’ and state control of American citizens.

E – the ‘war on terror’. Related to above – the US military conflicts against terrorists in the Middle East are part of the conspiratorial ‘great game’ for establishing a ‘New World Order’.

F – the US as ‘police state’. The US governmental/corporate elites are using various methods and pretexts to dismantle the civil liberties of American citizens to further their totalitarian agenda.

2 - Conspiracy beliefs about ‘the Zionist plot for world domination’.

Rense.com perpetuates these anti-semitic conspiracy trope by featuring news items dealing with Israeli politics and Jewish culture. These stories are invariably selected because of the ways they portray Jewish people in a negative light, thus reinforcing anti-semitic stereotypes.

A – Middle Eastern politics. Israel’s role in the geopolitical issues of the Middle East – especially the Palestinian situation – reflects the ‘evil’ nature of the Jewish people and their Zionist ‘new world Order’ agenda.

B – Zionist control of the USA. Israeli – US relations and American politicians of Jewish background are evidence of Zionist control of the US government.

C – Zionist control of world events. Israeli/Jewish connections to international political/economic systems are part of the Zionist plots for world domination.

D – Jewish culture. News stories dealing with aspects of Jewish culture are presented as a means of demonising Jews in accordance with anti-Semitic conspiracist beliefs.

3 – Conspiracy theories about the decline of America and the West. These news items deal with various types of internal crises or political trends that signify major problems or shifts in American (and more broadly Western) political, economic and social systems. The conspiracist implication is that such crises and trends are ‘engineered’ by the conspiratorial elites as a means of furthering their control over the USA and the West and their manipulation of international relations towards the creation of a conspiratorial ‘New World Order’.

A – USA and international relations. American relationships with other nation states are evidence of conspiratorial attempts to use American hyperpower as a means of establishing a New World Order and/or destabilise American hyperpower as a means of allowing the rise of other countries as a means of developing a new world order e.g. China.

B – US economic crisis. The current economic depression in the USA (2008 – present) is part of conspiratorial attempts to control global economic systems as part of the development of a New World Order.

C – Global economic crisis. The global economic depression that resulted from the American crises is part of conspiratorial attempts to control global economic systems as part of the development of a New World Order.

D – Globalisation. Political organisations and economic agreements based on ideas of globalisation are conspiratorial plots to develop a New World Order.

E – International conflict. Conflicts in non-Western geopolitical sphere are instigated by conspiratorial agents as a means of achieving New World Order ends.

F – Decline of American society. Conspirators are sowing moral corruption and social discord as a means of undermining the ‘true American values’ that are an affront to their conspiratorial agenda.

4 – Conspiracy theories about conspiratorial ‘control systems’. These news items relate to conspiracist concerns that almost all facets of modern cultural and

social life have been designed as and/or transformed into systems of conspiratorial control of the populace. This control is both physical (controlling such things as freedom of movement and organisation) and mental (controlling the ways in which citizens think about power, society, and the self).

A – Food. Conspiratorial elites are drugging/poisoning the populace through food production e.g. chemical additives

B – Science and technology. Scientific research and technological developments signify new forms of conspiratorial control.

C – US media. The American media is a system of conspiratorial mind control

D – Internet. The information freedom of the Net is under threat by conspiratorial elites through strategies such as legislation, censorship etc.

E – Health. Institutionalised medicine is a conspiratorial method for drugging/killing the populace. Alternative health practices and theories are therefore demonised by the conspiratorial establishment because of the ideological challenge they present to the health establishment.

F – Pandemics. Global disease outbreaks are engineered by conspiratorial elites as a means of reducing/controlling the world's population (through death or treatments such as vaccinations).

G – Global warming. Global warming is a scientific fraud used by conspiratorial elites to help establish a conspiratorial new world order through the implementation of international environmental laws and practices.

H – Disasters. Natural disasters such as the Feb 2010 Haiti earthquake are engineered by conspiratorial elites using top-secret technologies as a means of furthering New World Order goals.

I – Religion. Institutionalised religions are secretly controlled by the conspiratorial elites as forms of social control.

J – Feminism. Feminism is a conspiratorial plot to destabilise 'natural' social relations and enforce conspiratorial patterns of social control

K – Immigration. Immigration is a conspiratorial plot to destabilise 'natural' social relations of nation-states like the USA and make them more susceptible to conspiratorial control.

L – History. New research/evidence regarding historical events help validate conspiracist beliefs in the transhistorical reality of conspiratorial plots for world domination.

5 – Conspiracy beliefs about the reality of paranormal phenomena. These news items suggest that there exist as yet unknown facets of physical and mental reality. These areas are being suppressed by the conspiratorial elites because they are using these forces as part of their plans for world domination or because such forces signify alternative possibilities to the conspiratorial power structures.

A – UFOs – the conspiratorial elites are covering up the reality of UFOs and aliens due to its revolutionary implications for human society and thought; and/or the conspiratorial elites are in cahoots with aliens as part of their plans for world domination.

B – Other – stories on psychic phenomena, cryptozoology etc. are presented as evidence that there are still aspects of existence outside the control of conspiratorially-controlled mainstream science.

6 – The conspiracy community. These are news items that deal with individuals who are part of the American/ online conspiracy ‘community’, or which related to the personal interests of Jeff Rense and his website crew.

A – members of the conspiracy community – stories that discuss aspects of the personal lives of conspiracy theorists approved of/affiliated with *rense.com* (e.g. eulogies for deceased conspiracy theorists), or which attack rival conspiracy theorists (e.g. Alex Jones).

B – personal/human interest – stories that have no discernible conspiracist connotations. These appear to reflect the personal interests of Rense and assistants, or intended as ‘human interest’ stories which provide a break from the conspiracist content otherwise presented.

8.4 Data and Analysis

The quantitative information gleaned from the ‘news mapping’ exercise outlined above indicated clear patterns in terms of the selection and presentation of news material on *Rense.com* that related to the ideas of appropriation of alternative news forms as a means of legitimating conspiracist content as part of the alternative public sphere. I will use day 6 of the survey (dated 16/2/2010) for specific examples with which to illustrate the ideas discussed below.

8.41 News sources

Table A outlines the types of news sources used on *Rense.com*.

Table A – News items presented on *Rense.com* according to news source

	Mainstream		Alternative		Conspiracist		Official	
	No. of items	% of total	No. of items	% of total	No. of items	% of total	No. of items	% of total
Day 1	12/30	40	7/30	23.3	10/30	33.3	1/30	3.3
Day 2	25/44	56.8	10/44	22.7	9/44	20.4	0	0
Day 3	19/45	42.2	11/45	24.4	14/45	31.1	1/45	2.2
Day 4	22/37	59.4	10/37	27.0	5/37	13.5	0	0
Day 5	14/28	50	7/28	25	7/28	25	0	0
Day 6	37/61	60.6	11/61	18.0	12/61	19.6	1/61	1.6
Day 7	31/58	53.4	14/58	24.1	12/58	20.6	1/58	1.7
Day 8	29/45	64.4	10/45	22.2	7/45	15.5	0	0
Day 9	37/60	61.6	14/60	23.3	9/60	15	0	0
In relation to total	226/ 408	55.3	94/ 408	23.0	85/ 408	20.8	4/ 408	0.98

In terms of these news sources, the status of *Rense.com* as an ‘alternative’ news site could be seen to be predicated upon those news sources classified as ‘alternative’ and ‘conspiracist’. The news items selected from these sources are generally produced in relation to the principles of alternative news practices outlined in chapter 7, section 7.31. They originate from organizations and groups which are concerned with expressing ideas oppositional or marginal to the dominant values of mainstream society, and the news content is created largely by people outside of the professional parameters of mainstream journalism who are motivated by citizen-centric interests. I will present examples of both from Day 6 of the survey. A representative example of a news item from an alternative source

is a story entitled ‘How Do the PA Ambassadors Represent Palestine?’ which comes from the blog of Kawther Salam, a Palestinian journalist and human rights activist.¹¹⁶ This story adheres to alternative news practices in the following ways: the subject matter presented is marginal by mainstream standards (the poor quality of Palestinian-European diplomacy, hardly a subject of pressing importance to the mainstream Western news media); the writing is subjective and colloquial (being the blog – online diary – of an individual); and the intentions of the writer are political in the sense of being motivated by issues of citizenship and human rights (in this case a concern for the sovereignty of the Palestinian people in relation to the state of Israel). A representative example of a news item from a conspiracist source is that entitled ‘The Fictitious Legal Entity Called “a Person” which comes from the website of Illuminati conspiracy theorist Henry Makow.¹¹⁷ Apropos of its subject matter, this news item can be said to be within the parameters of alternative media practice in that it obviously deals with non-mainstream subject matter (in this case, critiquing some of the fundamental precepts of mainstream law as being manifestations of Zionist-Illuminati conspiracism); is written in a style untypical of mainstream journalism (e.g. a rambling essay with lots of references to other sources, the overuse of modes of emphasis such as words presented in caps or highlighted phrases); and is presented to readers not as an objective news story but as information to be shared between citizens regarding the oppressive nature of power in Western society (e.g. the author proposes acts of civil disobedience as means of challenging the ‘conspiratorially-designed’ precepts of Western legal structures).

However, the examination of news sources for *Rense.com* showed that the largest amounts of news items presented on the site were gathered from mainstream sources. As indicated in table A, 55.3% - over half - of the news items presented on *Rense.com* during the study period derived from mainstream news sources. This is over double the amount of material collectively sourced from alternative sites (23 %), conspiracy sites (20.8%) and official sites (0.98%). On the surface this trend may appear incongruous with the status of *Rense.com* as an alternative news site. If the mainstream media presents information that is irrevocably compromised by dominant power structures, why make such heavy

¹¹⁶ <http://www.kawther.info/wpr/2010/02/14/how-do-the-pa-ambassadors-represent-palestine>, accessed 16/02/2010.

¹¹⁷ http://www.henrymakow.com/the_fictitious_legal_entity_ca.html, accessed 16/02/2010.

use of such information if operating from an 'alternative media' perspective? To discuss this I will refer back to Atton's outline of alternative news practices as discussed in chapter 7, section 7.31. Although the alternative media model is predicated on a radical oppositional approach to mainstream journalism, this does not mean that alternative news is mutually exclusive of mainstream news. To proscribe the use of mainstream news in alternative news practices due to a literal enforcement of this oppositional ethos would make alternative news practice extremely difficult in both practical and theoretical terms. Practically because mainstream journalism still possesses a large amount of resources devoted to establishing the 'facticity' at the heart of news stories (such as 'on-site reportage'), and theoretically because the essentialism inherent in configuring alternative news as something totally separate from mainstream news suggests a degree of essentialism that is at odds with the cultural politics context within which Atton's alternative media model is positioned. In terms of alternative media taking up the public sphere duties that have been lost in mainstream media practice due to factors such as the increasing corporatisation and commercialization of mainstream news, the oppositional stance of alternative news can be considered one that operates in relation to mainstream news rather than against it. Alternative news practitioners may therefore use mainstream news material as a means of gathering factual information about a news event but within a critical framework that is aware of the potential biases and distortions of the mainstream journalistic practices that may have served to shape the piece. For example, the mainstream stories over this period carried stories relating to the economic recession that was caused by the byzantine and unregulated financial practices of Wall St banks.

Since the use of mainstream news material can be understood as part of alternative journalistic practices in such ways, so the reliance on such material exhibited by *Rense.com* does not undermine the self-proclaimed status of *Rense.com* as an alternative news site. *Rense.com* can be seen to be adhering to alternative credentials in that it is re-presenting mainstream news material so as to make clear such material only tells part of the story – that it does not represent the 'real', 'objective' take on the news events in question. Where it deviates from alternative news practice is in its use of conspiracist beliefs, rather than the radical political ethos of alternative media, to discuss what might be the hidden implications of the news stories presented. The interpretive framework for understanding the radical significance of this mainstream news content is not one

based in the progressive, democratic structures of alternative media, but rather in classical conspiracy beliefs in the reality of a Zionist-Illuminati plot for world domination. This conspiracist framework of interpretation is clearly seen in the tendency for the new editors on the *Rense.com* site to list news items, particularly those from mainstream sources, under headlines that differ from the actual titles of the items at their original source, as illustrated in Table B.

Table B –News items that are presented on *Rense.com* under a headline different from original source

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Totals
16/30	19/44	19/45	14/37	9/28	21/61	13/58	15/45	16/60	142/408
53.3%	43.1%	42.2%	37.8%	32.1%	34.4%	22.4%	33.3%	26.6%	34.8% of 408 items

That this is a common practice of the news editors at *Rense.com* is evident from the high proportions of such re-naming – 34.8% - across the stories sampled. These new headlines make clear the conspiracist significance of the news material presented.

I will present some representative examples of these trends from day 6 of the survey. A story from the Reuters press agency on the economic upheaval wrought upon Greece as a result of the Wall St financial crisis bore the unprepossessing title ‘Greek finance minister unveils tax reform, wage policy’.¹¹⁸ The *Rense.com* news editors presented this item under the headline ‘Cash outlawed in Greece’. This new title suggests that the dry, ‘objective’ reportage of the mainstream report disguises the ‘true’ conspiratorial significance of the Greek finance reforms – to prepare the country for the abolition of cash in favour of electronic currency and financial transactions. The abolition of cash is a central theme of the conspiracist worldview that informs the *Rense.com* site. Conspiracists see the shift to ‘cashless societies’ as a key aspect of the conspirators plans for total social control because the conversion of economic transactions into the virtual forms of electronic

¹¹⁸ <http://www.reuters.com/article/id USLDE61824V20100209>, accessed 06/02/2010.

transfer (such as EFTPOS and credit card systems) provides the opportunity for the economic activity of individual citizens to be monitored and manipulated by the conspiratorial elites through centrally controlled computer systems. Not only can the conspirators have access to private information about individuals' spending habits and bank balances, they can also use such information as a means of exercising totalitarian control, such as labeling someone a subversive because their transaction record indicated they purchased goods or services from an organization that poses a threat to conspiratorial power structures.

Another story dealing with the global repercussions of the Western finance sector collapse, from the website of the British mainstream news paper *The Daily Telegraph*, was entitled 'Time running out for Dubai to pull itself out of danger, says Lord Mandelson'.¹¹⁹ As the title clearly indicates, the story refers to then British finance minister Peter Mandelson's comments regarding the global financial crisis's effects on Middle Eastern economies such as that of Dubai. The *Rense.com* headline for this news item was 'Time Running Out For Dubai Says Rothschild Agent Mandy'. The conspiracist 'truth' lurking within this mainstream news story is contingent on the identification of Mandelson (whose name has been sarcastically abbreviated here to the faux-chummy 'Mandy') as a conspiratorial 'agent' of the Rothschild family. In the Zionist-Illuminati superconspiracy narrative to which *Rense.com* subscribes, the Rothschild's – a family of Jewish descent whose members have been prominent in Western banking over the last couple of centuries – are linchpins of the Zionist-Illuminati plot for world domination. Their long-standing power and influence in the Western finance sector is regarded by conspiracists such as Rense as a crucial part of the Zionist plan for global control in that they use this power and influence to build up and then crash the economies of nations around the world. The remedies imposed for these economic collapses, such as IMF austerity measures, enable the Rothschild's and other members of the elites to manipulate and ultimately control the economies – and thereby the geo-political fates – of nations around the world. In other words, the Rothschild's are accused by conspiracy theorists of deliberately orchestrating economic depressions and recessions as a means of furthering their power on an international scale in keeping with Zionist/Illuminati

¹¹⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/banksandfinance/7238174/Time-running-out-for-Dubai-to-pull-itself-out-of-danger-says-Lord-Mandelson.html>, accessed 06/02/2010.

schemes for world domination. Because Mandelson has a background in the UK finance sector, including involvement with Rothschild-affiliated banks, he is unquestionably regarded by conspiracists as a ‘Rothschild agent’. Mandelson’s economic advice to Dubai is thus presented here as part of the Rothschild schemes to manipulate and control the economies of nations around the world – the ‘true’ intention behind the Rothschild-caused financial collapse.

However, this practice of ‘re-titling’ news stories to bring out their ‘hidden meaning’, while it can be validated in terms of alternative news practice, effectively compromises *Rense.com*’s attempts to present itself as an ‘alternative news’ site. Through their use of conspiracist signifiers such as ‘cash outlawed’ and ‘Rothschilds’, these substitute headlines clearly signal a conspiracist rather than alternative framework for interpretation of the site. This suggests that the site’s appropriation of alternative news forms can only proceed so far before its conspiracist beliefs have to be directly asserted to make clear that the ethos of *Rense.com* is one that does not agree with the content – the political sensibility – of the alternative media model. The ideological contradictions between the alternative and conspiracist worldviews mean that the presentation of *Rense.com* as an ‘alternative’ news site can only be sustained on a relatively superficial level of *form*, rather than more detailed levels of *content*.¹²⁰ As the practice of retitling signifies, these contradictions between the conspiracist worldview and the alternative ethos manifest themselves in internal tensions in which the conspiracist sensibility is asserted within the legitimating parameters of the ‘alternative media’ framework.

Alongside the contextualization of mainstream material in conspiracist terms evident in the *Rense.com* practice of retitling, another aspect of news practice on *Rense.com* that is revealing in terms of the relationships between conspiracist, alternative and mainstream news content is the site’s reliance on news items from the British mainstream press. This is outlined in Table C.

¹²⁰ An observation can also be readily applied to other conspiracy news sites, such as Alex Jones’s *InfoWars.com*.

Table C – Amount of news stories on *Rense.com* originating from UK mainstream press

Newspaper	Amount of news stories	% of total news sources
www.guardian.co.uk	52/408	12.7
www.telegraph.co.uk	43/408	10.5
www.timesonline.co.uk	14/408	3.4
www.dailymail.co.uk	10/408	2.4
www.independent.co.uk	6/408	1.4
Total	125/408	30.6%

As Table C indicates, over 30% of the total news stories sampled for the survey were sourced from the same pool of British newspaper sites. Most referenced was *The Guardian* website (52 news items), followed by those of *The Daily Telegraph* (43 items), *The Times* (14 items), *The Daily Mail* (10 items) and *The Independent* (6 items). The heavy use made of material from the mainstream British press seems unusual given the American background of the *Rense.com* site. A reader might assume that, in terms of cultural background, an American alternative news site would gather most of its news from American alternative sources. I would argue instead that the use of such material is related to the understanding – shared by alternative media practitioners and conspiracy theorists alike – that the American mainstream news media is a highly compromised and poor quality source of news information. The American background of most classical conspiracy theory (as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.23), means there is a concomitant focus on the limitations of the mainstream US media as an information source. In particular, the excessive deregulation of the US media environment that has resulted in most news outlets being owned and operated as parts of huge media corporations is seen to be a trend that is directly antithetical to the effective operation of mainstream journalism in the public sphere tradition. (e.g. Curran 2002; Winter 2007; Columbia Journalism Review 2010).¹²¹ For

¹²¹*The Columbia Journalism Review* is an academic website, operated out of the Journalism school of Columbia University in New York City, concerned with the relationship between the US news media and the public sphere. One of its resources is a regularly updated listing of the corporate ownership of US and global news media: <http://www.cjr.org/resources/index.php>, accessed 18/5/10.

American conspiracy sites such as *Rense.com*, the mainstream British press may be considered to possess higher degrees of facticity and integrity by comparison with their American counterparts due to the different regulatory, historical, and cultural dynamics that have governed the relationships between the British press and institutions of power. For American alternative media and conspiracist audiences, the British news media may carry a cachet of 'quality' due to cultural distance. This cachet is useful for American conspiracists as it can be assumed that British mainstream news is fairly accurate and useful, at least on the level of the news 'facts' presented.

