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**The (dis)information highway:
conspiracy theories on the Internet**

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of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the production of conspiracy theories and paranoia within the realm of Internet newsmaking. Since the end of the Cold War, our traditional enemies have disappeared, and popular culture has embraced the conspiracy theory as their replacement. On the Internet, conspiracy theories are born, evolve and copied in a way unmatched by traditional forms of media. What makes the Internet such a successful conduit for paranoia-inspired narratives? In order to answer this question, I will examine the historical and technological facets of old and new media; how conspiracy theories disseminate through memetic behaviour and simulacra; and whether the media's recent obsession with paranoia is due to the Internet's commodification. The thesis will conclude by addressing whether our perception of the news has changed in the Internet age, and if conspiracy theories offer the possibility of narrative closure in a medium built on non-linear structure.

Cette thèse examine la production des théories de conspiration et la paranoïa dans le royaume des nouvelles sur l'Internet. Depuis la fin de la guerre froide, nos ennemis traditionnels ont disparu, et la culture populaire a embrassé la théorie de conspiration comme remplacement. Sur l'Internet, les théories de conspiration naissent, évoluent et se copient d'une manière inégalée par les médias traditionnelles. Que rend l'Internet une voie si favorable pour des récits paranoïaques? Pour répondre à cette question, j'examinerai les caractéristiques historiques et technologiques des médias traditionnelles et nouvelles; comment les théories de conspiration diffusent d'une façon mémétique et par le simulacre; et si l'obsession récente des médias avec la paranoïa est due à la commodification de l'Internet. La thèse conclura en discutant si notre perception des nouvelles a changé avec l'âge Internet, et si les théories de conspiration offrent la possibilité de clôture narrative à l'intérieur d'un médium bâti sur la structure non linéaire.

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories have been a part of our society for as long as there has been recorded history. Wherever there have been politics and power struggles, there have been conspiracies. Defined as “a joining secretly with others for evil purposes”, conspiracy has its origins in the 12th century Latin *conspirare*, “to whisper together”.¹ One often imagines conspirators gathering in dark rooms and speaking in hushed tones—a fitting etymology, indeed.

Conspiracy mentality does not depend on the presence of a real conspiracy. Reality holds no clout here; a conspiracy need not originate in actual events to be potent. Typically, the mere existence of a minority—a racial, religious, or political Other—constitutes a conspiracy for many, particularly during times of social unrest.² Even today, many ordinary Americans speak of a “Jewish Conspiracy” to control the world. Jews, readily identifiable by their distinct culture, laws, and practices, historically have been made a target of conspiracy theories by those who feel threatened by their difference. This difference marks for them a transgression of the taboo of conformity, resulting in a perceived power imbalance in the upper echelons of finance and government.

This resentment of the minority is pervaded by fear. According to Serge Moscovici, the minority is often seen historically as a contaminating force:

Threatened and dominated by alien power, one feels dispossessed. Something alien has disguised itself as something familiar and has permeated the community. Through contagion the whole environment becomes infested. One perceives it in relations, neighbors, or colleagues who belong to a minority. The members of the minority seem to possess

¹ From *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary* and *Le Petit Robert*.

² Serge Moscovici, “The Conspiracy Mentality” in Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, eds., *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987, pp. 157-8.

powers that no one suspected. These powers appear to be demonic because they exist in the make-up of one's own personality.³

This seeming possession of power is a key ingredient of the conspiracy mentality, especially in the realm of politics—the festering ground *par excellence* of paranoia. In the past, society was governed by a small group of men who could impose their will and change the course (or the perception) of events. Today, power is divided among parties and differs from society to society. Through elections and coups, power changes hands and opinions, which no one controls or can represent exclusively.

Because of this decentralization in power around the world, the rise of (post-) industrialism and political parties driven by “the masses”, people strive to explain crises that occur around them and their worsening social/political/economic situation. People become convinced that the morals of the establishment are being compromised by these crises and threaten their way of life. From a psychological perspective, anxiety becomes easier to endure when transformed into fear. This fear manifests itself habitually as a fear of an *Other* whom we can blame for our current situation.⁴ This Other is feared because it lives among the masses, disguises itself to look “normal”, and can only be exposed by conspiracy experts. According to Carl F. Graumann, if you belong to those “in the know”, you have to deal with two different opponents. You have to fight both the malice of the conspirator and the ignorance and disbelief of your own group. Hence he who “knows” has the burden of fighting the invisible enemy, and he has a mission, namely to convince or persuade the majority that they all must learn to recognize and fight the enemy in all his or her disguises.⁵

³ *ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴ Carl F. Graumann, “Conspiracy: History and Social Psychology—A Synopsis” in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, p. 248.

⁵ Graumann, *op. cit.*

The perceived enemy more often than not is a group, as conspiracy by definition involves more than one person. The targeted group is systematic and powerful enough to menace the society and its institutions. Because conspiracy by nature involves secret power agendas and the threatening of established order, it is not surprising that a majority of conspiracy theories involve government and the military—after all, it is they who hold power in the first place. Politicians and elected officials invite citizens' mistrust; who is to say they would not use it to deceive the general population?

Because conspiracy by nature involves secret power agendas and the threatening of established order, it is not surprising that a majority of conspiracy theories involve government and the military. They are largely invisible bodies because they are made up of many smaller agencies and units widely unfamiliar to the general public.⁶ In the United States, the FBI and the CIA are more notorious for what they deny or cover-up than for what they actually do.⁷ General distrust of government, especially in light of national incidents or tragedies (JFK assassination, Watergate, TWA Flight 800), brings conspiracy theorists to the fore of even the most reputable media sources.

