SKEPTICAL OPINIONS: Internet Conspiracies
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SKEPTICAL OPINIONS

Internet Conspiracies

Where the Absence of Evidence is Confirmation of the Claim

BRIAN K. PINAIRE

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I was teaching a writing course at Lehigh University that relied extensively on student-led class discussions. As was often the case the conversation quickly drifted away from the assigned topic and developed into a debate about Kennedy assassination conspiracies. Eventually talk of government conspiracy and coverup led students to question the reality of Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon. The pedagogy for this course urged a passive role for instructors, and thus I sat back and watched in amazement as several students set about explaining—to me and their skeptical peers—how the "moon walk" had, in fact, never occurred. The entire spectacle was apparently a ruse, it was argued, an episode of Cold War propaganda transmitted via television into the brains of submissive citizens. I scanned the room and saw lots of nodding heads. The ringleaders continued: "Don't you guys know? The whole event was filmed in Hollywood. It was all engineered by the C.I.A." And so on.

Finally, I had to get involved. "How many of you believe that?," I asked. To my amazement, 14 students out of a class of 22 said they believed some version of this account. At that point I was torn: At the university level, we encourage our students to "think critically," to question everything, and to refuse to accept the world at face value. And, in a way, I guess that's what these students were doing. But wait, Neil Armstrong never landed on the moon? Huh?

As I pressed the students on the specifics of the conspiracy ("How has this been kept quiet for so long?" "Isn't it possible that these suspicions are little more than urban legends themselves?") the source that was repeatedly offered as the purveyor of such information was the Internet. I was asked if I wanted the addresses of the websites that "proved" this version of events? Had I read (fill-in-the-blanks) blog dedicated to uncovering the scandal? How could I, the one who was encouraging them to look below the surface, accept the version of events proffered by "the Man?" I wasn't quite sure what to say.

To be sure, such distrust of authority and resistance to received accounts can be traced back to the American Revolution. And, additionally, for a generation raised on the *X-Files*, a tendency to accept conspiracy theories as facts is, perhaps, to be expected. But what seems to distinguish today's students from their predecessors is the ease with which they can search out information that confirms (or creates) their suspicions. Whereas earlier generations of young people might have exchanged leaflets or attended secret meetings in apartments, backyards, basements, and barns, today's students gather in cyberspace where they conspire to bring truth to power.

This phenomenon presents several problems. Put simply, most websites and web logs lack the sorts of quality controls and external validation that are essential components of the traditional research process. The practice of peer review for professional researchers, while by no means free of its own faults, at least has a structure in place for checking the veracity of one's claims, the propriety of one's methods, and the plausibility of one's conclusions. A typical blog, by contrast, seems to offer little more than what one person with a keyboard thinks is true about the world at a given moment. Are most students—or people in general—capable of evaluating the reliability of their sources on the net? What makes one website "truer" than another? The information may be of great value, but as students google their way through their chosen topics, many check their critical eyes at the door, which is ironic because the search for the "real truth" is generally what makes this medium attractive in the first place.

But the reliance on the Internet for such purposes is ironic in another way as well. Not only does the screen (of the computer) now represent the conduit of facts, whereas before the screen (of the television) was the willing purveyor of propaganda, but the concept of "falsifiability" is turned on its head. In the course of research, we look for ways to disprove theories; we wonder, that is, how we might go about showing that a particular claim is invalid. Could we, in other words, demonstrate that a proposition is false? If not, how can we take it as true? And yet for conspiracy theories, it is precisely this lack of evidence that purports to support claims of the advocate.

Let us return to my students' belief that Neil Armstrong never walked on the moon. According to this logic, the conspiracy theory cannot be proven—the evidence has been hidden, corrupted, or destroyed! Witnesses, insiders, and accomplices have been killed and all records that might blow the lid off the hoax have been destroyed. This leads us to the grand irony: Conspiracy theories seem to work within the confines of an altered epistemology, wherein less proof garners greater belief; where, paradoxically, the absence of evidence is taken as confirmation of the correctness of the claim, meaning that logically there is no way that such a proposition could be disproven. The more evidence presented to bolster the "official" version of events, the more suspicion mounts; the more the government reveals, the more it is assumed that it has something to hide. How do I know this? I read it on the Internet. ▼

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