The political stance of these British mainstream papers is also worth considering in this regard. While the conservative bias of papers such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* may seem vaguely amenable to the far-right worldviews of classical conspiracy theorists, the prominence of *The Guardian* as a news source is surprising given the newspaper's obvious liberal-radical tendencies. This may be accounted for in terms of the broad political themes that underlie the conspiracist worldview. The *Rense.com* news editors may use the *Guardian* as a favoured news source because its leftist stance makes it critical of governments and corporations in ways in which more right-leaning media may not be (e.g. in terms of issues such as workers rights and environmental issues). In this respect *The Guardian* may be seen as an effective mainstream news outlet in terms of the 'watchdog' function of the press in the public sphere – a function that is central to conspiracist conceptions of news media (see chapter 7, section 7.32). The liberal perspective of *The Guardian* is based upon an oppositional critical stance on news issues which can thematically be appropriated in relation to the 'anti-establishment' conspiracy worldview of *Rense.com*, even though the ideological content of both sites is antithetical to each other. In other words, the basic form of *The Guardian*'s politics (oppositional and critical) can be applied to conspiracy thinking without a deep engagement with the content (the liberal political perspectives) that are intrinsic to *The Guardian*'s understanding and application of the oppositional-critical perspective. In this respect, the regular use of *The Guardian* as a news source by *Rense.com* could be seen to play an important role in the presentation of *Rense.com* as an alternative news site. The positioning of extremist and far-right news and ideas alongside those from liberal sources such as *The Guardian* means that the liberal connotations of *The Guardian* can be 'extended out' to the far-right and extremist ideas that mark the

bulk of the conspiracist material presented. The conspiracist information is therefore given a patina of legitimization as part of a liberal-radical continuum of ideas (the mainstream liberal ethos of *The Guardian* serving as the basis for a more radical discussion of such liberal ideas in the alternative media ethos). The use of *The Guardian* – and, by extension, other mainstream news sites, particularly those of a liberal slant – thereby serves to ameliorate and disguise the far-right conspiracist beliefs that are the *raison d'être* of *Rense.com*.

8.42 News types

The surveys in Tables D and D (i) of the types of news stories presented on *Rense.com*, signify trends in keeping with some of the ideas considered in the discussion of news sources presented above.

Table D – News items presented on *Rense.com* according to type

	News report	Commentary	Video clip	Letters	Essay	Press Release
Day 1	16/30	7/30	3/30	1/30	2/30	1/30
Day 2	21/44	18/44	2/44	2/44	1/44	0
Day 3	20/45	11/45	5/45	1/45	6/45	2/45
Day 4	21/37	9/37	1/37	2/37	4/37	0
Day 5	15/28	7/28	1/28	0	2/28	2/28
Day 6	38/61	12/61	1/61	1/61	9/61	0
Day 7	32/58	18/57	3/57	0	3/57	1/57
Day 8	29/45	12/45	1/45	0	2/45	1/45
Day 9	39/60	11/60	5/60	2/60	1/60	2/60
% of total news items	56.6	25.7	5.3	2.2	7.3	2.2

Table D (i) – Correlation between mainstream news sources (first number) and number of news reports used by *Rense.com* (second number)

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Totals
11/16	18/21	14/20	19/21	14/15	34/38	29/32	25/29	32/39	196/231
68.7%	85.7%	42.2%	70.0%	93.3%	89.4%	90.6%	86.2%	82.0%	84.8%

As outlined in Table D, most of the news stories featured on *Rense.com* during the survey period were straight news reports (56.6% of total news items over the survey period). As listed in Table D (i), almost all of these news reports – 84.8% - derived from mainstream news sources. Again, this appears somewhat at odds with a conspiracist news site that presents itself as a radical ‘alternative’ to mainstream journalism. As indicated in the practice of retitling discussed above, *Rense.com* uses mainstream news material as part of a strategy of legitimization based on form, suggesting that the site adheres to ‘legitimate’ mainstream standards of news credibility and facticity whilst guiding the reader to interpret the content of such news in relation to conspiracist perspectives that are highly ‘illegitimate’ by such mainstream news standards. I would argue that the reliance on news reports is another aspect of this appropriation–legitimation dynamic. The ‘objective’ status of news reports helps reinforce the sense of *Rense.com* as a serious news site that presents credible and factual information, even though the ‘objective’ content of those reports is designed to be interpreted through the ‘non-objective’ frameworks of the sites’ conspiracist beliefs. In other words, the heavy use of mainstream news reports serves as a means by which *Rense.com* can appropriate the qualities of objectivity and facticity associated with mainstream news reportage as a means of legitimating itself as a credible news source within the alternative public sphere.

A more direct adherence to alternative media practices is evident in the other types of news items utilized by *Rense.com* during the survey period. As listed in Table D, these include columnists and commentaries (25.7%); essays (7.3%); video clips (5.3%); and letters and press releases (2.2 % respectively). A central factor of Atton's formulation of alternative journalism was the problematic nature of ‘objectivity’ as a cornerstone of mainstream journalistic practice. Since true objectivity is impossible for human subjects, the objectivity practiced by

mainstream journalism was considered by Atton in cultural politics terms as an ideological construct that conditions mainstream journalists to shape news stories in ways suited to dominant ideological frameworks. As a remedy to this bias, Atton proposed that alternative journalism foregrounds the subjective nature of its news material. This subjectivity was discussed in two main forms. Firstly, an acknowledgment by the journalist that the information presented is constructed in accordance with political and social perspectives that are generally marginalised within the news values of mainstream journalism so as to function as a counter to the ideological biases of objective mainstream journalism. Secondly, an emphasis on the role of the journalist as citizen rather than media professional (see chapter 7, section 7.31).

These other types of news stories can be seen to operate largely within this 'subjective, citizen-journalist' alternative framework. Commentaries and columns, essays, and letters are all types of news information that are clearly presented as being based in subjective rather than objective positions. Columnists and commentators provide their opinion or perspective on events as representatives of sectors of the public (e.g. left and right-wing political commentators) or as observers whose background may endow them with specific knowledge about a particular subject (e.g. foreign correspondents); essayists present theories and research that argue for particular points of view; letter writers are readers of news media presenting their opinions on news items of interest. The ideas expressed in these types of news items are clearly understood by readers to be the views of the person writing the piece, rather than 'objective' reportage of facts. 'Subjective' factors such as ideological bias or an emphasis on 'marginal' topics and positions are thereby presented in ways amenable to the effective operation of the public sphere. By giving voice to the views and ideas of a diverse range of citizens, such news types help facilitate the principles of 'interpersonal, interactive and inclusive' communication that are regarded as integral to the operation of the public sphere. Not only do such 'subjective' news types help make clear the diversity of public opinion, thus serving to exercise democratic principles such as pluralism and egalitarianism, but they also provide communicative spaces in which rational-critical debate can be exercised. Citizens can use such news types to exercise their 'freedom of speech', presenting their views on particular topics as contributions to wider socio-political debates. In relation to alternative media perspectives, these 'subjective' news types can be regarded as significant in enabling citizens to

present ideas that challenge the institutional and informational biases of mainstream journalism.

The Internet can be seen to play a vital role in this process because of its decentered and non-hierarchical information structures. Because there are no hierarchical structures delineating mainstream news sources as superior to alternative news sources, such as the institutional emphasis on mainstream journalism as more objective and thereby factual than alternative media, the public can position 'subjective' alternative journalism alongside 'objective' mainstream journalism in terms of news factors such as facticity and credibility. The interactive and multi-media capacities of the Net are particularly important here in that they provide accessible technical means by which citizens can directly produce and present their own news content to other citizens. A type of news item significant in this regard is the online video clip. Where mainstream television news requires a large resource base and institutional apparatus to operate, the combination of domestic media technologies constructed around principles of digital convergence, such as digital still and video cameras, enable citizens to cheaply and effectively create their own audio-visual news content and upload this to the Internet as a means of informing other citizens (the audio-visual file-sharing site *YouTube* being a key online space for such activity).

I would posit these notions of 'subjective' alternative news practices as being particularly useful in relation to the information practices of conspiracy theorists. The radical emphasis on news that deliberately foregrounds 'non-mainstream' subject matter or foregrounds the observations and experiences of ordinary citizens as possessing innate credibility and facticity corresponds well to conspiracy theorising. A major reason why conspiracy theories in general, and classical conspiracy theories in particular, are marginalised by mainstream knowledge institutions such as journalism and academia is that the evidence presented for such theories is invariably subjective rather than objective. Highly personalised forms of information such as anecdotes, suppositions, and speculations – often unattributed or poorly referenced – form the basis for most classical conspiracy theories. For example, one of the pivots of the 'occult alien Illuminati' superconspiracy narrative that is a major strand of contemporary Western conspiracy culture as popularised by theorists such as David Icke is the anecdotal claims made by Americans Brice Taylor and Cathy O'Brien, to name some of the most visible proponents, that they were conditioned from childhood

by CIA agents to become mind-controlled 'sex slaves' for the Illuminati elite (McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 192-195). Since no verifiable objective evidence that validates such claims has been found, and since the claims themselves are so fantastic and bizarre they invariably suggest the claimants are suffering from psychological conditions such as paranoid delusion or schizophrenia, the mainstream reaction has been to dismiss the veracity of such claims due to their extreme subjectivity. Similarly, conspiracy theories that NASA and the US government faked the moon landings that took place between 1969 – 1974 are almost all predicated on idiosyncratic interpretations of photographic imagery by individual conspiracy theorists (McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 316-321). The alternative legitimization of subjective factors as key parts of radical news practices can therefore be seen to be particularly receptive to appropriation and application within the realms of conspiracy theorising.

In the context of alternative news, the oppositional status of the conspiracy theorist – as configured in relation to ideas of citizen journalism (see chapter 7, section 7.22) – serves to endow the information presented by the conspiracy theorist with an innate degree of veracity because such information can be considered within the radical cultural politics framework of a 'counter-narrative' developed by marginalized groups as a riposte to the ideological distortions of mainstream news. Positioning themselves within the alternative media ethos, conspiracy theorists can legitimate their highly subjective claims as being credible and factitious accounts or interpretations of news events. Such positioning also resonates with the libertarian and populist impulses that underlie the conspiracist worldview (see chapter 4, sections 4.35 and 4.36). The radical, 'oppositional' politics that informs these alternative notions of subjectivity can be readily appropriated and extrapolated into a conspiracist configuration that inverts the mainstream associations between objectivity and truth. Because the subjectivity of citizen-based journalism is free of the conspiratorial control of mainstream journalism – with associations between journalistic objectivity and truth as a major part of this control process – so news information from subjective sources, such as those that inform conspiracy theorising, can paradoxically be configured as representing a more 'accurate', 'truthful', or ostensibly 'objective' view of social reality.

Such relationships between alternative media modes of subjective news information and conspiracist information practices can be seen in Table E.

Table E – Correlation between alternative news sources and conspiracist sources presented on *Rense.com*

	Alternative sources: commentary	Conspiracist sources – commentary	Totals combined alt/con sources of commentary	Alternative sources – essays and letters	Conspiracist sources – essays and letters	Totals combined alt/con sources for essays and letters
Day 1	2/7	3/7	5/7	0/3	3/3	3/3
Day 2	4/18	5/18	9/18	0/3	2/3	2/3
Day 3	3/11	5/11	8/11	0/7	6/7	6/7
Day 4	6/9	2/9	8/9	0/3	2/3	2/3
Day 5	4/7	3/7	7/7	1/3	2/3	3/3
Day 6	3/12	7/12	10/12	4/10	6/10	10/10
Day 7	9/18	9/18	18/18	1/3	2/3	3/3
Day 8	4/12	4/12	8/12	0/2	2/2	2/2
Day 9	5/11	3/11	8/11	0/3	2/3	2/3
Totals	40/105 38.0%	41/105 39.0%	81/105 77.1%	6/37 16.2%	27/37 72.9%	33/37 89.1 %

Almost all (77.1%) of the total commentaries presented as news items on *Rense.com* over the survey period came from alternative and conspiracist sources (38.0% from alternative sources and 39.0% from alternative sources respectively). The same trend could be seen in relation to essays and letters, with 89.1% of the total of these news types deriving from alternative and conspiracist sources (16.2% from alternative sources, and 72.9% from conspiracist sources). While the news 'facts' presented on the site may have come from mainstream news reports, these statistics show that the types of news story that dealt with subjective interpretations of those facts - commentaries/essays/video clips/letters - were almost all derived from alternative and conspiracist sources. The implication here

is that only those news types positioned within the alternative frameworks of citizen journalism are useful as a means of understanding the wider meaning of news 'facts' because the subjective qualities of citizen journalism function as a corrective to the ideological distortions that shape mainstream news and commentary. Since conspiracy theorists regard their work as a form of citizen journalism, so the subjective information presented by conspiracy theorists through news types such as commentaries and essays can be presented as being critically astute and politically engaged in the radical traditions of alternative journalism. For example, on day 6 of the survey *Rense.com* features an essay from the alternative anti-US imperialist/globalisation news site *GlobalResearch.ca*, entitled 'Will Obama's Record War Budget Lead to a US Victory in Afghanistan? Don't Bet On It!' This can be seen to be a news item very much in the subjective citizen journalism ethos described. It presents radical subject matter (a critique of US military intervention in Iraq) and is written by a politically engaged citizen (Jack A. Smith, "editor of the Activist Newsletter", an anti-war movement resource based in New York state).¹²² Alongside this *Rense.com* also features an essay entitled 'Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global' from the rabidly anti-Semitic website *Revisionist Review*, in which leading American anti-Semite Michael Hoffman argues that anti-Semitism is a justified response to the 'character' of the Jewish people.¹²³ Because the information is presented in the 'subjective' news type of the essay, within the context of *Rense.com* as an ostensibly 'alternative' news site, this essay can be presented as a 'radical' piece of citizen journalism in a manner akin to the essay from *GlobalResearch.ca*, despite the fact that the actual content of the piece is about as far removed from radical alternative politics as it is possible to get. The associations made between the types of news stories presented and the principles of alternative journalism serve as another way in which the forms of alternative news practices are appropriated by conspiracy sites such as *Rense.com* as a means of legitimating their conspiracist content within the alternative public sphere.

¹²² <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=SMI20100214&articleId=1760> accessed 16/2/10.

¹²³ <http://revisionistreview.blogspot.com/2010/02/lethal-obsession-anti-Semitism-from.html>, accessed 16/2/10.

8.43 Subject matter

The third major area from the *Rense.com* survey that I will examine here is that of the subject matter of the news items presented. As outlined by Atton in chapter 7, section 7.31, the basic premise of alternative journalism is to act as a counterpoint and riposte to the ideological biases and oversights of the news content provided through mainstream news channels. Since mainstream journalistic outlets operate within a mainstream commercial/state-owned media systems, so many media theorists see mainstream news media as reflecting the interests of the market or the state rather than the public. Such commentators consider mainstream journalism to be irrevocably compromised in its abilities to present news content that is useful and relevant in terms of the effective functioning of the public sphere (e.g. Keane 1991; Curran 2002; Winter 2005). As an ‘alternative’ to mainstream media news values, alternative news is therefore focused on presenting news that deals with those subject areas that are marginalized or ignored within the mainstream news ethos. Particular emphasis is placed upon subjects that relate to radical political or social movements and issues, such as anti-globalisation, human rights, and environmentalism.

The role of alternative news as a counterpoint or corrective to the distortions of mainstream reportage is reflected in the formatting of news content on alternative news sites. Alternative news sites tend to use news formats familiar from mainstream news to present news content that challenges and corrects mainstream news perspectives. Headings are provided for broad subject areas such as politics or environment; these headings indicate sub-sections within the news site where news stories that relate to these particular themes or topics are presented. However, some of the news items included within these subject areas, and some of the subject areas themselves, are likely to be highly different in terms of subject matter and ideas to the types of items featured in mainstream news. For example, the American alternative news site *truthout.org* features news categories on areas such as ‘health’, ‘education’ and ‘environment’, all of which are common in relation to mainstream news sources, alongside sections presenting news features related to subject areas such as ‘labor’, ‘voter’s rights’, and ‘women’s issues’ – subjects which are generally marginalized or ignored in terms of mainstream

media news coverage.¹²⁴ The wide range of news subjects presented on alternative news sites thus provides a potentially more comprehensive overview of social and political topics as part of a ‘radical’ redressing of the imbalances of mainstream news reportage.

Rense.com can also be seen as operating within this alternative framework in terms of the scope of news topics presented on the site.

Table F – News stories presented on *Rense.com* according to subject matter

Topic	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	% of total news items
National Politics	6/30	2/44	8/45	3/37	1/28	4/61	10/58	6/45	7/60	11.5
International Politics	4/30	4/44	6/45	3/37	6/28	5/61	6/58	7/45	8/60	12.0
Mid-East issues	2/30	8/44	4/45	7/37	4/28	10/61	6/58	14/45	10/60	15.9
War On Terror		4/44	4/45	2/37	3/28	8/61	5/58	2/45	4/60	7.8
Economics (incl.global recession)	3/30	5/44	4/45	3/37	1/28	8/61	9/58	2/45	2/60	9.0
Business	1/30	2/44	1/45	1/37		1/61		1/45		1.7
Society	2/30	2/44	4/45	2/37	1/28	4/61	7/58	4/45	2/60	6.8
Culture	1/30	2/44	1/45			4/61	1/58		4/60	3.1
Media		2/44			1/28	2/61	2/58			1.7
Internet	1/30		1/45	3/37	1/28		2/58	3/45		2.6
Health	6/30	6/44	4/45	1/37	2/28	1/61	2/58	1/45	6/60	7.1
Environment	1/30	4/44	2/45	4/37	2/28	2/61	2/58	1/45		4.4
Science & Technology	1/30	2/44	2/45	3/37	1/28	1/61	2/58	1/45	4/60	4.1

¹²⁴ <http://www.truthout.org/issues>, accessed 26/5/10.

History				1/37		6/61	1/58	1/45	1/60	2.4
Religion							1/58			0.2
Crime						3/61	1/58		2/60	1.4
Conspiracism	1/30		1/45	2/37	5/28			1/45		2.4
Education						1/61				0.2
Paranormal			2/45	1/37				1/45	8/60	2.9
Human Interest	1/30	1/44	1/45	1/37		1/61	1/58		2/60	1.9

Table F (i) – News stories featured on *Rense.com* ranked according to subject matter:

1	Mid-East Issues
2	International Politics
3	National Politics
4	Economics
5	War on Terror
6	Health
7	Society
8	Environment
9	Science & Technology
10	Culture
11	Paranormal
12	Internet
13	History Conspiracism
14	Human Interest
15	Business Media
16	Crime
17	Education Religion

As described in section 8.33 and outlined in table F above, *Rense.com* featured a wide range of news topics that could be classified in terms of content into 20 or so general categories. With the exception of a small amount of news items that dealt explicitly with conspiracist or paranormal content, (2.4% and 2.9% of the total news stories respectively), most of the news items can be categorized in terms of subject areas redolent of mainstream media concerns, such as national and international politics, the war on terror, and economics. On this formal level *Rense.com* can readily present itself as an alternative news site in that it combines a wide coverage of news subjects with independence from the institutional strictures of mainstream journalism. In such respects *Rense.com* can be configured as a ‘one-stop news shop’, presenting all the reader needs to know about national and international events within an alternative news framework that suggests that the news information presented will be more ‘truthful’ and ‘accurate’ than that presented in the mainstream media.¹²⁵ This configuration can be reinforced by the sources of the news content presented. As discussed earlier in this section, the majority of news items featured on *Rense.com* over the survey period emanated from mainstream and alternative news sources (Table A: alternative - 23.0%; mainstream – 55.3% of survey total). The wide spread of news facts available in mainstream journalism is contextualized in alternative media terms by being presented in conjunction with a critical framework of subjective commentary from alternative news sources.

This formal reading of *Rense.com* as a quality alternative news site that offers a wide range of news content can be further reinforced by the proportions devoted to particular types of news stories over others. As Table F makes clear, news items dealing with certain types of subject matter were selected by the *Rense.com* news editors a lot more than other subject areas. News dealing with geopolitics and domestic politics constituted the highest proportion of news items. Reports on Middle East geopolitical and social issues accounted for 15.9% of the total news stories surveyed; those focusing on other types of international politics 12.0%; those on domestic (American) politics 11.5%. Other major subject areas covered by *Rense.com* include economics (9.0%), the war on terror (7.8%), health topics (7.1%) and social topics (6.8%). The remaining subject areas all ranked below 5% of the total news items featured on *Rense.com* over the survey period. The

¹²⁵ Refer to the description of *Rense.com* as a ‘one-stop shopping zone’ in the Weidner article discussed in chapter 4, section 4.22.

emphasis placed on these particular subject areas can be seen as fairly typical in terms of mainstream and alternative debates on news. Because of their direct influence on the actions of governments and the lives of citizens, news on geopolitics, domestic politics, and economics has traditionally been favoured as the most important subject matter for news coverage. In terms of the time frame of this survey, the high proportion of news items dealing with economic subjects is explainable in relation to the recent global recession that has affected countries around the world over the last few years; similarly, it would seem amiss for an American based news site of any description to not feature news items relating to ‘the war on terror’ that has come to be a central feature in 21st century American political and social life. Stories dealing with a wide variety of social issues or with events in key social sectors such as health may also be expected to predominate in terms of general news coverage.

Again, however, it can be seen that the types of news subjects and news content featured on *Rense.com* serve as a legitimating framework that enables the editors of *Rense.com* to position their conspiracist beliefs as a form of alternative journalism. I will here present a list of the relationships between the subject matter of the news items presented and the conspiracist worldview of *Rense.com* in the form of Table G.

Table G – Correspondence between subject matter of news item and the conspiracist worldview of *Rense.com*

Conspiracy theme	Total amount amount over all news items	% of total amount
US politics	25	6.1
Pres. Obama	8	1.9
9/11	11	2.6
Govt/corporate corruption	24	5.9
War on terror	33	8.1
Police state	5	1.2
Zionism & Mid-East	62	15.1
Zionism & US	11	2.6

Zionism & world	8	1.9
Jewish culture	6	1.4
Int. relations	16	3.9
Moral decline of US	18	4.4
US economic crisis	17	4.1
Global economic crisis	20	4.9
Globalisation	2	0.4
Int. conflict	6	1.4
Food	5	1.2
Sci & Tech	20	4.9
US media	6	1.4
Internet	10	2.4
Pandemics	10	2.4
Health	14	3.4
Environment	3	0.7
Global warming	10	2.4
Disasters	8	1.9
History	5	1.2
Education	1	0.2
Feminism	2	0.4
Religion	1	0.2
Immigration	3	0.7
UFOs	11	2.6
Paranormal	2	0.4
Conspiracism	9	2.2
Conspiracy community	6	1.4
Personal Int.	6	1.4

Table G (i) – Conspiracy themes featured on *Rense.com* ranked according to percentage of total amount of news items featured: ¹²⁶

1	Zionism & Mid-east
2	War on terror
3	US politics
4	Govt/Corporate corruption
5	Global economic crisis
6	Moral decline of US society
7	US economic crisis
8	International relations
9	Health
10	9/11 Zionism and the USA UFOs
11	Internet Pandemics Global warming
12	Conspiracism
13	President Obama Zionism and the world Disasters
14	Jewish culture International conflict US media Conspiracy community Personal interest
15	Police state

¹²⁶ It is important to note that the news stories sampled for this survey inevitably reflect some of the major trends in international news and current affairs journalism at the time the survey was carried out (February 2010). Important trends in this regard include the following:

- news coverage of the ongoing systemic social and economic problems related to the global recession caused by the collapse of the US finance sector in 2008 – 2009 are reflected in the figures for categories ‘economics’ (Table B), ‘US economic crisis’ and ‘global economic crisis’ (Table E).
- news coverage of the social and political aftermath of the Feb 2010 earthquake in Haiti are reflected in figures for categories ‘International Politics’ in Table B and ‘Disasters’ in Table E.
- news coverage of the Feb 2010 release of UFO files by the UK Ministry of Defence is reflected in the figures for categories ‘Paranormal’ (Table B) and ‘UFOs’ (Table E).

	Food History
16	Environment Immigration
17	Globalisation Paranormal Feminism
18	Education Religion

As illustrated in Table G, each news story posted on *Rense.com* can be seen to have been selected by the news editors of the site because of its resonance to particular aspects of the Zionist-Illuminati superconspiracy narrative that forms the ideological and epistemological background for *Rense.com*. The wide range of news topics featured on *Rense.com* is a reflection of the all-encompassing nature of this conspiracist mindset, in which every aspect of modern political and social life is regarded as being ‘controlled’ and ‘manipulated’ by the conspirators. The general subject categories of news items outlined in Table F can be converted in conspiracist terms into sub-categories of particular conspiracist themes that collectively constitute the Zionist-Illuminati conspiracy belief system. For example, news items dealing with swine flu and other pandemic diseases, which in terms of general news categories would have been classified under health, can be considered within conspiracist news values to constitute a subject category in their own right, since such diseases are considered by conspiracists to be a major part of the Zionist-Illuminati plans for world domination.¹²⁷ Similarly, the general category of news items dealing with ‘social events or issues’ can be converted into a variety of conspiracist topic areas, such as religion (e.g. Catholicism as a conspiratorial control structure) feminism (women’s rights as part of conspiratorial plot to undermine ‘true’ American values), and immigration (again, immigration as a conspiratorial scheme to destabilize the WASP sensibility that such conspiracists take to be the ‘true core’ of American culture). News items that

¹²⁷ Specifically, that such diseases are being genetically engineered in secret government labs and deliberately disseminated around the world as a means of reducing the global population in accordance with conspiratorial goals for global totalitarianism. See fn 47, chapter 4.

may appear to readers to fit generalized categories of subject matter that they are used to from the mainstream news (and, concomitantly, proper alternative news sites) are much more likely to have been selected because of their significance to subject areas of explicitly conspiracist interest.

A much more specific and sinister aspect of the use of news topics to legitimate conspiracist ideas is the excessive emphasis *Rense.com* places on news stories dealing with Middle East issues. As indicated in Table F, 'Mid-East Issues' was by far the most common type of subject matter presented on *Rense.com* over the survey period (15.9% of the total stories surveyed). What this category heading doesn't indicate is that the content of almost all of these 'Mid-East' news items focused on Israel, particularly the Palestine/Israel situation. In terms of *Rense.com*'s self-styled status as an 'alternative' news site, one might ask why the site should place such a disproportionate emphasis on news items related to Israel. Given the American provenance of *Rense.com*, it might be expected that news items dealing with the 'war on terror' – a subject area predominated by the American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan – would feature far more heavily in terms of subject matter given that the content of such items is more directly relevant to American political and social concerns than Israeli affairs. The answer lies in the extreme anti-Semitism that informs the Zionist-Illuminati conspiracist worldview that *Rense.com* is predicated upon. The core ideological tenets of this worldview are that the conspiratorial actions of the Illuminati are undertaken as manifestations of a 'Zionist plot' for world domination. Since Israel was founded as a Jewish state, any news dealing with Israeli politics and society – no matter how seemingly innocuous – is interpreted by conspiracy theorists as part of the machinations of this grand Zionist conspiracy (Cohn 1967; Lipstadt 1994; Perry & Schweitzer 2002). For example, the news stories that in general terms may be categorized as dealing with Middle East issues (Table F) can also be categorized (Table G) in accordance with several major themes central to conspiracist anti-Semitism of the sort *Rense.com* adheres to: Zionist 'control' over the Middle-East; Zionist control over the USA; Zionist control over the world; and the negative portrayal of Jewish people and culture in general.

The appropriation of alternative news forms as a means of legitimating conspiracist ideas is a major part of *Rense.com*'s approach in using the subject matter of news to assert anti-Semitic conspiracist beliefs. In terms of the radical/progressive values of alternative media, alternative newssites regularly

present news items that critique Israel on ethical grounds (e.g. human rights abuses committed against the Palestinian peoples) and political ones (e.g. right-wing Israeli governments enacting policies that engender further conflict with Palestine rather than ameliorating it).¹²⁸ In terms of subject matter, such news items are presented as part of international news coverage, with the Israel-Palestine conflict being presented as one of many news events of radical interest around the world. This critiquing of Israel within the contexts of alternative news content is thus highly appealing to conspiracy theorists in that it provides a legitimating framework within which their anti-Semitic conspiracist beliefs can be expressed. For example, on Day 6 of the survey *Rense.com* posted 9 news items dealing with Israeli or Jewish topics. The content of several of these items suggest a concern with the political and humanitarian aspects of Israeli power in the Middle East that may be seen as typical of the ‘citizen politics’ ethos of alternative media. For instance, a news item entitled ‘US Army Chief: Iran attack option on the table’ comes from the website of the Israeli Defense Force. The article describes a meeting between an American military official and IDF leaders in which the former said the USA would support Israel in undertaking military strikes on Iran if the country became nuclear-capable because such technology would geopolitically ‘destabilise’ the Middle East.¹²⁹ The content of this article can be seen to be in keeping with *Rense.com*’s ostensible status as an ‘alternative news’ site. In this context, the article was included on *Rense.com* to heighten readers awareness as to how some in the American military are advocating further American military intervention in the Middle East in support of Israeli political power in the region. The criticism of Israeli power in this story therefore appears legitimate in relation to ‘alternative’ concerns with international peace issues. Similarly, *Rense.com* also featured a news item from the website of Kawther Salam, a Palestinian journalist who now lives in Vienna and operates as a Palestinian activist for rights and peace. The item is a news report from Dubai

¹²⁸For example: ‘Israeli settlers step up attacks on Palestinian mosques’ by Mel Frykberg, posted 10/5/10 on *Truthout.org* <http://www.truthout.org/israeli-settlers-step-up-attacks-palestinian-mosques59356>; and the Israel/Palestine news page on the *Indymedia.org.il* site: <http://israel.indymedia.org/>. There are also alternative newssites such as *The Electronic Intifada* that specifically offer Palestinian-based information and perspectives on the Israel/Palestine conflict: <http://electronicintifada.net/new.shtml>. All sites accessed 12/5/10.

¹²⁹<http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/today/10/02/1403.htm>, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, 16/2/10.

media describing Dubai police's attempts to track down and prosecute the Mossad agents who assassinated a Palestinian (Hamas) official in Dubai in January 2010.¹³⁰ Not only did the agents commit a criminal act in the form of the assassination itself, but they also violated the diplomatic integrity of several countries by using faked passports as their means of entry and exit to Dubai agents used false passports. Again, the criticism of Israel outlined in this report is one in keeping with the humanitarian concerns and peace activism which is part of the 'radical' political culture informing alternative media practice (Atton 2004).

However, if we consider the subject matter of all 9 Israel-related news items posted on *Rense.com*, it becomes clear that the news editors of *Rense.com* have selected such stories because of their resonance with anti-Semitic conspiracism rather than any alternative or radical ethos. Alongside the two news items already discussed, these other items are (in order of the days' news samples):

- an essay entitled 'Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global' (*Rense.com* headline: '[Hoffman - Rant Poses As Study Of Anti Semitism](#)'). What might – from the title – appear to be a historical critique of anti-Semitic conspiracism turns out to be an attempt to justify anti-Semitism on historical grounds. The essay is written by Michael Hoffman, one of America's leading anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists, and sourced from the anti-Semitic/holocaust denial website *Revisionist Review*.¹³¹
- a news report from the website of the mainstream British newspaper *The Independent* entitled '[Congressman - US Should Break Israeli Gaza Blockade](#)'. The content of the report relates the content of a speech by US congressman Brian Baird to Palestinian students in the Gaza strip in which he stated that the US should violate the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip on humanitarian grounds and deliver much-needed supplies to the area.¹³²
- a news item from the website of the mainstream British newspaper *The Times* entitled 'Israeli 'harem' leader Goel Ratzon charged with rape and incest'. The item outlined Ratzon's status as head of a religious cult of his own devising which

¹³⁰ <http://www.kawther.info/wpr/2010/02/15/names-of-mossad-death-squad-published>, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, 16/2/10.

¹³¹ <http://revisionistreview.blogspot.com/2010/02/lethal-obsession-anti-semitism-from.html>, accessed via http://www.rense.com, 16/2/10.

¹³² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/congressman-says-us-should-break-gaza-blockade-1899787.html>, accessed via http://www.rense.com, 16/2/10.

consisted of himself and over thirty women whom Ratzon is alleged to have psychologically and physically abused over several years.¹³³

- another news item from *The Times* website entitled 'Israeli politicians may provoke arrest to force law change in Britain'. This item describes the existing British law which means that Israeli politicians accused of war crimes against the Palestinians could be arrested upon entry to Britain. Both Israeli and British politicians want the law altered to improve relations between the two countries, but it is far down the list in terms of current British government activities. Ex-Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni states that she is considering traveling to Britain and getting arrested as a means of impelling the British government to urgently act upon changing the law.¹³⁴

- an essay posted on *Rense.com* entitled 'Absolute Proof Most Jews Are Not 'True Jews''. This essay is an overview by anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist Dick Eastman of Arthur Koestler's 1976 book *The Thirteenth Tribe*, which argued that today's Jewish peoples are descended from the 'Khazar' empire of the Caucasus region rather than the Middle East. While Koestler intended the book as a piece of 'proper' historical research (albeit one that has been discredited by historians), Eastman uses the ideas presented in the book to argue that Jews are descended from the 'Huns' and are therefore an innately brutish, power-hungry race who are the antithesis of 'American christendom'.¹³⁵

- a commentary entitled 'For Your Viewing Pleasure' from the blog of *Mantiq Al-Tayr*. Ostensibly a Palestinian activist concerned with presenting an alternative to the 'pro-Israeli bias of the mainstream US media, the content of this blog is little more than a collection of tirades equating the geopolitics of Israeli power with the moral evil of the Jewish people as a whole. The content of this particular page is a collection of video clips on assorted subjects, such as news footage of the collapse of the WTC7 building in the 9/11 attacks; positive images of Palestinian culture; and footage that portrays Israeli citizens as arrogant warmongers. The implication is that 9/11 attacks were caused by Israel as part of

¹³³ http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article7026987.ece, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, 16/2/10.

¹³⁴ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7026939.ece>, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, 16/2/10.

¹³⁵ <http://www.rense.com/general89/notjws.htm>, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, accessed 16/2/10.

their plan for consolidating power in the Middle East through the military intervention of the USA in the region.¹³⁶

- a commentary entitled 'Does the Word of God Seem Really Confusing Sometimes' from a blogspot called *The Ugly Truth*. From the little information provided about the blogger, this site appears to be the work of another 'Palestinian activist' like Mantiq Al-Tayr, although the entries appear interchangeable with the anti-Semitic discourses advocated by American conspiracists. This particular blog entry deals with the 'moral hypocirsy' of the Jewish people. The author takes the punitive codes outlined in the Old Testament book of Leviticus to show the 'inhumane' and 'immoral' nature of the Jewish people in general.¹³⁷

The intention of the *Rense.com* news editors in selecting these news items is to depict Israelis - and, by association, Jewish people in general - as inherently 'evil' in a manner befitting the extremist racist ideologies that underpins the 'Zionist-Illuminati world domination' superconspiracy narrative. The subject area of the Israel-Palestine conflict serves as a legitimating framework within which anti-Semitic beliefs typical of classical conspiracy thought can be propagated and reinforced under the guise of alternative news and commentary. For instance, the news reports from *The Times* and *The Independent* - 'Congressman - US Should Break Israeli-Gaza Blockade' and 'Israeli politicians may provoke arrest to force law change in Britain' - present a critical take of Israeli actions in relation to Israel within the legitimate context of the 'objective' mainstream press. The humanitarian and legal factors that serve as the bases for the criticism of Israel in these items (along with the content of the IDF and Salam articles discussed earlier) can be seen to create a framework of 'legitimate criticism' of Israel that can then be appropriated to incorporate the explicitly anti-Semitic content of the conspiracist news items that are placed alongside these mainstream and alternative news pieces. This is clearly seen in the items from the *Mantiq Al-Tayr* and *The Ugly Truth* blogspots. Both bloggers purport to be Palestinian activists, an 'alternative' or 'radical' identity position that serves to legitimate the anti-Semitic conspiracism that constitutes the regular content of both blogs as the 'justified

¹³⁶ <http://mantiqaltayr.wordpress.com/2010/02/14/random-videos/>, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, 16/2/10.

¹³⁷ <http://theuglytruth.wordpress.com/2010/02/14/does-the-word-of-god-seem-really-confusing-sometimes/>, accessed via <http://www.rense.com/>, 16/2/10.

anger' of Palestinians at the Israeli oppression. The 'legitimated' news focus on the Israel-Palestinian situation also provides the basis for a reductive moral dichotomy, in which the Palestinians can be presented as heroic freedom fighters against the oppressive colonialism of the Israelis. This position in turn provides a cover for the expression of the core theme of anti-Semitic conspiracism – the 'innate evil/corruption' of the Jewish people – that is evident in the other Jewish-themed news items featured on the site. This explains the selection by the *Rense.com* news editors of *The Times* piece on the Israeli cult leader, which seems incongruous in relation to the 'alternative' focus on more directly political news. The implication of this news item is not that the abusive activities of Ratzon were the result of his status as a cult leader (the abusive nature of such cult groups being a universal social phenomenon), but rather the 'natural' product of his Jewish ethnicity. This mainstream news item thus presents 'objective' mainstream evidence for the conspiracist theorizing of 'Jewish evil' presented in the pseudo-historical 'research' essays by Hoffman and Eastman.

The high proportion of news stories featured on *Rense.com* dealing with the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israeli society, or Jewish history (as classified in mainstream terms under the subject area of 'Middle-East Issues') can thus be seen as a prime example of conspiracy theorists legitimating their ideas by appropriating the forms of alternative news practices. The focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict as a news topic suggests a commitment to radical subject matter typical of alternative journalism. This ostensibly 'alternative' stance can then be used as a legitimating framework for the expression and dissemination of classical conspiracist anti-Semitic ideas.

The flipside of this legitimating process - the 'conspiracisation' of many ostensibly alternative radical issues - should also be considered here. Where readers of alternative news sites may have previously interpreted news issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict in relation to the radical/progressive ethos of the alternative public sphere, their engagement with such issues through faux-alternative conspiracy news sites such as *Rense.com* could be seen to result in conspiracist perspectives on such news subjects being accepted as legitimate alternative perspectives on such matters. To use a biological metaphor of the sort employed by pathological scholars of conspiracy theory (see chapter 2, section 2.2), this trend could lead to alternative discourses becoming 'contaminated' by conspiracist discourses, with the ideological extremism of conspiracism

undermining the radical and progressive ethos of the alternative public sphere. A notable example of this process in action is the presentation of anti-vaccination discourses on alternative websites. Anti-vaccination discourses are heavily implicated with alternative health discourses, which often have roots in classical conspiracy beliefs. For example, as illustrated by the Swinney article in chapter 4, section 4.22, the idea that vaccinations are used to impair public health as a means of conspiratorial control is a staple of Illuminati superconspiracy narratives. The demonisation of vaccinations through discourses, such as the government cover-up of the alleged MMR vaccine-autism link, that derive from conspiratorial beliefs, has been well-noted in regards to prominent alternative media sites such as the American site *The Huffington Post*.¹³⁸

8.5 Summary

In relation to the ideas discussed in chapter 6, the *Rense.com* conspiracy news site describes itself as an alternative news site, appropriating the radical connotations of the term ‘alternative’ as a means of making its classical conspiracy content (which revolves around extremist anti-Semitic interpretations of the Illuminati superconspiracy discussed in chapter 2, section 2.51) appear legitimate in relation to critical configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere. As this case study illustrates, the news practices of *Rense.com* help reinforce its appropriated status as an alternative news site by operating in a manner similar to the alternative news practices which were outlined in chapter 7 as central to the alternative public sphere model.

This case study indicates three main areas in which the news practices of *Rense.com* can be used to legitimate it as an alternative rather than conspiracist news site. The first area is the use of news sources. In keeping with the use of mainstream news in alternative news practice, the prominent use on *Rense.com* of news from mainstream sources helps position the conspiracist interpretations which *Rense.com* places upon such news as legitimate forms of alternative discourse. The second area relates to the different types of news items presented

¹³⁸ For example, see the online article ‘The Huffington Post’s War on Medical Science: A Brief History’ by David Gorski at *Science-Based Medicine*, <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/?p=473>, posted 04/05/2009, accessed 15/09/2010.

on *Rense.com*. Not only can the likes of conspiracist essays be articulated as alternative forms of ‘biased’ citizen-centric reportage and citizen journalism, but the use of mainstream/alternative news reports with an ostensibly ‘objective’ ethos can also be appropriated to present conspiracist content as forms of ‘reportage’ rather than subjective speculation. The third area relates to the subject matter of the news items presented. In relation to the alternative media emphasis of radical subject matter dealing with topics that are usually marginalized in mainstream news media, *Rense.com* can present classical conspiracist beliefs, such as anti-Semitism, under the guise of radical commentary on social and political events.

The case study complements the theoretical focus of chapter 6 and 7 by offering an empirical illustration of how the technocultural capacities of the Internet can be used to facilitate the legitimation of conspiracist content in the alternative public sphere. As ‘alternative news’, conspiracy theories can be presented as information that is of better quality than that presented in mainstream news, and as information that is important in terms of realizing the democratic ideal of the alternative public sphere. In such respects conspiracy theories can achieve a degree of legitimation as political and social discourses within the alternative public sphere that it is highly likely they would not normally achieve if presented on their own terms. Taken as representative of conspiracist news practices on the Net, this case study illustrates how the Net provides technical capacities and information resources that can enable conspiracy theorists to develop their ideas and position them within the broader realms of democratic discourse typified by notions of the public sphere.

CONCLUSION

9.1 Overview of ideas presented

This study has argued that the Internet does constitute a ‘conspiratoria’ – a cultural space conducive to the beliefs and practices of classical conspiracy theory – because the technocultural capacities of the Internet have been articulated and configured in ways that align with, and are receptive to, the epistemological principles and ideological beliefs that constitute the conspiracist logic which underpins classical conspiracy theory. In these respects the Net can be conceptualised as a significant tool for classical conspiracy theory – a medium that *empowers* classical conspiracy theory by enabling and facilitating information practices through which conspiracy theorists can present their ideas as being more legitimate or acceptable in relation to the dominant political and epistemological frameworks of mainstream society. Such ‘empowerment’ can be discussed as operating on two inter-related levels. On a technical level, the principles of information organisation and manipulation that distinguish the Internet as a ‘new medium’ empower conspiracy theorists by enabling them to create and disseminate conspiracist content in ways unavailable or difficult to achieve through mainstream media. On a cultural level, the technologically deterministic cyber-cultural discourses that have provided the dominant conceptual framework for understanding the Net have influenced articulations of the technical aspects of the Net as online cultural forms, notably the articulation of the Internet as an alternative public sphere. These cyber-cultural discourses and online forms empower conspiracy theorists by enabling them to present their conspiracist beliefs as manifestations of radical cyber-culture practices.

My focus in this study has been to develop a conceptual framework for understanding how the Internet can be configured as a conspiratoria. Research into the ideological and socio-cultural aspects of conspiracy theory, along with observations of online conspiracism, suggested a particular blend of political and

technocultural dynamics were integral to the ways in which classical conspiracy theorists conceptualised and utilised the Internet. Chapters 4 and 5 posited two influential conceptions of the socio-political significance of the Internet as constituting the discursive roots of the connection between the Internet and the logic of conspiracy theory. Chapter 4 argued that a key tenet of conspiracist thought is the belief that the mainstream media is an agent of conspiratorial control, suppressing and manipulating information pertaining to the truth about the conspiratorial nature of society to keep citizens acting out against the conspiratorial structures of state and economic power. This suspicion of mainstream media has led to conspiracy theorists configuring the Internet as a medium eminently suited to conspiracist practice because of its perceived operation outside mainstream media structures. In this respect conspiracy theory can be seen as resonant with the radical/critical traditions of media studies, in which the technocultural capacities of the Internet are also discussed as an opportunity for reworking the existing (unequal) structures of media power. Chapter 5 argued that the role of the Internet in Western society has been heavily influenced by cyber-cultural discourses which configure the Internet in technologically deterministic terms as a medium that constitutes a major cultural paradigm shift because of the ways in which its technocultural capacities can be used to democratically empower users beyond the limitations of established mainstream media. This articulation of the Net as a revolutionary medium constitutes a major point of connection with the distorted democratic ideals that underpin classical conspiracist thought. This connection is enhanced by the American cultural contexts in which these cyber-cultural discourses were developed. The articulation of the Net as a medium of democratic freedom in relation to American political traditions of small government and individual liberty is particularly resonant with the Amerocentric libertarian and populist ideals integral to most contemporary classical conspiracy thought.

These broad discourses of the Internet as a radical and revolutionary medium form the conceptual basis for what I argue in chapters 6, 7, and 8 constitutes the most significant dynamic underpinning the Internet as conspiratoria – critical configurations of the Internet as an alternative medium. Chapter 6 delineated the alternative media concept in relation to critical notions of the media as a public sphere. Public sphere theory argues that mass media systems are integral to the operation of Western democracy because they can serve as instruments by which

the public can keep power transparent. Radical/critical concerns that the public sphere functions of the mainstream media are in serious decline due to recent political and economic trends have led to the articulation of the Internet as an alternative public sphere in which these public sphere functions can be enacted in more intensive ways and in opposition to the limitations of the mainstream public sphere. This configuration of the Internet as an alternative medium which embodies radical democratic ideals in opposition to mainstream media systems is one of particular appeal to conspiracy theorists because it resonates with their ideological self-perception as 'radical' activists fighting for democratic 'freedom' from conspiratorial power, and their opposition towards mainstream media as conspiratorial control systems. I therefore argue that conspiracy theorists have appropriated the concept of 'alternative media' to describe their conspiracist beliefs and online practices as legitimate forms of radical democratic activity. Chapter 7 developed these arguments in more detail by considering alternative news practices as the specific type of alternative online content most conducive to the conspiracist appropriation-legitimation dynamic. News content and news principles are central to the operation of both the traditional public sphere and the alternative public sphere. The appropriation of alternative news practices by conspiracy theorists can therefore be argued to be the major way in which conspiracy theorists could legitimate their ideas in the alternative public sphere. Chapter 8 presented a case study of the conspiracist news site *Rense.com* as an illustration of this appropriation-legitimation dynamic in action.

The dominant aspects of this conspiratorial framework can be encapsulated as follows. Firstly, that the internet is a medium with technocultural capacities that have been discursively framed as possessing revolutionary potential in relation to existing structures of media and politics. Secondly, such potential is manifested in articulations (theoretical and practical) of the Internet as an alternative public sphere. Thirdly, that these perspectives make the internet intrinsically appealing to conspiracy theorists because of the opportunities they provide for the representation of the extremist worldviews of classical conspiracy theory as ideologically valid and significant socio-political discourses.

9.2 Academic contributions of this study

I consider the conspiratoria framework presented in this study as one which presents several critical perspectives of importance to scholarship in the fields of conspiracy theory and new media. The discussions of the Internet as an alternative medium and the cyber-utopian discourses portraying the Internet as a 'revolutionary' medium are particularly pertinent in this regard.

Alternative media perspectives are a significant aspect of online conspiracy culture that have hitherto been largely overlooked as a critical framework for considering the relationships between conspiracy theory, society, and politics. Because the academic backgrounds of the scholars who have published on conspiracy theory and conspiracy culture have largely been in disciplines outside of media studies, they tend to treat the relationships between conspiracy theory and media as something tangential, rather than integral, to their central focus on such topics as the cultural politics of conspiracy beliefs. In so doing they overlook the significance of how the channels of media communication can influence conspiracist thought and practice. However, as this study has illustrated, the alternative media emphasis on political and social ideas such as the public sphere, democracy, and 'radical' cultural activity in relation to new media systems is highly relevant to the political science and cultural studies approaches that have so far dominated academic discussions of conspiracy culture. The ideas presented in this study regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and alternative media can therefore be seen to be useful contributions in terms of suggesting new areas of investigation into the socio-political aspects of conspiracy theory, and by extending or revitalising existing theoretical approaches.

The argument that conspiracy theorists appropriate the alternative media ethos associated with the Internet as a means of legitimating their ideas in relation to the broader mainstream of socio-political debate (as represented by the alternative and mainstream public spheres) is a significant contribution towards some of the key areas of critical debate surrounding contemporary conspiracy culture. These areas of debate include: why are conspiracy theories ostensibly more prevalent or visible within Western culture today? What is it about conspiracy theories that makes them appealing or credible to certain members of the public? Has the Internet helped to establish conspiracy ideas as acceptable aspects of political discussion in relation to particular topics or issues (such as 9/11)?

The populist and libertarian impulses that this study argues are latent to both the radical democratic ideas that underlie the alternative media ethos and conspiracy theory suggest answers to the first two questions. For instance, it could be argued that conspiracy theories have become more visible in the wider culture in the millennial period because audiences find the personalized, amateur nature of much Internet content, such as that created by conspiracy theorists, more appealing on a populist level than the institutionally and professionally created content of mainstream media. The oft-made observation by historians of conspiracy culture (e.g. Hofstadter 1966; Goldberg 2001) that conspiracy theories become more popular and visible in a society during times of political and economic upheaval could also be applied here with regards to theories that such periods bring out libertarian and populist attitudes in the public towards dominant power structures. In such periods (of which I would argue the West is in at the time of writing, with major upheaval in the form of the international war on terror, global recession caused by the excesses of the US financial sector, and wide-reaching environmental problems such as global warming), the libertarian and populist overtones of the Net as a democratically ‘radical’ alternative medium – and the conspiracy theories that are presented as manifestations of such radicalism – could make audiences more receptive to the ideas presented in online conspiracy theory, leading to such material become more visible in the wider society. A prospective answer to the third question could be seen to lie in the radical articulation of the Internet as a site of free speech by comparison with mainstream media, so that conspiracist ideas expressed online are taken by audiences as possessing a degree of integrity because their symbolic overtones as examples of free speech are conflated with the actual conspiracist ideas presented. Another answer may be that members of the public who are particularly interested or concerned with events such as 9/11, and who consider the mainstream media to poorly represent their objects of interest, will turn to the Net as the perfect site for such subject-specific discussions, and therefore be more exposed to the conspiracist ideas that are presented online in relation to such topics.

The related argument that the Internet functions as an empowering technology for conspiracy theorists in relation to the influence of cyber-utopian discourses about the ‘revolutionary’ potential of the Net is another facet of the conspiratoria framework presented here that I consider makes an important contribution to academic understandings of conspiracy theory and new media, notably in the

realms of cultural politics. Where the popular appeal of classical conspiracy theories has been traditionally considered largely in terms of ideology, this argument posits the technocratic mentality associated with new media technologies as being increasingly significant. As has been argued (and will be discussed further in section 9.4), the impact and appeal of many contemporary conspiracy theories can be seen to derive from the amalgamation of the intrinsic 'logic' of classical conspiracy belief with the technologically deterministic assumptions that are similarly intrinsic to understandings of new media. In relation to new media studies, online conspiracy theories can be considered in this regard as exemplars of a new media 'ethos', rather than marginal or aberrant content. In a more direct sense, while some studies on conspiracy culture have examined online conspiracy material as illustrations of the philosophical and political aspects of contemporary conspiracy culture (e.g. Birchall 2006; Bratich 2008), such studies have not systematically analysed the communicative and informational strategies and techniques by which the conspiracy theorists construct such material as distinctive pieces of online content, such as alternative news. In this respect, I consider this study to make some important contributions for understanding how conspiracy theories work as forms of media communication, a critical dimension of central importance to wider discussion of the ideological and discursive significance of conspiracy theories in relation to broader areas of society and culture.

The other major area of this study which I regard as making a useful contribution to future scholarship in the subject area of conspiracy theory is the typology of conspiracy theory outlined in chapter 2, section 2.51. This typology was developed in relation to issues raised in the literature review, in which it became apparent that the term 'conspiracy theory' was regularly used in a generalised 'catch-all' fashion that failed to convey the diversity and complexity of conspiracy theories and their historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. While this typology is only briefly delineated in this study (being edited down from a much larger section which was too digressive in relation to the main arguments of this study), and therefore itself highly generalised, I consider it a useful starting point for a more comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theory based upon more in-depth research and improved awareness of the historical, cultural, and ideological contexts that have shaped different conspiracy 'types'.

9.3 Ideas for further research

As already stated, I regard the key focus of this thesis as the development of a critical framework which outlines the dominant principles shaping the ways in which conspiracy theorists conceptualise and utilise the Internet. As an exploratory and developmental work, my emphasis has been upon ascertaining these principles on a broad or large-scale level. In terms of a future research agenda based upon the arguments presented in this study, there are several specific areas of inquiry that I would like to investigate further in terms of developing a more in-depth and rounded understanding of the Internet as ‘conspiratoria’. My researches into conspiracy culture, both online and real-world, constitute the basis for my considerations of these areas as important in this regard. They can be presented in relation to the following subject headings:

Technical – how conspiracy theorists use the technical capacities of the Net to develop and present evidence for their claims; the influence of search engines on online conspiracism

Cultural – the development of online conspiracy communities; possible connections between the psychological profile of conspiracy theorists and the subjective mentalities of the Net

Political – the ways in which conspiracy theorists utilise the net as an entrepreneurial medium, and how this usage relates to the Amerocentric libertarian ethos that informs much online conspiracist thought.

The following sections will present in-depth outlines of each of these ideas.

9.31 The Internet and conspiracy evidence

Discussions of how conspiracy theorists make use of the Internet as a means of collecting, interpreting, and presenting evidence were presented in this study, particularly in the arguments pertaining to the conspiracist appropriation of alternative news practices in chapters 7 and 8. However, these are such an

integral and interesting facet of online conspiracism that they deserve much more investigation than could be provided here.

Since most conspiracy theorists appear to believe in the truth of the conspiracist ideas they are presenting, critical debates over the nature of conspiracy thinking (e.g. whether or not a conspiracy theory is ‘true’ or justified) are usually dismissed in favour of research which can elevate the conspiracy from the realms of theory to those of ‘fact’. Most conspiracy theorists realise that, in order for their conspiracist ideas to be accepted as factual by the public, they must be presented as possessing some degree of plausibility or credibility in accordance with the standards of rational thinking and scientific fact that form the basis for mainstream perceptions of social reality. As several scholars of conspiracy theory have noted, classical conspiracy theory thus relies heavily on techniques of ‘pseudo-scholarship’ (Hofstadter 1966: Pipes 1997: Barkun 2003). As with the arguments presented in this study regarding conspiracy theorists’ appropriation of alternative media frameworks as a means of legitimating their ideas in relation to the public sphere, conspiracist practices of pseudo-scholarship can be seen to revolve around the appropriation of frameworks associated with mainstream scientific and academic research in order to convey the impression that the conspiracy theory in question is, at best, ‘true’, or, at least, a warranted explanation given the nature of the events involved.¹³⁹

In these respects, the Internet can be seen to incorporate a variety of technical features well-suited to conspiracist practices of researching and presenting evidence. Two such practices that I found ubiquitous in online conspiracism were what I term ‘information saturation’ and image analysis. Information saturation practices revolve around the substitution of quantitative factors for qualitative ones in the presentation of evidence. Here conspiracy theorists marshal vast amounts of different pieces of data from online sources to present a weight of evidence that superficially suggests that the conspiracy theory in question is true. The actual quality of the information is rarely called into question. As already illustrated by the likes of the Swinney article in chapter 4, section 4.22, much of the online evidence presented on conspiracy sites derives from the completely

¹³⁹ An example of such a ‘warranted explanation’ is the idea that the destruction of the WTC buildings in the 9/11 attacks could have been a controlled demolition undertaken by conspiratorial groups within the US government, in light of the observation that the WTC collapse looked like a controlled demolition, and in light of public knowledge of the US government’s geopolitical machinations that formed the background to the attacks (as delineated in Michael Moore’s 2003 documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*).

speculative ramblings of fellow conspiracy theorists or quotes and data ‘cherry-picked’ out of the wider context of mainstream information such as news reports. Such information is, by mainstream standards, low quality because it is highly subjective and/or distorted through its decontextualised nature. These information practices represent a distortion of one of the principles of scientific research, in which repeated observations of activity related to a particular subject can be presented as a cumulative body of data that helps confirm the validity of a hypothesis regarding the nature of that subject. The presentation of vast quantities of information as evidence for the conspiracy theory in question is taken as qualitative proof that the conspiracy theory is conspiracy fact.

The hypertextual capacities of the Internet are also central to these information saturation practices in that they enable conspiracy theorists to back up their ideas with multiple references to other online conspiracy sources. By enabling non-linear linkages between content on different conspiracy websites, conspiracy theorists can present the impression that there is a vast weight of evidence for their ideas in the form of other online references about the particular conspiracy topic in question. This gives their arguments a formal sheen of credibility in accordance with mainstream standards of scholarship, in which a researcher references other scholars work as a means of validating their own argument. This perspective reflects a distinctively technologically deterministic logic at work. Because the Net is perceived as a medium that enables information to be presented and organised in ways that are better than those available in other media (e.g. the simplicity and speed of hypertext links), so the actual content of these ‘pieces’ of online information is perceived to be of a innately high qualitative standard. In this respect, to merely have information presented on the Internet can be seen as a marker of information quality. An invaluable discursive framework for legitimating this pseudo-scholarly information saturation approach is the cyber-cultural configuration of the Net as a digital library (see chapter 5, section 5.22).

Image analysis refers to the ways in which conspiracy theorists use the multi-media capacities of the Net to analyse images for details that constitute evidence for particular conspiracy theories. There are three main areas of practice here. The first is related to the digital library view of the Net outlined above. The Net provides a ready-made resource base in terms of archiving large amounts of news and documentary footage and images from all sorts of sources, such as

mainstream news channels, scientific organisations, and academic institutions. Such material is generally not restricted or copyrighted due to the Net's status as a 'free' information environment. Conspiracy theorists can therefore source a wide variety of images and then subject them to their own analysis and interpretation.

The second is based upon the convergent nature of the Net with other digitally-based technologies. Conspiracy theorists are able to use software designed for the presentation and manipulation of digital images as a means of 'dissecting' images in order to uncover their conspiratorial secrets. A key technique here is that of digital enhancement of images and soundtracks, such as magnification of particular elements within an image; checking differences in contrast and colour to check for evidence that images may have been manipulated; or using filters to remove distortion, such as audio crackle. These techniques are used by conspiracy theorists to bring out 'hidden details' which are then used as evidence for conspiratorial interpretations. Such techniques are staples of conspiracy sites on subjects such as the JFK assassination (analysis of the Zapruder film to prove the existence of multiple shooters); extraterrestrial life (analysis of NASA images of the Moon and Mars to show existence of alien artefacts on the surfaces of both bodies); and 9/11 (analysis of footage of the WTC attacks and collapse to show that the collapse was a 'controlled demolition' and therefore proof that the attacks were an 'inside job' by the US government).

A third practice of conspiracist image analysis is conspiracy theorists' use of the multimedia and convergent capacities of the Net to create their own images in the form of online documentaries on conspiracy topics. To return to ideas discussed in chapter 7, section 7.32, the Net not only enables conspiracy theorists to appropriate footage from online sources but also to combine this footage with material they have created themselves using convergent equipment such as digital video cameras and digital film-making software. The Net also provides a ready-made network for the distribution and reception of such conspiracist images, in form such as the ubiquitous audio-visual file-sharing site *YouTube*. In such respects the Net enables conspiracy theorists to adopt one of the most persuasive forms of communication available to the mainstream media (documentary) and disseminate such material to potentially vast numbers of users whilst bypassing the structures of the mainstream media which delimit documentary filmmaking (e.g. researchers who fact-check documentary content to avoid lawsuits, aesthetic codes of objectivity etc). These online conspiracy documentaries have become

staples of online conspiracy culture and can be argued to have been central in the increased visibility of some conspiracist theories within contemporary Western culture, as suggested by the on and offline discussion of documentaries such as the 9/11-themed *Loose Change* and the religious/banking/NWO themed *Zeitgeist*.

These arguments relating to conspiracy theorists' use of the Net's technocultural capacities to produce conspiracist content are also bound up with cyber-cultural debates regarding the blurring of boundaries between professional and amateur information, a position touched on in the discussion of online citizen journalism as part of the alternative media ethos (see chapter 7, section 7.31). An example of this is that sites such as *YouTube* blend professional and amateur content together, so that conspiracist documentaries are presented alongside documentaries from established or professional media sources. Given that the Net presents an information environment free of the cultural and institutional distinctions that distinguish amateur from professional content in other media (e.g. the expert status accorded to mainstream journalists or academics), it can be argued, in relation to these ideas of production, that the Net empowers conspiracy theorists by enabling them to present their conspiracist ideas online as being qualitatively equivalent to mainstream content. In these respects, the cyber-utopian concept that the Net is a more genuinely democratic medium because of its emphasis on user-generated content can be seen to be translated into a legitimating framework for conspiracy theory.

9.32 The Internet and the development of conspiracy communities

Theories of online community have become staples of discussions of cyberspace within fields such as media studies and sociology (e.g. Swiss 2000; Mossberger *et al* 2008). The basic premise of these discussions is that the technocultural capacities of the Internet, such as its ability to transcend the temporal and geographical limitations that traditionally separate people in the physical world, will facilitate individuals and groups joining together to form new socio-cultural communities online based upon a shared adherence to particular types of beliefs and behaviours (e.g. Dean in Swiss 2000: Holmes 2005).

These critical discourses of online community were discussed in relation to the arguments presented in chapters 6-8 regarding configurations of the Net as an

alternative medium which empowers conspiracy theorists and helps legitimate their ideas in relation to the alternative public sphere, such as Atton's notion of citizen journalism in which alternative news producers are affiliated with particular radical groups or causes (chapter 7, section 7.31). However, theoretical notions of conspiracist cyber-communities and their relationships with real-world social and political activity constitute a vast subject area in their own right that would make a fascinating subject for future research. A key starting point in this regard is the function of online conspiracy sites as literal meeting points for conspiracy theorists. A site like the NZ conspiracy news site *Uncensored* could be seen to facilitate the development of a virtual conspiracy community, in both a local and international sense, because it provides a supportive environment for the reinforcement and development of conspiracist beliefs. The news and commentary presented on the site collect together a wide range of material from across the conspiracist websphere so as to make the site a central information source for conspiracy-minded users; while the comments features serve as a means for local and international conspiracy theorists to swap information with each other and affirm their identity, in the face of online critics, as self-styled 'radical truthseekers' or 'investigative journalists' rather than adherents to extremist and fantastical conspiracist beliefs. The articulation of online conspiracy theory as a distinctive, radically-committed community that operates on the margins of mainstream society can be seen to legitimate classical conspiracy beliefs further as acceptable forms of politically 'alternative' thought.

The capacities for conspiracy theorists to use the Internet to mobilise fellow conspiracy theorists into real-world socio-political action, in the manner of alternative activists using sites such as *Indymedia* to organise protests against the World Trade Organisation and other globalist bodies made up of powerful economic and political interests, is another topic related to notions of online community particularly pertinent to an understanding of contemporary conspiracy culture. As noted in chapter 7, section 7.32, the 9/11 truth movement is a community of international activists who use the Net to exchange information and organise political activity such as demonstrations, (in America at least), regarding their conspiracist beliefs that the 9/11 terror attacks and the collapse of the WTC buildings were 'inside jobs' by forces within the US government.¹⁴⁰ The

¹⁴⁰ Some good examples include: The website 911blogger.com which keeps track of 9/11 activist events around the world; and the group 'Architects and Engineers for 911 Truth' which sent

crossover between online and offline community activity, as discussed in a conspiracist context, also has significance regarding the future development of the Internet. For example, recent claims in America that increased state regulation and surveillance of the Net are needed to prevent extremist groups, whose worldviews are predicated in classical conspiracy beliefs, from organising their real-world activities online, pose a major affront to the civil libertarian ethos that was outlined in chapter 5, section 5.3, as an integral aspect of American cyber-culture.

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9.33 Online conspiracy theory, entrepreneurialism, and libertarianism

It can be argued that the technocultural capacities of the Internet are conducive to the commodification of conspiracy culture. Many conspiracy websites have a commercial agenda alongside their ostensibly core practice of presenting conspiracist information. The two most common manifestations of this are advertisements for conspiracy-themed products (e.g. 'survivalist' equipment) and the sale of conspiracist goods and services, such as books, DVDs, subscriptions to conspiracist radio broadcasts, or tickets to lecture tours by conspiracy theorists.¹⁴²

architect Richard Gage on a 2009 international lecture tour promoting the idea that the WTC buildings were destroyed in a controlled demolition (Gage spoke to a full house in the lecture theatre at Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum in Wellington): <http://www.ae911truth.org/> accessed 16/07/2010.

¹⁴¹ For example, Cass Sunstein, an Obama White House official dealing with information society matters, suggested in early 2010 that the federal government should actively spy on conspiracy groups for concerns that the proliferation of online conspiracism could translate into domestic terrorist activity (shades of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing). See, for instance, Arthur Goldwag's article 'Cass Sunstein's Thought Police' at alternative news site *The Huffington Post*: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arthur-goldwag/cass-sunsteins-thought-police_453562.html, accessed 15/09/2010.

¹⁴² Prime examples here include :

- American conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, who aggressively presents himself as a conspiracy 'brand' via a mini-empire of online media (websites, radio and television broadcasts, online documentaries) and merchandise (DVDs, T-shirts, baseball caps) – see his websites Alex Jones' Prison Planet <http://www.prisonplanet.com/> and Alex Jones' InfoWars <http://www.infowars.com/>
- American conspiracy theorist Jeff Rense, whose website is full of conspiracy-related advertising: see <http://www.rense.com/> and case study in chapter 8.
- British conspiracy theorist David Icke, who regularly publishes conspiracy books and undertakes international lecture tours, both of which are heavily promoted on his website: <http://www.davidicke.com/index.php> / , all sites accessed 16/07/2010.

Much of this commercialism appears predicated upon purely technical aspects of the Internet. The multi-media and convergent capacities of the Net provide the means for conspiracy theorists to produce, promote, and sell conspiracy-themed goods. For example, conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones make use of news footage available through Net sources to make their own conspiracist documentaries; make use of websites such as *YouTube* to promote these DVDs through trailers and downloads; and make use of virtual transaction functions such as *PayPal* to enable people to buy DVD versions of these documentaries whilst bypassing the economic and legal structures that would affect the sale of such products through conventional means such as mainstream retail stores (e.g. copyright issues involved in the use of corporate news footage).¹⁴³

An investigation of the ways in which the technocultural capacities of the Net enable conspiracy theorists to commercialise their conspiracy beliefs would constitute an interesting extension of the arguments presented in this study regarding the Net as an empowering medium for conspiracy theory. This topic is also interesting in that it suggests further development of the arguments mooted in chapter 5, section 5.3, regarding the American libertarian ethos that informed the cyber-cultural configurations of the Internet as a site of information freedom as a significant point of connection with the American libertarian principles which also underpin classical conspiracist thought. Libertarian ideologies of individual freedoms and distrust of government also form the basis for the free-market principles that are quintessential to the history of American capitalism as one of the pillars of American national identity.¹⁴⁴ As cyber-commentators like Richard

¹⁴³ As on the Alex Jones Infowars shop page: <http://infowars-shop.stores.yahoo.net/index.html> , accessed 15/09/2010.

¹⁴⁴ As these ideologies have been imposed on countries around the globe over the last 30 years in the guise of neo-liberalism, it could also be argued that they have been an influence on the articulation on *fin-de-siecle* conspiracism in countries outside the USA. Certainly the NZ libertarian right, in forms such as the ACT party, has actively promoted conspiracist discourses of the sort advocated by American libertarians in relation to issues such as global warming.

See, for example, the article 'Don't Hide your love away: Don Brash, climate and a very particular kind of coup' on the NZ global warming news site *Hot Topic*: <http://hot-topic.co.nz/dont-hide-your-love-away-don-brash-climate-and-a-very-particular-kind-of-coup/> accessed 18/09/2011. A prominent player in ACT party history is Trevor Loudon. As an acolyte of John Birch Society style anti-Communist conspiracies from the 1970s to the present, Loudon presumably finds the libertarianism of the ACT party complementary to his classical conspiracist worldview. See the article 'Anyone more normal?' by Russell Brown, posted on the NZ news site *Public Address*: <http://publicaddress.net/hardnews/anyone-more-normal/>, posted 28/3/2006. Also Loudon's own website, the *NewZeal* blog: <http://trevorloudon.com/>, accessed 18/09/2011.

Barbrook have argued, the American cyber-utopian perspectives which have shaped Western conceptions of the Internet have actually combined these two major forms of American libertarianism. The articulation of the Net as an expression of the libertarian freedoms of the American frontier mythos has not only manifested in the civil libertarian emphasis on radical democratic activity online and lack of government regulation, but also in a free-market emphasis on online entrepreneurialism as an articulation of one's democratic liberties and rights (see Barbrook & Cameron 2001: Barbrook 2007). In this context the online entrepreneurship of American conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones can be seen as not just brazen hucksterism but as an ideological affirmation of the Net as a site of the American libertarian 'freedoms' the conspiratorial forces are trying to suppress – the constitutional rights of US citizens and laissez-faire capitalism. The Net therefore provides an environment free of government and market regulation in which Amerocentric conspiracy theorists can exercise their libertarianism through the presentation of conspiracy content critical of the government and the packaging of this content as 'commodities' within the 'free market' of cyberspace.

9.34 Search engines and online conspiracism

Search engines such as the omnipresent *Google* are arguably the closest thing the Internet has to a 'centre', in that they are designed to serve as the main base for most user's engagement with the Net because they organise the vast amounts of information available online according to the requests of the user. They are also one of the pivots of the Net's socio-cultural configuration as a 'democratic' or 'amateur' medium, in that search results are organised from first to last according to popularity – how many times the site has been accessed by users from across the Net. In this respect search engines reflect the blurring of boundaries between information quantity and information quality that is typical of the technologically deterministic ethos of the Internet. There is no indication to search engine users that the information contained within the websites that rank high in search engine listings has been evaluated as the best quality information on a particular topic. Rather, it is assumed that because so many people have accessed a particular site and therefore given this site a high ranking within the search engine scale, such popularity must be indicative of the quality of information contained within the

site in question. Quantitative measurements of the amount of times users have accessed specific websites are thus configured as a democratic endorsement of the quality of information contained on these specific sites.

This emphasis on popularity as synonymous with quality is an aspect of Net culture that can be considered particularly significant in relation to online conspiracy theory. Conspiracy websites often rank highly on the likes of *Google* in relation to searches on specific subjects of conspiratorial significance, such as 9/11 and the moon landings,¹⁴⁵ or searches for alternative media, enabling the poor-quality information on conspiracy sites to achieve a significant degree of visibility and influence within the wider culture due to their presentation as the most popular/most qualitative sites on particular subjects. Search engine rankings may therefore be configured as another way in which the technocultural capacities of the Internet empower conspiracy theorists. Several possible lines of future research can be suggested here to investigate the apparent influence of search engines on conspiracy culture. One of these may be an examination of which types of subjects have a heavy conspiracist element to their search engine results. For example, are conspiracy sites represented in search rankings in response to topics of obvious conspiracist interest, or is their influence more widespread across a wide variety of topics? Another approach, that would possibly be more difficult to research, but possibly more informative regarding the relationship between search engines and conspiracy theories, could be to examine the socio-cultural factors that are involved in the popularity of conspiracy websites. For example, conspiracy websites may be accessed by users for a variety of reasons. Some topics may have a particularly active online ‘conspiracy community’ operating around them which will boost the rankings of relevant conspiracy websites (e.g. the 9/11 ‘truther’ movement – conspiracy sites dealing with 9/11 ranking higher than official sites on the subject). The controversial, spectacular, or bizarre nature of other conspiracy theories may also lead certain conspiracy sites

¹⁴⁵For example, a *Google* search on the subject of ‘9/11’ (30/08/2011) brings up the following sites as their top 8 on the subject:

- 1 - September 11 attacks – Wikipedia
- 2 - The 9/11 Truth Movement – 911truth.org
- 3 - September 11 News.com
- 4 - September 11 2001 Video – YouTube
- 5 - 9/11 (TV2002) – IMDb
- 6 - 9-11 Research: An Independent Investigation of the 9-11-2001 Attack
- 7 - September 11 Digital Archive
- 8 - 9/11Watch Free Documentaries Online

Out of the 8 sites listed, numbers 2, 3, and 6 are conspiracy websites.

to be rated highly on topic searches (e.g. claims that global warming is a conspiratorial plot rather than scientific fact, as controversially addressed in mainstream media such as newspapers and television, may induce a level of public curiosity that leads to global warming ‘denial’ sites rating highly in net searches on the subject).

9.35 Relationship between psychology of conspiracy theorists and Net culture

The relationship between conspiracy theory and certain psychological and personality traits has been a major focus of many popular and academic studies of conspiracy theory (e.g. Hofstadter 1966: Graumann & Moscovici 1987: Showalter 1997: Parish & Parker 2001: Swami et al 2009: Aaronovitch 2009). My online examinations of conspiracist writings and conspiracist practices, such as the interactions between conspiracy theorists and skeptics in the comments pages of both mainstream and conspiracist websites, has indicated recurrent tendencies in both conspiracist thought and expression which suggest that conspiracy theorists are something of an identifiable psychological and personality type. Perceived aspects of a conspiracist psychology include, obviously, a paranoid world view (the conspiracy theorist is under threat by the conspiratorial ‘other’); autodidacticism (conspiracy theorists have educated themselves in particular topics, which means they consider themselves more knowledgeable than the likes of academics who operate within education systems controlled by conspiratorial forces); and narcissism (conspiracy theorists are prone to present themselves as ‘special’ individuals in possession of ‘special’ knowledge about the ‘true’ conspiratorial nature of reality. Activities such as debunking, which threaten the conspiracy theorists’ exalted self-image, are likely to be met with extreme and aggressive responses).

In this respect, another potentially interesting point of inquiry regarding the relationships between conspiracy theory and the Internet may be to consider how the technical features of the Net facilitate the communication of ideas in modes that are resonant with, or beneficial to, such aspects of the ‘conspiracist personality’. The virtual nature of Net communication appears to be a key focus in this regard. Where conspiracy theorists may have their ideas – and personalities –

challenged and critiqued in real-life social situations or mainstream media such as newspapers and television, the technocultural capacities of the Net may enable conspiracy theorists to control communication to their own psychological advantages. For instance, conspiracy theorists can set up their own websites to promote their ideas within a web sphere of fellow conspiracy theorists who engage in mutual reinforcement of each others beliefs. Conspiratorial ideas, such as holocaust denial, that would result in social opprobrium for conspiracy theorists in real-world/mainstream contexts, can be presented on the Net anonymously or from a distance, protecting conspiracy theorists from direct social repercussions. The views of critics and sceptics can be ignored within the information wash of the Net or attacked with impunity within the virtual realm of online forums and comments pages.

The decentered nature of the Net could also be seen to be significant in this regard in that it enables conspiracy theorists to present their ideas as equivalent to, or better than, those of mainstream thinkers in a notably narcissistic and self-aggrandising manner. A typical example of this is the tendency of New Age conspiracy theorists to develop ‘revolutionary’ new paradigms in fields such as physics and biology in order to validate the existence of the fantastical or occult elements, such as UFOs or ‘interdimensional intelligences’, that constitute the basis of their worldviews. In so doing such conspiracy theorists present themselves as scientific geniuses who are misunderstood or conspired against by the scientific establishment because of the paradigm-shattering brilliance of their discoveries.¹⁴⁶

9.4 Further discussion of critical ideas presented

The main ideas presented in this study touch on a variety of themes and issues regarding the subject areas of both conspiracy theory and the Internet. I will here discuss further what I think are some of these relevant areas of wider debate, and

¹⁴⁶ Good examples include the writings of American New Age conspiracists Val Valerian (<http://www.trufax.org/>) and Laura Knight-Jadczyk (<http://www.sott.net>), both of whom present superconspiracy histories of the world based upon New Age pseudoscientific precepts such as ‘quantum multidimensionality’. New Age thought (and the conspiracy theories derived from this) is particularly noteworthy for its conceptualisation of an entire alternative science paradigm predicated upon the combination of discredited early modern theories of vitalism and occult extrapolations of quantum theory. The eccentric or cranky ideas of scientists such as Nikola Tesla and Wilhelm Reich are central pivots of such ‘alternative science’.

consider some of the problems and counter-arguments related to these debates and the ideas discussed in the study.

In this study I feel I have effectively argued that there is a ‘special relationship’ between classical conspiracy theory and the Internet, with the Net serving as a legitimating system for conspiracy ideas within the wider culture, particularly in relation to the Net’s perceived cultural status as an alternative public sphere. The main theme that I would like to discuss as a conclusion to the arguments presented in the body of the text is the idea that conspiracy theorists can be seen as prime exponents of and believers in technologically deterministic discourses of the Internet as a radical socio-political ‘paradigm shift’. I present this discussion as conclusion for several reasons. Firstly, to indicate an awareness of the possible criticisms and ripostes related to the conspiracy-Internet arguments that formed the basis of this study. Secondly, to indicate the complex and problematic nature of the Internet as an object of study, and to simultaneously signal my awareness of the larger critical debates that surround the technocultural capacities of the Internet. Thirdly, to acknowledge my own critical scepticism regarding the subject areas of the Internet and conspiracy theory that has developed over the course of this project. I regard this informed scepticism as one of the major outcomes of my research, and as the prospective basis for future work examining the relationships between the Internet and society.

The central idea which I perceive as underlying the problematic aspects of the conspiracy-Internet relationship is that of the Internet’s cultural status as a ‘revolutionary’ medium. The central premise of this study is that the ways in which conspiracy theorists conceptualise and utilise the Internet (as with their appropriation of the alternative public sphere ethos) are shaped by technologically determinist cyber-cultural discourses which articulate the Net as a ‘revolutionary’ force in 21st century Western society. To recap arguments presented in the main body of the study, the technocultural capacities of the Net which constitute its revolutionary potential for cyber-theorists and academic commentators (as with discourses of the second media age and frameworks of alternative media) are also those regarded as ‘revolutionary’ by conspiracy theorists. Because these capacities (such as the decentered and unregulated nature of the Net that has developed due to its organisation as a digital network rather than a broadcast medium) empower the information practices of conspiracy theorists – practices which they perceive

as politically revolutionary in terms of the conspiracist beliefs they are disseminating – so those same technocultural capacities can be seen as effectively synonymous with conspiracist notions of ‘revolution’. Thus, from a conspiracist perspective, the communication of conspiracy theories via the Internet is truly revolutionary in that it melds the ‘radical’ socio-political messages of conspiracy theory with the ‘paradigm-shifting’ impact of the Internet on almost all spheres of Western social, cultural, and political life. The technologically deterministic logic of the Internet is entwined with the logic of classical conspiracy theory.

In this respect, it could be argued that online conspiracism symbolises a kind of apotheosis of the technologically deterministic discourses which frame the Internet. Underlying the online activities of conspiracy theorists is a ‘cyber-mythic’ belief that by the mere act of communicating information via the Internet particular results will eventuate – in terms of conspiracy theory, the ‘awakening’ of the populace as to the conspiratorial ‘truth’ of the social and political reality in which they live. In this regard, conspiracy theorists can be seen as proselytisers for the technologically determinist myths that the information revolution of the Internet is also the major driver for social and political revolution. As articulated in relation to the discursive framework of the ‘digital sublime’, the technical aspects of the Net are regarded as making conspiracy theories more visible, more appealing, and more potent to the public. The Net’s ‘sublime’ status as a medium which transcends the limitations of the mainstream media is perceived as endowing conspiracy theorists with the ability to transcend the conspiratorial structures of everyday society within which they are generally marginalized and denigrated in respect of their beliefs. This sublime relationship between the Net and conspiracy theory is underpinned by a technologically determinist logic in which the quantitative capacities of the Internet to store and make accessible large amounts of information are conflated as being equivalent with qualitative assumptions about the power and significance of the information content presented via the Internet.

This conspiracist belief in the revolutionary or transcendent powers of the Internet means that conspiracy theorists fail to consider the technocultural limitations of the medium. As argued above, the Net’s status as a ‘revolutionary’ medium is irrevocably bound up with the ways in which its technical features enable communication by facilitating the abilities of individuals to create and distribute their own content and to access information outside of the limitations of

traditional media. Such perspectives usually overlook or ignore the myriad ways in which the technical features of the Net can also disable said processes of communication and information. A major area in which the limitations of the Internet may be said to influence the ideas and practices of online conspiracism is that pertaining to reception - the ways in which online content is received and interpreted by audiences. An important factor in terms of ideas of reception is that the diverse nature of media audiences presupposes a diversity of possible audience responses to media content. An implicit assumption of conspiracy theorists, and commentators on conspiracy culture (particularly those in the pathological mode – see chapter 2, sections 2.2 – 2.22) is that audiences will take online conspiracy content at face value – that the conspiracist ideas presented will be received in seriousness and interpreted literally by audiences. Such a position reflects technologically deterministic logic at work. The systems of information organisation and presentation that mark the Internet, such as access to vast reserves of hyperlinked information and the ability for conspiracy theorists to present evidence in multi-media forms, are perceived by conspiracy theorists as means for making their ideas more credible and convincing to audiences.¹⁴⁷

Underlying this technologically deterministic assumption that conspiracy theories are somehow more potent by virtue of their presentation via the Internet is the sense that online conspiracy theorists are writing in relation to an idealised concept of a Net user and conspiracy site reader. The implicit sense evoked of such a user is someone who combines a conspiracist suspicion of political and social authority with a ‘cyber-libertarian’ belief in the personally and socially liberating potentialities of the Internet. Such ideal conspiracy Net users are using the opportunities the Net provides for the expression of information and interpersonal interaction outside of the channels of mainstream media to empower themselves through an online education in ‘alternative’ (i.e. conspiracist) ideas against the conspiratorially-controlled political and social norms. This conspiracist image of the Net and Net users is therefore one of utmost seriousness. The Net is not some frivolous site of mere entertainment and expression but a ‘serious’ information resource in which ‘serious’ people, deeply concerned with

¹⁴⁷ The alternative media arguments presented in the main body of the study are an attempt to critically articulate the possible appeal of online conspiracism beyond this technologically deterministic position. Online conspiracy theories are discussed as possessing more potential credibility and believability with Net users, not merely because of the technical features of the Net, but because of the ways in which the Net is articulated within the wider culture as a socio-political information space that constitutes an alternative to the structures of mainstream media

social and political issues, can access ‘serious’ information about such matters in the form of online conspiracy content.

However, as investigations within fields such as media studies and sociology have argued, the ways in which audiences (both individually and as groups) receive and interpret media content is highly complex (e.g. Ruddock 2001: Curran & Morley 2006). The diverse factors that constitute an individual as a distinctive entity within a society are also regarded as shaping that individual’s reactions to media content when they are part of a media audience. Thus it cannot be assumed that Net users who frequent conspiracy websites necessarily accept the conspiracist ideas presented or adhere to the implicit conspiracist image of the ideal Net user. Leaving aside totally negative standards of reception, such as audiences ignoring conspiracy material altogether, several modes of audience reception could be postulated as applying to online conspiracy theory in ways that challenge and compromise the mythic notions that the Internet empowers and enables conspiracy theorists.

One significant perspective is that audiences may engage with conspiracy material online for entertainment purposes. Many individuals may find classical conspiracy theories unbelievable on political and logical grounds, yet still find them interesting on a cultural level because the extreme and bizarre nature of the conspiracist material presented is culturally and politically ‘spectacular’ in relation to the cultural and political ideas that typify mainstream culture and thought. Such a position may be considered in relation to critical discussions of spectacle and sensationalism as key modes of contemporary Western media culture (e.g. Lull & Hinerman 1997: Kellner 2003). In such perspectives, spectacle – the presentation of subject matter considered culturally excessive, aesthetically sensational, and/or morally controversial – is discussed as a standard practice within mainstream media systems such as television and newspapers, because it is usually guaranteed to attract the attention of audiences – attention which can then be converted into commercial gains such as ratings and sales. Since this spectacular mode is one that constitutes one of the norms of Western popular culture (e.g. the excessive emphasis on political and celebrity scandals, murders and disasters in the mainstream news media), audiences habituated to this norm may naturally be drawn to spectacular and sensational subject matter when engaging with the Internet. Online conspiracy content may therefore be appealing to many Net users because of its excessive and unusual nature, with users

checking out conspiracy sites for entertainment reasons – “hey man, check out this crazy conspiracy shit!” – rather than a desire to ‘seriously’ consider the political and ideological ideas presented.

Such presentation of conspiracy theories as spectacular cultural discourses is compounded by the excessive usage of conspiracist themes and subject matter in millennial popular culture. American popular culture has made conspiracist themes highly visible in Western mainstream culture through successful entertainment media such as the television show *The X-Files* (1993-2002) or films such as *Conspiracy Theory* (1997). Since audiences are used to the presentation of conspiracy theories as forms of popular entertainment, then they may also engage with online conspiracist material in a similiar fashion. A variation of this entertainment framework is that users may also be attracted to online conspiracy content because the unregulated nature of the Net provides easy access to content that may be restricted or forbidden in mainstream media systems due to its subject matter. Users may check out online conspiracy content because of personal and cultural curiosity regarding its subversive or taboo status in relation to the values and standards of ‘normal’ society and mainstream culture. Again, this does not mean that such audiences are believing conspiracist ideas wholesale.¹⁴⁸

Another, more generous perspective may be that Net users are selective in their responses to online conspiracy material, finding certain conspiracy theories appealing or believable whilst rejecting others for a variety of political, social, and cultural reasons. For example, many commentators have noted that 9/11 conspiracy theories which argue that the 9/11 attacks were a ‘false flag’ operation undertaken by sinister elites within the US government are particularly prominent on the Net, a prominence that has helped them become highly visible within American popular and political culture (e.g. Sargeant 2006: Bratich 2008). I would suggest here that the visibility of 9/11 conspiracy theories is not merely due to conspiracy theorists’ abilities to use the technical capacities of the Net to present particularly convincing ‘evidence’ (e.g. the hype surrounding the online 9/11 conspiracy documentary *Loose Change* (2006: revised editions 2006 - 2010), but to the historic nature of the 9/11 attacks in relation to American political and cultural traditions, and its apparent plausibility in terms of popular conceptions of

¹⁴⁸ This notion of the Internet as a repository for ‘taboo’ content is reflected in the adage, readily trotted out in popular discussion of the Net, that the two most popular forms of online content are conspiracy theories and pornography (although both of these have probably been well surpassed in the last few years by social networking sites).

the activities of the US intelligence institutions. The spectacular and traumatic nature of the 9/11 attacks and its radical impact on US social and political life (via consequences such as the neo-conservative 'war on terror' and invasion of Iraq) rendered 9/11 an event of great resonance to most Americans and, given America's hyperpower status, the world as a whole. Conspiracy theories involving the US government may therefore seem understandable to American citizens and people in other countries as a response to the 'paradigm-shifting' nature of the 9/11 attacks. Such theories are also informed by a popular awareness of the sinister activities of US intelligence agencies. Through vehicles such as investigative journalism and the Freedom of Information Act, American citizens in the late 20th century were confronted with revelations that branches of the government had engaged in clandestine and anti-democratic political activity in accordance with the ideological beliefs of small groups of people who occupied positions of political power (e.g. the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s and the controversy surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin incident that was the catalyst for the Vietnam War) (Knight 2001: Knight 2003: McConnachie & Tudge 2005). Knowledge of such prior governmental subterfuge has loaned an air of credibility or plausibility to conspiracy theories that the 9/11 terror attacks were an 'inside job'.

However, the seeming popularity and visibility of 9/11 conspiracy theories online is no indication that Net users who engage with online conspiracy material will take all such material seriously. Audiences who accept 9/11 conspiracy theories for reasons such as those discussed above may not necessarily accept the likes of David Icke's superconspiracy thesis that the human race is being collectively conspired against by an elite group known as the Illuminati, whose members are interdimensional 'reptilians' that can shapeshift in and out of human form, because the bizarre, science-fiction nature of Icke's premises strains credulity and plausibility to the utmost. The diversity of opinion and belief amongst conspiracy audiences can be seen on websites such as the conspiracy forum *Above Top Secret.com*, where the existence of 9/11 conspiracies is generally accepted but figures like Icke are the subject of intense debate between correspondents.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ For example, the thread entitled 'David Icke is a liar': <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread585555/pg1>, accessed 09/07/2010.

To recap, this discussion of ideas of audience reception in relation to online conspiracy material is intended as an acknowledgment of the inadequacies of the technologically deterministic logic that informs much of the conceptualisation of online conspiracy culture. The area of audience reception offers significant challenges to this technologically determinist logic. The responses of Net users to online conspiracy material are not shaped by the technologically deterministic mythos of the Net, but by a wide variety of interlocking social and cultural factors. In combination with these factors, the Net may serve to *disable* conspiracy theory – in relation to the ways in which users interpret and relate to conspiracist ideas – as much as *enable* it.

Obviously I am not trying to argue that the Internet has *no* effect upon the political, social and cultural visibility and impact of conspiracy theories. As this study has theorised, for example, configurations of the Internet as an alternative public sphere can be seen to be particularly influential in affecting the ways in which conspiracy theories are perceived in the wider culture. Rather, my arguments here are against the tendency, implicit in the ethos of online conspiracism and in some of the mainstream and academic discussions of conspiracy theory, to attribute *too much* influence to the Internet as the ostensible ‘driving force’ behind the ostensible ‘rise’ of conspiracy theory within millennial Western culture. As illustrated by the brief discussion of different possible ways in which Net users may relate to and interpret online conspiracy material, the cultural status of the Net as a ‘revolutionary’ medium should be considered one amongst many factors shaping conspiracy theory as a significant aspect of contemporary political, social, and cultural life. This basic point is worth explicating in detail because it is often forgotten or overshadowed by the technologically determinist perspectives that dominate discussions of the significance of the Internet on contemporary conspiracy culture.

As the above statements indicate, these arguments against the technologically deterministic view of the Internet as a ‘revolutionary’ medium are informed by a socio-historical approach to media technologies, such as that typified by Winston (1998). This approach is a skeptical riposte to the technologically deterministic perspectives that dominate discussions of new media. I will here discuss some of these ideas as a conclusion to the skeptical perspectives on the conspiracy/Net relationship outlined above, and as concluding thoughts on the main themes of this study overall. Winston argues that the development of new media

technologies should be more accurately understood in terms of socio-historical evolution rather than revolution. New media technologies are not systems that operate extrinsic to society and which bend society to their own ends – a position which forms the dominant subtext to much contemporary cyber-theory – but are systems which are created and develop in relation to particular historical conjunctions of social, political, economic, and technological forces. This historical overview also illustrates how all new media technologies (such as the telephone and television) are integrated into society through similar cycles. The first is a phase in which the new medium is regarded in technologically deterministic terms as a revolutionary force that will radically change society on numerous levels. This ‘paradigm-shifting’ phase eventually recedes as the medium is gradually assimilated into existing socio-cultural frameworks.¹⁵⁰ To put it in cyber-cultural terms previously used in this study, this historical framework of media development proposes that the digital sublime of the Internet will gradually transform into the digital mundane.

Contemporary Western culture can still be seen to be firmly ensconced within a digitally sublime phase. The revolutionary potential of the Internet to radically change society for the better in areas such as community, politics, and journalism is reflected in both popular and academic promotion of Net-centric paradigms such as social networking, digital citizenship, and alternative media (e.g. Chayko 2008: Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal 2008: Gilmor 2004). However, the Internet has now become so well-ensconced within the social fabric that its technocultural limitations are also becoming readily apparent, leading to a burgeoning culture of popular and academic cyber-skepticism (e.g. Lanier 2010: Barbrook 2007). These sceptical and critical perspectives on the Net are perhaps indicative of the beginnings of a shift away from the digital sublime to the digital mundane.

In relation to this socio-historical view of the Net, I would argue that a digitally sublime perspective is likely to typify conspiracist attitudes towards the Internet indefinitely because this perspective is so empowering in relation to the conspiracist worldview. My observations of online conspiracy culture indicated

¹⁵⁰ While this is often expressed in progressive terms, this revolutionary potential is often considered as a negative influence on existing social structures. For example, the cyber-utopian view of the Net as a site of information freedom is countered by cyber-dystopian perspectives which perceive the Net as the instigator of various ‘moral panics’ (e.g. cyber-stalking, online pornography) and/or potential abuses of power (e.g. corporate and government surveillance). This latter perspective is, of course, most interesting in relation to conspiracist conceptions of the Net as a medium outside of the ‘information control’ of other media: see chapter 4, section 4.22.

that conspiracy theorists often acknowledged the limitations of the Internet as an information system, but ascribed these limitations to conspiratorial machinations rather than factors intrinsic to the Net as a medium in its own right. For example, discussions of Internet censorship or as the Internet as a tool of government surveillance were a common topic on conspiracist sites.¹⁵¹ However, none of these conspiracist discussions considered that the use of the Net as a site of surveillance, censorship and the like is, in many respects, unavoidable, given that the Net is a product of society and as such is subjected to the same social, political, economic and cultural forces that shape most other areas of contemporary life. Changes to the Internet were not seen as the natural or expected result of the Net's position as a part of existing socio-political structures, but deliberate efforts by conspiratorial forces to neutralise the power of the Net as an information system that, because it exists 'free' of established social and political structures, represents a challenge and a threat to those power structures and the conspiratorial forces which control them. I would argue that this is because conspiracy theorists are ideologically and psychologically invested in digitally sublime configurations of the Internet as an infallible and omnipotent information system which operates as a radical alternative to mainstream society.

In this respect the 'digital sublime' can be seen to facilitate a mythic perspective of the Internet that also operates as an idealised projection of the classical conspiracist mentality. The Internet and conspiracy theorists are both 'outsiders' – positioned beyond the mainstream structures and institutions of society, and rendered both omnipotent and infallible in their awareness of the truths of that society by virtue of the vast amounts of information at their command. The psychological and emotional resonance that has been established between the Internet's technocultural status as a 'revolutionary' medium and the ethos and beliefs of classical conspiracy theorising suggest to me that Western conspiracy culture will, in a dogged and perverse fashion, continue to function as one of the major cultural forces upholding the cyber-utopian perspectives which typified the initial establishment of the Internet in the face of ongoing

¹⁵¹ For example:

- 'Internet Threatened by Censorship, Surveillance, Laws' by Stephen Lendman: posted at *Rense.com* <http://www.rense.com/general85/net.html>, 22/05/2009;
- 'Google in bed with U.S. Intelligence' by Michael Hampton, posted at *911Review.org*: http://911review.org/Alex/reference/google_and_CIA.html, 22/02/2006;
- 'The Pentagon's War on the Internet' by Mike Whitney, posted at *Information Clearing House* <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article11901.html>, 13/02/2006.

reconstitution of the Net as a predominantly domestic, social, and commercial medium – the ‘digital mundane’.

APPENDIX 1

CONSPIRACY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

A1.1 Conspiracy theories – terminology

Conspiracy theories are intimately concerned with ideas of politics and power. The association between conspiracy theory and politics is rooted in the etymology of the word ‘conspiracy’. As constructed from the Latin roots ‘con’ (together) and ‘spire’ (breathe), ‘conspiracy’ means ‘breathe together’. To ‘breathe together’ suggests a group of people engaging in some form of mutual, intimate activity (‘breathing’ as a particularly vital/personal function that is performed close to the body: the image evoked is of a group of people in close proximity to each other sharing their breath). In an abstract sense, the image evoked is one of many people acting as one, both in terms of what they are doing (the physical activity of ‘breathing’) but also how they are thinking (individual volition being required to make oneself breathe in concert with others). These connotations can readily be transposed into a political context in which ideas of power are of central importance. To ‘conspire’ suggests individuals coming together to form a group based on some sense of mutual interest or common identity, with the members of this group having an intimate or insider connection to each other that positions them as distinct from others in various capacities. This ‘insider’ position suggests that the group seeks to further their interests in a manner benefiting them at the expense of those who are ‘outsiders’, thereby establishing their intentions as ‘sinister’ in relation to non-members of the group. ‘Sinister’ here equates with the pursuit of power in the interests of the group in question, and the manipulation of power already possessed by such group as a means for extending its reach and influence. The sinister nature of the groups’ intentions also connotes a high level of secrecy in order that such intentions may be enacted without the awareness of outsiders who will undoubtedly oppose such intentions. A working definition of the term ‘conspiracy’ can therefore be regarded as incorporating the following elements: ‘a course of action of sinister intent, determined by a group acting in secret’, within an interpretive framework of politics.

‘Theory’ is a term taken from scientific research which refers to a possible explanation for something based upon the interpretation of particular facts pertaining to the event or idea in question. A ‘conspiracy theory’ can therefore be considered as a hypothesis as to the ‘true’ or ‘real’ events and meanings that are being kept hidden by a particular conspiracy. Key elements of the ‘truth’ include uncovering the identity of the people involved in the conspiracy: their motives and intentions for carrying out the conspiracy; and the means by which the conspiracy is put into operation. Such theorising involves putting together a picture of the ‘truth’ from various facts and other pieces of evidence. In a socio-cultural context, a ‘conspiracy theory’ can be conceived here as a hypothesis that seeks to explain the conspiratorial inter-relationships or connections between particular people and particular events in relation to social and political power structures. A ‘conspiracy theorist’ is someone who develops and disseminates such hypotheses.

In this study I am using the terms ‘conspirator’ and ‘conspiratorial’ to refer to the individuals or groups that are believed to be involved in the operation of a particular conspiracy theory, and the term ‘conspiracist’ as an adjective for the modes of thought and practice considered typical of conspiracy theory. My use of the term conspiracist is therefore a neutral one, and should not be considered as congruent with the pejorative use of the term in the work of scholars such as Pipes (1997).¹⁵² Pipes uses the terms ‘conspiracist’ and ‘conspiracism’ as shorthand for his equations between conspiracy theory and other destructive political ‘isms’ such as communism and fascism (see comments in Bratich 2008: 4-5). I also make use of the phrase ‘conspiracy culture’ in reference to the distinctive epistemological and cultural milieu associated with classical conspiracy beliefs and practices.

A1.2 Conspiracy theories – conceptual structures

I will here outline of some of the major thematic and conceptual aspects of conspiracy theories. These are delineated in relation to the central idea of

¹⁵² Pipes uses the terms ‘conspiracist’ and ‘conspiracism’ to connote conspiracy theories as destructive political ideologies such as communism and fascism (see comments in Bratich 2008: 4-5). Writing from an American neo-conservative perspective, Pipes also provocatively associates conspiracism with socialism and Islam (Pipes 1997).

conspiracy as a political concept – that historical and political events are 'caused' by the sinister machinations of an ideologically-unified group acting in secrecy to preserve or extend their 'power'. This outline is based upon discussions of the epistemological structures of conspiracy theory presented in Hofstadter (1966) and Barkun (2003) along with my own research observations.¹⁵³

A1.21 Nature and organisation of the conspirators

The conspiracy is usually conceptualised as a hierarchical structure that operates in a 'pyramidal' manner. At the apex is a small select group of conspirators who possess the abilities to enact the conspiracy down through ever larger 'layers' of society. Those at the bottom of the pyramid are generally regarded as the 'masses' who are being controlled by the conspiracy; those on higher layers of the pyramid represent the institutional forces through which the elites exercise their plot, members of which may also be 'in on' the conspiracy to some degree. Areas of society that may seem to occupy quite distinct spheres of influence from each other, such as health and education, are thereby positioned as being interconnected with each other as part of the all-encompassing embrace of the master conspirators at the apex of the pyramid.

The conspiracist template of a small, central group whose conspiratorial influence extends to encompass and connect wider fields of society is often envisaged in metaphors such as 'tentacles', 'webs', or 'matrixes'¹⁵⁴. The core group of conspirators is often referred to as an 'elite', 'cabal', or 'secret society'. The application of these terms often appears related to the ideological slant of the conspiracy theorist involved. For example, conspiracy theorists with a predominantly political worldview may interpret the conspirators as a political 'cabal'; those with a populist/nationalist angle may favour the connotations of the term 'elites'; those rooted in religious fundamentalisms may use 'secret society' for its cultic/heretic implications.

¹⁵³ The use of ideas from Hofstadter and Barkun does not mean that I share their particular theoretical takes on conspiracy theory as subject area – see chapter 2.

¹⁵⁴ A classic example here is the 1980s conspiracy theory of international skullduggery by US intelligence agencies known as 'the Octopus'. See McConnachie & Tudge 2005: 128-130.

A1.22 Identity of the conspirators

The conspirators are usually identified in relation to certain identity positions. These positions are in turn assumed to be central to the motivations of the conspirators in carrying out a conspiracy in the first place. Standard conspiratorial suspects include those individuals who occupy major positions of institutional power or authority, such as politicians and business leaders, and specific institutional bodies of great political and economic influence, such as the UN, the EU, and the Federal Reserve Bank (McConnachie & Tudge 2005). More often, however, conspiracy theorists link these professional/institutional identity positions with specific socio-cultural identity positions which are of particular significance to their ideological beliefs or worldview. Typical socio-cultural identity positions include:

- **nationality:** e.g. New World Order conspiracy theories. The United Nations is part of a New World Order plot against American autonomy and hegemony.
- **ethnicity:** e.g. anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. People of Jewish heritage are inherently 'evil' and seek to dominate and control other peoples, particularly those of Anglo-Saxon descent.
- **class:** e.g. the populist element in conspiracist thinking. The rich naturally conspire against poorer members of society.
- **religious affiliations:** e.g. anti-Catholic conspiracy theories. Catholicism is a 'false faith' opposed to the 'true faith' of Protestantism.
- **political affiliations:** e.g. anti-Communist conspiracy theories. Communists (in the dictatorial Stalinist tradition) seek to takeover the capitalist USA/West and make them totalitarian socialist societies.

Most conspiracy theorists identify the conspirators in relation to multiple identity positions. For example, contemporary American anti-Semitic conspiracy theories usually identify Jewish people as not only ethnically 'other' regarding nativist ideals of 'Americans' as of Anglo-Saxon heritage, but also as threats to Christianity due to their different interpretations of the Bible; as class villains due to the stereotypes of Jewish people and big business; as anti-patriotic due to their

perceived allegiance to Israeli over American political interests; and as intellectual purveyors of 'un-American' ideas such as Communism and Freudianism (as developed by Jewish intellectuals such as Marx and Freud) (Perry & Schweitzer 2002).

A1.23 Motivations of the conspirators

The conspiracy is regarded as motivated by the conspirators' desire for power, particularly of an absolutist or totalitarian sort. This desire is usually related back to the identity positions of the conspirators. For example, Communist conspirators are regarded as seeking to fulfil the socialist teleology of Marxist theory by overthrowing capitalism and organised religions such as Christianity on a global scale. Through their positions of power, the conspirators are regarded as seeking to exercise 'total' control over the lifestyles, behaviours, and thoughts of citizens so that citizens are rendered unaware of the existence of the conspiracy or ineffectual in their ability to challenge it and thus threaten the conspirators' power.

This desire for control is usually expressed in relation to three main spheres of human experience. Firstly, culture and society. The power of the conspirators is maintained by their control over almost all aspects of society - politics, economics, education, medicine, science, media, etc. Secondly, geography. The conspirators are regarded as desiring power on a global scale. The conspiratorial 'takeover' of the USA, for example, is regarded as a stepping stone towards the conspirators control of the entire world. Thirdly, history. The complexities involved in gaining total control over all aspects of society and all nations are such that the conspirators plans are conceived as operating on a trans-historical scale across long periods of time. Past and present events are interpreted in accordance with the workings of the conspirators: these are often used to make predictions as to future conspiratorial events. The historical scale is dependent on the particular conspiracy beliefs in question. For example, communist conspiracies for global domination are often regarded as operating on a timespan of decades across the latter half of the 20th century; anti-Semitic and Illuminati

conspiracies posit their groups respective attempts at world domination as being carried out over the course of centuries.

A1.24 Scale of the conspiracies

Some conspiracy theories may be small-scale, focussing on a specific political event in a specific country; others large-scale, in which the conspiracy is implicated with almost all aspects of society and culture, all nations of the world, and all of world history. I here present the conspiracy 'schema' developed by Barkun (2003) as a useful descriptive outline of the major types of scale typical of conspiracist thought.

Event conspiracies. Here the conspiracy is held to be responsible for a limited, discrete event or set of events. The best-known example in the recent past is the Kennedy assassination conspiracy literature, although similar material exists concerning the crash of TWA flight 800, the spread of AIDS in the black community, and the burning of black churches in the 1990s. In all of these cases, the conspiratorial forces are alleged to have focused their energies on a limited, well-defined objective.

Systemic conspiracies. At this level, the conspiracy is believed to have broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country, a region, or even the entire world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organization implements a plan to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions. This is a common scenario in conspiracy theories that focus on the alleged machinations of Jews, Masons, and the Catholic Church, as well as theories centred on communism or international capitalists.

Superconspiracies. This term refers to conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically. Event and systemic conspiracies are joined in complex ways, so that conspiracies come to be nested within one another. At the summit of the conspiratorial

hierarchy is a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors. These master conspirators are almost always...groups both invisible and operating in secrecy. Superconspiracies have enjoyed particular growth since the 1980s, in the work of authors such as David Icke, Valdamar Valerian, and Milton William Cooper (Barkun 2003: 6).

A1.25 Abilities of the conspirators

The conspirators are perceived as possessing omnipotent powers of agency in order to successfully carry out their plans. Conspiracy theorists assume that the conspirators have the political, economic, and technological power necessary to mobilise the material and logistical resources needed to carry out the conspiracy in question. Key resources include labour (workers/agents who physically undertake the tasks required to ‘pull off’ the conspiracy); technology (specialised types of equipment or large-scale employment of existing technology being required for the conspiracy to work); and financing (large amounts of money being necessary to pay for/implement conspiratorial applications of labour and technology). For example, the 9/11 truther movement posits US government agents as being able to secretly plant demolition charges in the WTC buildings – some of the busiest office space in the centre of America's biggest city – with thousands of other people – police, rescue workers, public officials et al – secretly enlisted as part of the cover-up.

The nature and scale of these resources and the degrees of omnipotence possessed by the conspirators is also related to the nature and scale of the conspiracy theory involved. For example, contemporary conspiracy theories about the Illuminati conspiracy to develop a New World Order/‘one world totalitarian government’ requires the Illuminati to possess abilities that are basically godlike in their power. Not only do the Illuminati secretly control entire governments, along with most of the world’s major finance institutions and big business corporations, but they have also developed advanced technologies for the purposes for controlling the minds of mass populations to prevent challenge/change to the conspiratorial agenda, or for killing them off as part of a strategy of depopulation to preserve the earth’s dwindling resource base for those

in power. The many conspiracy theories relating to the Illuminati/New world order plot thus present a panoply of exotic hardware that endow the conspirators with omnipotent power. These include spyplanes that spray pandemic-causing chemtrail clouds, orbiting spacebases made from back-engineered alien technology, and technologies derived from the works of scientific eccentrics and iconoclasts such as Nikola Tesla and Wilhelm Reich that are based in occult views of physical reality and are thus unverifiable by acceptable scientific standards.

APPENDIX 2

INTERNET TERMS AND CONCEPTS

A2.1 Internet terms

There are three terms that are particularly pertinent to understandings of the Internet. On a macro-level there is the notion of cyberspace, the ‘information realm within which the internet is positioned. Then there is the medium of the Internet itself. Finally, on a micro-level, the World Wide Web as a specific content space within the Internet.

A2.11 Cyberspace

The term ‘cyberspace’ can be used in both a technical and a cultural sense. On a technical level, cyberspace refers to the realms of information transfer and storage associated with digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet. Such realms are ‘virtual’ in that the elements within them are not material objects but pieces of electronically generated code – information - that communicate recordings or representations of material reality. ‘Cyberspace’ can be used to refer to the information realm specific to individual ICTs, such as the Internet, ATM machines, or faxes, and the collective information realm created from the digital convergence of ICTs into integrated networks and systems (Dodge & Kitchin 2001: 1). In a cultural sense, cyberspace “is a metaphor that conjures up an image or an idea of the potential of information and telecommunication networks” (Shields in Swiss 2000: 66) to create virtual environments with their own distinctive technocultural codes. Cyberspace is therefore popularly used to designate the experience of the Web, for example, as a “distinct plane of reality” within the hardware of the computers and the Internet itself (Shields in Swiss 2000: 68).

A2.12 Internet

The Internet is the name given to the medium formed by “a global network of computers” (Dodge & Kitchin 2001: 2), linked together by hardware (e.g. computer terminals, cables, wireless transmitters and receivers) and software (e.g. communication protocols to enable one computer to connect up with another for the purposes of transmitting information) (Whittaker 2004: 18). As a networked medium, the Internet is concerned with the open “flow and exchange” of information between computers, rather than information being sent to different computer terminals from a centralised source, as with traditional broadcast media such as television (Lister et al 2003: 165). Within the Internet there is a wide range of content, including Email; news groups and Bulletin Board systems in which users engage in on-line discussion with each other via collective ‘postings’ of commentary and content; chat rooms in which individual users engage in live conversations with each other; ‘imaginary environments’ such as text-based multi-users domains (MUDS) or 3-D visual worlds such as *Second Life*; and websites on the World Wide Web that present multi-media extensions of existing media forms (such as television, magazines etc.)

A2.13 The World Wide Web

The World Wide Web is the collective term given to a specific type of information system that forms the most dominant type of content to be found within the broader network structure of the Internet. Web content is generally defined as “multimedia data (mostly text and static graphics but also sound, animation, movie clips and virtual spaces) which are stored as hypermedia documents (documents that contain links to other pages of information)” (Dodge & Kitchin 2001: 3). Interactive communicative practices are also central to the operation of the Web. Internet forms such as email and bulletin boards require ‘active conversation’ in the form of writing and reading text-based messages; while websites also feature such text-based/conversational components, much of

their content is visual-based and involves users 'selecting' certain pieces of information from elements provided on the site by clicking on hyperlinks that access new pages of content within the website or from different ones (Lister et al 2003: 182). The multimedia and interactive capacities of Web content enable users to create and access vast amounts of different forms of information (text, video, music, graphics), create their own information (such as blogs), or navigate through online information resources according to their individual prerogatives (unlike the likes of newspapers and television where content is preselected and prepackaged for audiences). Such factors have led to Web becoming the most popular 'mode' of Internet content, to the extent that the term 'Internet' is now synonymous with the Web and its contents (Lister et al 2003: 182).

Despite the vast amount of information content available on the Web, the cultural practices that help shape web content have led to certain formats becoming established as identifiable online 'genres'. I will here refer to Burnett & Marshall's (2003) summary of the four major types of website:

1 - search engines/webportals. These types of sites help users navigate through the vast amount of information available online and select/organize specific pieces of information. Search engines such as *Google* serve as a 'channel' for users to search for and access specific types of Web content: webportals such as *Yahoo!* help 'organize a user's relationship to online information' within the categories and features provided on a personalized homepage (Burnett & Marshall 2003: 91).

2 - media sites. These come in two forms. Firstly, websites that are connected to offline media forms, such as online versions of newspapers or television news shows, or promotional/fansites connected to films/TV shows etc. Secondly, Web-based forms of traditional media. Notable examples of these include Web radio/music –download sites, or on line magazines (Burnett & Marshall 2003: 92-93)

3 - commercial sites. Major forms of these include: company/corporate websites, in which existing businesses set up a website as an extension of their commercial practices and for advertising/PR purposes; commercial trading sites that operate solely online, such as the booksellers *Amazon.com*; institutional sites, such as those set up by national/local government departments to provide information/services for citizens (Burnett & Marshall 2003: 94).

4 – personal websites. Websites developed by individual Web users according to their own needs and interests. Major subforms here include fansites and ‘topic sites’ (information/interaction relating to specific cultural products such as television shows, or knowledge areas such as paranormal phenomena); weblogs (individual cultural/political commentary); and diary sites (presentations of individual users personality and activities). (Burnett & Marshall 2003: 95).

A2.14 The Internet as collective term

As stated above, the ‘Internet’ and the ‘World Wide Web’ are terms which technically refer to different aspects of the same medium. The Internet refers to the overall medium or information system; the World Wide Web refers to a particular type of information content within that system. Although, in this study, I have examined conspiracy content that is presented on websites, I have used the term ‘Internet’ rather than the more specific ‘Web’ for two main reasons.

The first, and most significant, reason is that the Web - as the most dominant system of content within the Internet – is effectively synecdochal for the technocultural capacities of the Internet as a medium. How users present and interact with Web content is reflective of broader technocultural configurations of the Net as a whole. The information practices of conspiracy theorists – as made visible through conspiracy websites – can therefore be taken as indicative of conspiracy theorists conceptualisations of the Internet as a medium predicated upon mythic ideas of ‘information freedom’ (see chapter 5). The term ‘Internet’ therefore signifies not only the technological aspects of the Internet as a specific medium, but also connotes the conceptual frameworks within which the Internet is configured as one of the features of contemporary Western social life, such as ideas of ‘new media’ or technologically deterministic arguments that the Net is a socially and politically ‘revolutionary’ medium. The second reason is one related to writing. It is easier for the purposes of writing and reading to use one term, such as ‘the Internet’, as a signifier for arguments relating to both the Net and the web, rather than alternate between both terms in a manner that may be more technically correct but is likely to become confusing or cumbersome in terms of the flow of prose.

A2.2 New Media – concepts

The Internet and other digitally based ICTs are usually discussed in critical and popular literature as forms of 'new media'. The phrase 'new media' encapsulates a variety of technocultural concepts and characteristics that are seen to distinguish these digital technologies from those established media that are based upon analogue and broadcast technologies and practices. The following sections will delineate some of the major characteristics typical of the Internet as a 'new medium'.

As Lister *et al* discuss, 'new media' as a general concept encompasses 'changes in media production, distribution, and use', changes that are not only technological but aesthetic (in the way 'texts' are created and developed in cyberspace) and cultural (in relation to the practices by which people engage with such media and the meanings it comes to have in relation to broader social/cultural contexts) (Lister et al 2003: 13). In such an understanding new media is not something external to society that then casts its influence upon it, but something deeply implicated within the myriad structures of social life. Specific types of technology are developed and applied within society by a variety of groups with differing ideological perspectives: the cultural practices that develop around such technologies create a feedback effect suggesting further avenues for development. For example, the Web was developed as an application within the Net within a particular cultural milieu – scientists wishing to facilitate the exchange of technical data. This application was then developed throughout the 1990s by largely amateur networks of computer users into a global 'information commons' of user-driven content (Murphy: 2002), which has in turn been appropriated within the drives for commodification typical of late capitalism. While the term 'new media' connotes ICTs such as the Internet as media that are radically different from existing media systems, it is more accurate to conceptualise new media in terms of an extension of existing media systems and cultural practices. Although forms of communication that could be considered to be unprecedented have been developed in relation to the technocultural capacities of the Internet (such as 'immersive' gaming/virtual reality environments, or social

networking sites such as Facebook), much of the content presented on the Net can be considered remediated versions of earlier media forms, particularly print media such as magazines and newspapers (Bolter & Grusin 1999). Regardless of these debates, connotations of the Internet as a ‘new’ medium are central to the mythic discourses that have influenced socio-political conceptions of the Internet within contemporary western society (see chapter 5 section 5.21).

The sections below will delineate the major technical and cultural characteristics of the Internet that form the basis of its status as a ‘new’ medium.

A2.21 Technical aspects of new media

A long history of developments in the fields of communication technologies (and the media industries based upon such technologies) converged in the 1980s/1990s in the form of large-scale shifts in the ways in which information content could be produced, distributed and used. The most significant of these developments in terms of ideas of new media was **digitalisation** - the shift from analogue to digital or computer-based communication technologies. Analogue media refers to media that “exist as fixed physical objects”, the communication of information “dependent upon transcriptions from one physical state to another” (Lister et al 2003: 16). Such technologies include those requiring film stock (e.g. cinema, photography), printing presses (newspapers, books) and magnetic tape (music, TV shows). Digital media content may also “exist as analogue hard copy”, but can also exist in a virtual non-material form “as a mutable string of binary numbers stored in a computer’s (or other chip-based technologies) memory” (Lister et al 2003: 16). In such ‘virtual’ forms, large amounts of information content is able to be stored in a very small space (e.g. chips and hard drives); accessed “at very high speeds and in non-linear ways”(e.g. any computer terminal with modem offers potential access to the Web); and manipulated by producers and users in ways different from the physical limitations of analogue technologies (e.g. CGI manipulation of pixels within a digital image rather than physical modification of photographic emulsion) (Lister et al 2003: 16). As argued by Lister and other cyber-theorists, these shifts to digital forms of information “storage, access, and manipulation” have in turn led to major changes

in the way information is produced, formed, received, and used (Lister et al 2003: 16).

The changes to information storage, access, and manipulation are readily identifiable in relation to certain defining features of the Net/Web as 'new media' forms. I will here delineate these features in relation to the schema of new media characteristics presented in Lister et al (2003).

A – Dispersal.

Dispersal refers to the 'decentralised' nature of information production and distribution on the Net. 'Old' media, such as television and radio, operate on broadcast models, in which content is generally produced at a central source (such as a studio) and distributed in a relatively linear 'one to many' fashion to audiences across large geographical areas through electronic signals from central transmitting points (such as aerials). By contrast, information on new media such as the Net can be digitally produced within a wide variety of places (such as the home computers of Net users) and transmitted in a lateral fashion between and across sites or nodes of transmission and reception. Information sent from one source may travel a variety of routes between 'nodes' – not just one route, as with a broadcast model - before it is received by another computer. The key technological development here is the computer server, a device to which other computers can connect in a network fashion (as per the term 'internet'), which can both receive information (input) and send information (output), and which is connected to other servers as a node in a overall web of servers with multiple input/output connections between them (hence the term 'World Wide Web') (Lister et al 2003: 31). (It is important to remember, however, that such dispersed communication makes use of hardware networks set up for broadcast technologies, particularly the intercontinental networks of fibre-optic cables and satellite linkages set up to enable international telephone communication).

Such dispersed distribution of information is integral to new media shifts in modes of information storage and access. Dispersal affords opportunities for audiences to engage with media information in ways previously limited by the technological structures of broadcast or print media. In terms of information access, “many different users can access many different kinds of media at many different times around the globe using network-based distribution” in terms (Lister et al 2003: 31). In terms of information manipulation, such improved

access means that “consumers and users are increasingly able to customise their own media use to design highly individualised menus that serve very particular and specific needs” (Lister et al 2003: 31).

B – Hypertextuality.

Hypertextuality refers to the connectivity between elements that typifies the way information is organised within Internet forms such as websites. As defined by Lister et al, a hypertext is “a work which is made up from discrete units (or 'nodes') of material in which each one carries a number of pathways to other units”. These pathways serve as both entrances and exits for signals to connect up to – or 'link' with – other nodes. The overall effect of this nodal structure, with multiple possibilities for units of information to connect with each other, is to create the work or text in question as a 'web' of information units that can be engaged with in a lateral/associative, rather than linear/causal, fashion. In relation to websites, navigational aids, such as icons or highlighted words, operate as the actual hypertextual links between different pages on the one website or to other websites themselves (Lister et al 2003: 24).

Hypertextuality works concomitantly with principles of dispersal in establishing new media forms of accessing and manipulating information content. For instance, units of information may be dispersed across different websites or different pages within a particular website. Hypertext software, such as the 'navigational aids' outlined above, enable users to link between these dispersed units. In this regard hypertextuality becomes integral to conceptions of new media cultural practices by enabling audiences to control the ways in which they interact with online content. This marks a significant point of departure from the ways in which audiences experience texts in traditional media systems. Films, television programmes, and books present narratives which are designed to make sense in a linear sequence, from a start to an end point (obviously audiences do not have to follow this pattern – for example, on DVD one can watch chapters of a film out of sequence – but the meaning of the narrative as a linear sequence of events is disrupted in doing so). The hypertextual capacities of new media such as the Net enable audiences to experience the information content of a 'cyber-text' such as a website in a lateral or 'multi-linear' fashion. Generally there is no set sequence as to how audiences should access the pages of information contained within a website, the individual Web 'user' choosing specific pages according to

the amount of hypertextual links contained within the website, all of which make possible multiple ways of sequencing content. Hypertext therefore can provide audiences with the ability to choose how they experience a given text outside of the traditional autonomy of the ostensible author/creator (lister et al 2003: 27). In this regard hypertextuality serves as one of the main bases underlying the interactive nature of Net communication and the socio-political associations between interactivity and the ‘empowerment’ of the Net user (see chapter 5, section 5.21).

C – Interactivity.

Interactivity refers to the increased capacities provided by new media technologies for users to more directly engage with information content. Old media are regarded as 'passive' in the sense that audiences can only engage with content from the level of experiencing discrete 'texts' created by somebody else (e.g. films, TV shows, books, recorded music) or choosing between content options already preselected for them (such as the likes of TV programmes) without being able to modify or select such content according to their tastes or needs. The technical attributes of new media afford audience members active engagement with media content: the “ability to directly intervene in and change the images and texts that they access” (Lister et al 2003: 20). The term 'user' – with its connotations of utility and productivity (using something as a tool to produce something) – has therefore developed as a term distinguishing audiences of interactive new media from the more passive 'readers' and 'viewers' of old media forms (Lister et al 2003: 21). Lister et al identify the following technical features as being central to the interactive capabilities of the Net:

hypertextual navigation – although already discussed above, it is worth noting that hypertext navigation involves an explicit degree of physical interactivity in that the computer user manually manipulates a specific accessory, such as a mouse, in order to direct a cursor to 'click' on a hyperlink, often portrayed in a highly visible form as header or icon. To reiterate the ideas outlined in the previous section, such features afford each user to interact with the information contained within a website in a distinctly individualised fashion (albeit restricted by the scale of the website and the amount of hyperlinks it contains) (Lister et al 2003: 21).

registrational interactivity – this refers to users ability to provide 'input' to a particular website after registering as a user. Grades of input can vary from merely providing one's credit card details to purchase something from a commercial website to contributing content in such forms as comments, posts, or essays. Such input “then becomes part of the text” (of the website or webpage in question) and is usually “made available to other users” of the site (Lister et al 2003: 21-22).

interactive communication – alongside the distanced interaction between users of registrational interactivity, various Net forms offer the ability for directly reciprocal communication between individuals and/or groups and organisations. Here communication between users is considered in approximation to norms of face-to face communication but with the technological capacity for transcending the temporal and spatial limitations of such norms. E-mail, bulletin boards and chatrooms all enable users from different geographical locations to communicate and respond to each other in various 'real time' capacities.

D – Virtuality.

The cumulative effect of digitality, dispersal, hypertextuality, and interactivity is to create a distinct sense of user engagement with new media that may be termed virtuality. I am not concerned here with the dominant notion of virtuality, which is the construction of digital environments that invite degrees of verisimilitudinous immersion from users, as with virtual reality or gaming technologies, but in the use of the term as a signifier for “imagining the invisible space of communication networks” (Lister et al 2003: 35). In this respect I am conceiving virtuality here as referring to the nature of the Net as a distinct information or media space that is constructed from a global network of home computers and servers. Such a space is virtual in the sense that the content has no physical form outside of a mass of electronic computer code, yet enables forms of user engagement analogous with cultural activity in the real world, such as interactive conversations with other users or the hypertextual facility for users to select particular pieces of content according to their own criteria.

The virtual nature of the Net enables users to manipulate not only the information presented on specific Net formats but their very presence in cyberspace. As a virtual voice online, users are presented with possibilities to change or transcend the limitations of the physical/social self by adopting

“markers of identity that differ from their identities as constituted in the physical and everyday social world” (Lister et al 2003: 36). Users can construct identities and act out behaviour in virtual environments (such as chat rooms or bulletin boards) that may be considerably different from their 'real world' personalities. Alongside changing perceptions of individual identity, the virtual nature of the Net facilitates new kinds of collective interaction amongst users, “the possibility of forming new kinds of association and community which are not dependent upon spatial location and which can transcend geographical, social, and political boundaries and divisions”(Lister et al 2003: 36). Virtuality, interpreted here as the collective 'resonance' of other new media shifts in information storage, access and manipulation, can also be taken as a signifier for the shifts in subject positions, such as the blurring of the roles of user/creator and disembodied collectivity, that are regarded by many cultural theorists as indicative of new media cultural practices (e.g. Poster 1997).

A2.22 Cultural aspects of new media

As outlined earlier, conceptualisations of 'new' media are not predicated merely on technical differences between digitally-based ICTs and established broadcast/analogue media, but on how these technical characteristics translate into significant changes in the aesthetics of media content and the cultural practices by which audiences engage with such content. Lister et al (2003) provide the following summary of major aesthetic/cultural shifts related to the establishment of new media technologies such as the Net/Web:

new textual experiences: new kinds of genre, textual form, entertainment, pleasure and patterns of media consumption (computer games, hypertexts, special effects cinema).

new ways of representing the world: media which, in ways that are not always clearly defined, offer new representational possibilities and experiences (as in immersive virtual environments, screen-based interactive multimedia).

new relationships between subjects (users and consumers) and media technologies: changes in the use and reception of image and communication media in everyday life and in the meanings that are invested in new media technologies.

new experiences of the relationship between embodiment, identity and community: shifts in the personal and social experience of time, space, and place (on both local and global scales) which have implications for the ways in which we experience ourselves and our place in the world.

new conceptions of the biological body's relationship to technological media: challenges to received distinctions between the human and the artificial, nature and technology, body and (media as) technological prostheses, the real and the virtual.

new patterns of organisation and production: wider realignments and integrations in media culture, industry, economy, access, ownership, control and regulation. (Lister et al 2003: 12).

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CONSPIRACY THEORY WEBSITES

These are the conspiracy websites which I examined during my researches into online conspiracy culture. While only a few of these sites are directly referred to in the thesis (e.g. *Rense.com*), observations of all of these sites was important to the development of my ideas about the relationships between conspiracy culture and the Internet. Although no doubt only a small amount of the total conspiracy themed-sites operating on the Net, the sites listed below should give some indication of the variety and breadth of online conspiracism. While most of the sites deal with classical conspiracy theory, there are some examples of ‘realpolitik’ conspiracy theory also (e.g. *Lobster*).

911 Mysteries Guide.com

<http://www.911mysteriesguide.com/>

9-11 Review: A Resource For Understanding the 9/11/01 Attack

<http://www.911review.com/index.html>

A-Albionic Research

<http://a-albionic.com/>

AboveTopSecret.com: Conspiracy Theories, UFOs, Politics, and Many Other
“Alternative Topics”

<http://www.abovetopsecret.com/>

AE911Truth.INFO: Answering the questions of Architects & Engineers for 9/11
Truth

<http://ae911truth.info/wordpress>

The Arctic Beacon – the Last Frontier of Truth!

<http://www.arcticbeacon.com/greg/>

Alex Constantine's Anti-Fascist Research Bin

<http://alexconstantine.blogspot.com/>

Alex Constantine's Blacklist

<http://aconstantineblacklist.blogspot.com/>

Alex Jones' Infowars.com – There's a War on For Your Mind!

<http://www.infowars.com/>

Alex Jones' Prison Planet.com

<http://www.prisonplanet.com/>

American Deception.com: Uncovering the Deceptively Hidden Truth

<http://www.americandeception.com/index.php?page=home>

The Anomalies Network: Find the Truth

<http://www.anomalies.net/page/home>

Armageddon Online.org

<http://www.armageddononline.org/>

Assassination Science

<http://www.assassinationscience.com/>

The Atlantean Conspiracy

<http://www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/>

BenAbraham.com

<http://www.benabraham.com/>

Blacklisted News – Independent Media For Independent Minds

<http://www.blacklistednews.com/>

Coast To Coast AM with George Noory

<http://www.coasttocoastam.com/>

Conscious Media Network: Interviews, articles and More on Consciousness, Enlightenment, and Human Potential

<http://www.consciousmedianetwork.com/home.htm>

Conspiracy Bomb

<http://conspiracybomb.com/>

Conspiracy Digest: Real News That Connects The Dots

<http://www.conspiracydigest.com/hoodwinked.html>

Conspiracy Planet – The Alternative News and History Network

<http://www.conspiracyplanet.com/>

Conspiracy Science

<http://www.conspiracyscience.com/>

Conspiracy World.com: We Know Conspiracy!

<http://www.conspiracyworld.com/>

The Corbett Report

<http://www.corbettreport.com>

Core Of Corruption

<http://coreofcorruption.com/>

Cutting Through the Matrix with Alan Watt

<http://www.cuttingthroughthematrix.com/>

Data4Science.net: Dedicated to exploring phenomena that mainstream science often ignores...

<http://www.data4science.net/index.php?project=book&view=samples>

David Icke Website

<http://www.davidicke.com/index.php/>

Educate-Yourself.org

<http://educate-yourself.org/>

End Game Now – What Mainstream Media Won't Tell You

<http://endgamenow.com/>

The Enterprise Mission

<http://enterprisemission.com>

Etheric Warriors: A grassroots movement fighting tyranny with organite devices

<http://www.ethericwarriors.com/ip/forum.php>

The Excluded Middle

<http://www.excludedmiddle.com/>

FemaCamper: Destroyer of Disinformation

<http://femacampr.wordpress.com/>

The Forbidden Knowledge

<http://www.theforbiddenknowledge.com/>

Foundingfather1776

<http://www.foundingfather1776.com/>

FourWinds10.com

http://www.fourwinds10.com/siterun_data/

Freedom Force International

<http://www.freedom-force.org/>

The French Connection

<http://iamthewitness.com/index.html>

GlobalWarming.org

<http://www.globalwarming.org/>

The Good News About God

<http://www.goodnewsaboutgod.com/>

The Gunny “G” Blog & E-Mail

<http://gunnyg.wordpress.com>

Henry Makow.com – exposing feminism and the new world order

<http://www.savethemales.ca/>

Hour Of The Time

<http://www.hourofthetime.com/hott.htm>

Illuminati Archives

<http://www.illuminatiarchives.org/>

Illuminati Conspiracy Archives

<http://www.conspiracyarchive.com/>

Information Clearing House- news you won’t find on CNN

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/>

The Information Underground: Truth-Honour-Fortitude-Resolve

<http://theinfounderground.com/forum/index.php>

International Center for 9/11 Studies

http://www.ic911studies.org/Home_Page.html

Jeff Rense Program

<http://www.rense.com/>

Jordan Maxwell’s Homepage

<http://www.jordanmaxwell.com/>

The Konformist

<http://www.konformist.com/>

Leading Edge International Research Group

<http://www.trufax.org/>

Lobster: Journal of Parapolitics, Intelligence and State Research

<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/>

MadCow Morning News

<http://www.madcowprod.com>

Mars Anomaly Research: in the pursuit of Planetary Truth

<http://marsanomalyresearch.com/>

Media Underground

<http://www.media-underground.net/home.htm>

The Medusa File: save democracy and freedom from conspiracy by the Illuminati

<http://www.medusafile.com/index/htm>

Metapedia: The Alternative Encyclopedia

http://en.metapedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

Michael Tsarion.com

<http://www.michaeltsarion.com>

Montalk.net – Transcending the Matrix Control System

<http://www.montalk.net/>

Morph City – trashing failed paradigms, ushering in sanity

<http://www.morphcity.com/>

Mysterious New Zealand (NZ)

<http://www.mysteriousnewzealand.co.nz/>

NameBase Book Index

<http://www.namebase.org/>

National Prayer Network

<http://www.truthtellers.org/index.html>

The New Enlightenment

<http://www.hermes-press.com/>

News With Views.com – Where Reality Shatters Illusion

<http://www.newswithviews.com/>

OpposingDigits Vlog

<http://opposingdigits.com/vlog/>

openUREyes – Alternative news headlines: free minds for freedom (NZ)

<http://www.openureyes.org.nz/link.html>

Open Your Minds Eye

<http://openyourmindseye.blogspot.com/>

Outside The Box: Your Source For News You Can Trust

<http://alexansary.com/links.html>

Paranoia – The Conspiracy & Paranormal Reader

<http://www.paranoiamagazine.com/index.html>

Policestateplanning.com

<http://www.policestateplanning.com/>

Propaganda Matrix.com: Exposing the Fourth Reich of the Elite and Government
Sponsored Terrorism

<http://www.propagandamatrix.com/>

Radio Liberty

<http://www.radioliberty.com/>

Red Ice Creations – Explore – Observe – Be Here Now

<http://www.redicecreations.com/>

The Ruthless Truth blog

<http://theruthlesstruth.com/wordpress/>

Serendipity: Information and commentary not to be found in the mainstream media

<http://www.serendipity.li/index.html>

Signs of the Times News

<http://www.sott.net/>

Steamshovel Press. All Conspiracy. No Theory.

<http://www.steamshovelpress.com/>

Surfing The Apocalypse

<http://www.surfingtheapocalypse.com/>

Survive 2012: Ancient Mayan Doomsday, Pole Shift, and Evolution

<http://survive2012.com/>

Three World Wars – Tracking the Progress of the Planned World War Three

<http://www.threeworldwars.com/>

Terrorism and the Illuminati – A Three Thousand Year History

<http://www.terrorism-illuminati.com/>

Total Information Analysis

<http://www.total411.info/>

Truth Radio << The T.R.U.T.H. Project

<http://thetruthproject.us/truth-radio/>

True Conspiracies, the Illuminati and One World Government

<http://www.trueconspiracies.com/>

Truth Gone Wild

<http://truthgonewild.blogspot.com/>

Unbent

<http://unbent.wordpress.com/>

Uncensored Magazine (NZ)

<http://uncensored.co.nz/>

The Universal Seduction

<http://theuniversalseduction.com/>

Joan Veon – The Women’s International Media Group

<http://www.womensgroup.org/>

Viewzone Magazine

<http://www.viewzone.com/VIEW.ZONE.html>

The Vigilant Citizen

<http://vigilantcitizen.com/>

Wake Up From Your Slumber/The Truth Will Set You Free

<http://wakeupfromyourslumber.com>

Web Of Evidence: What They Don’t Want You To Know (NZ)

<http://clareswinney.wordpress.com/>

Whale

<http://www.whale.to/>

Whole Truth Coalition: Free Minds Building a Better World

<http://www.wholetruthcoalition.org>

WINDS – World Internet News Distributary Source

<http://www.apfn.org/THEWINDS/index.html>

Wing TV – World Independent News Group

<http://www.wingtv.net/>

Wise Up Journal

<http://www.wiseupjournal.com/index.php>

Zionist Conspiracy

<http://zioncon.blogspot.com/>

WEBSITES CRITICAL OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

These are websites that are either concerned with debunking specific conspiracy theories or which regularly feature material critical of conspiracy culture from a variety of perspectives (e.g. political/scientific/academic). Such websites offer much useful background information on specific conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theories, and often contain interesting theoretical observation and commentary regarding conspiracy culture and its wider socio-political ramifications.

911 Cultwatch

<http://www.911cultwatch.org.uk/>

The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI)

<http://www.csicop.org/>

Conspiracy Bomb

<http://www.conspiracybomb.com/>

Conspiracy theory logical fallacies

<http://warp.povusers.org/grrr/conspiracytheories.html>

Contrail Science

<http://contrailscience.com/>

Counterknowledge: Exposing conspiracy theories, cults, quack medicine, bogus science, and fake history

<http://counterknowledge.com/>

Crank Dot Net: Cranks, crackpots, kooks and loons on the Net

<http://www.crank.net/index.html>

Denialism blog: don't mistake denialism for debate

<http://scienceblogs.com/denialism/>

Disinformation Station: A blog for paranoids and the people out to get them

<http://texasbuddha.wordpress.com/>

Forgetomori: Extraordinary Claims. Ordinary Investigations.

<http://forgetomori.com>

Fringe Reporter: exploring the edges of Internet culture

<http://fringereporter.blogspot.com/>

Fundies Say the Darndest Things

<http://www.fstdt.com/Default.aspx>

Hot Topic: Global warming and the future of New Zealand

<http://hot-topic.co.nz/>

IdiotWars – Cracking the Nuts of the Lunatic Fringe

http://www.fontcraft.com/idiotwars/?page_id=2

International Journal of Inactivism

<http://frankbi.wordpress.com/>

Leaving Alex Jonestown

<http://leavingalexjonestown.blogspot.com/>

Mating Hedgehogs

<http://earonmouse.blogspot.com/>

Neurodiversity.com – Conspiracism links page

<http://www.neurodiversity.com/conspiracism.html>

New Yorkers Against Religion-based Bigotry

<http://nyarbb.com/index.html>

Public Eye.org - The Website of Political Research Associates

<http://www.publiceye.org/index.php>

Reading the Maps

<http://readingthemap.blogspot.com/>

Respectful Insolence

<http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/>

Screw Loose Change: Exposing the lies, distortions and myths of the 9-11
“Truthers”

<http://screwloosechange.blogspot.com/>

Swallowing the Camel

<http://swallowingthecamel.blogspot.com/>

The Amateur Scientist: a sceptical look at science, politics, and religion

<http://www.amateurscientist.org/>

The Uncritiqued: a blog about the many conspiracies which underlie just about
anything and everything you can possibly think of

<http://theuncritiqued.blogspot.com/>

Watching the Deniers: throwing a spotlight on climate change scepticism

<http://watchingthedeniers.wordpress.com>

What’s the Harm in believing in conspiracy theories?

<http://whatstheharm.net/conspiracytheories.html>