It is far from surprising that the 20th century, with two World Wars, numerous political assassinations and scandals, and the development of advanced technology, has provoked more conspiracy theories than ever before in history. It seems as if the global mindset, according to Moscovici, is bent on proving that "The Truth is Out There":

⁶ In the case of the U.S., for example, the FBI and the CIA are more notorious for what they deny doing than for what they actually do.

⁷ The CIA crack cover-up (as reported in the *San Jose Mercury News*), the uncovering of the substantial FBI file on Frank Sinatra, made public following his death, and the admission by the U.S. government that the CIA conducted LSD experiments on unsuspecting U.S. citizens are just a few examples.

Other centuries have only dabbled in conspiracy like amateurs. It is our century that has established conspiracy as a system of thought and a method of action. Ours is in many ways a disturbing century. It seems as if it is dead set to belie, with insane energy, one after another, all principles on which it appeared to be founded, and all hopes that people had placed in it.⁸

In a poll conducted recently by *George* magazine, 75% of Americans believed that “the Government is involved in conspiracy”. Within this 75%, groups that feel that they have been politically marginalized, socially isolated or economically oppressed are the most prevalent.⁹ This “paranoid style in American politics” stems from the belief that “all ills can be traced back to a single center and hence can be eliminated by some kind of final act or victory over the evil source.”¹⁰

During the Cold War, America’s penchant for melodrama surged with *True Confessions* magazines, soap operas, and scandals. In the midst of McCarthyist America, Communist paranoia permeated the news and entertainment industry, with films like *Dark Passage* (1947) and *Rear Window* (1954), while *The Crucible* took top honours on Broadway and *The Twilight Zone* filled our television sets with the strange and paranormal.

The increasing presence of television in homes across North America during this time made the Communist threat more palpable to the average citizen, who could now “witness” the so-called effects of socialism through news reports from Eastern Europe, China, Korea and Cuba—once distant lands but now entirely accessible through modern technology. In the 1960s and 70s, the notion of conspiracy as not

⁸ Moscovici, p. 153.

⁹ Rick Marin, and T. Trent Gegax, “Conspiracy Mania Feeds Our Growing National Paranoia” in *Newsweek*, Dec. 30, 1996, p. 64.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter in Tom Dowe, “News You Can Abuse” in *Wired* 5.01, p. 55

only a foreign plot but also a homegrown menace became manifest with the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Watergate scandal.

Gossip and spectacular “revelations”, no longer limited to the phone or a quick whisper over the backyard fence, became commonplace on television and print media, reaching its peak in the 1990s and into 2000 with the invasion of tabloid television, where speculation is as valid as fact and dramatizations replace actual events. In the past few years, there has been a surge of conspiracy theories, the most common targets being the government, the military, and the question of extraterrestrial life. Why now? And why in such widespread numbers?

For one, the end of the Cold War, which began with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and quickly saw the toppling of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, left us with no logical enemy except an unknown presence that we could uncover within our own national borders, or, in extreme cases, in space. It was quite unremarkable that when a new medium called the Internet—a computer/TV hybrid that spanned the globe—was embraced by mainstream America, it would serve as the ideal forum to expose these new enemies and disseminate disinformation to an audience wider than previously entertained.

In a traditional conspiracy, individuals come together one at a time, each carefully testing the others, until all are in accord on ideology, tactics and their intended target. Secrecy is essential. When they finally move, they do so swiftly. All is won or lost in a single act. In feudal societies, if the group deposed the king and his barons, his realm and their lands passed to the chief conspirator and his vassals. Conspirators who failed paid with their heads.

A virtual, Internet-based conspiracy has the same objective—to depose a leader—but the means are different. A virtual conspiracy starts in the open and requires publicity to flourish and gain adherents. Virtual conspirators test-fly stratagems, tactics and rumors. They do not meet in secret until they have discerned

what will advance their undertaking and what will not. Moreover, by making their initial moves in the open, they attract others to their cause and to one another.

Instantaneous communication is critical to a virtual conspiracy. So, too, is freedom of expression. Though there are laws against making false accusations, virtual conspirators who channel allegations and rumours through the press or spread them on the Internet gain the protection of the First Amendment.¹¹

But, according to self-appointed conspiracy theorist Oliver Stone, when a government spends billions of dollars in secret, citizens can hardly be blamed for thinking anything is possible. Early hackers might have unconsciously had this in mind when they set out to construct a medium without boundaries. Cyberspace is a world without secrets, or at the very least a medium ineffective in keeping them. According to Jodi Dean, the absence of boundaries and normalized power structures creates an environment propitious to the development of conspiracy theories:

The so-called distortions and imaginative leaps of conspiracy theory may be helpful tools for coding politics in the virtual realities of the technoglobal information age. Not least because we've lost the conditions under which we can tell the difference: the increase in information brought about by global telecommunications disrupts the production of a normalized, hegemonic field of the normal against which distortions can be measured. The accusation of distortion is thus revealed as a play of power, one often made on the part of a dominant group against those who may perceive themselves as threatened, marginalized, or oppressed...¹²

In this age of technological prosperity, we have, so far, had the luxury to ignore the lesson Marshall McLuhan taught us decades ago: that every technology has "service" and "disservice" effects—positive and negative consequences for society.¹³

¹¹ Peter J. Ognibene, "The Anatomy of a Virtual Conspiracy," in *Salon*, May 18, 1998. [<http://www.salonmagazine.com/news/1998/05/18news.html>]

¹² Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 144.

¹³ David Shenk, *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, San Francisco: HarperEdge, 1997, pp. 40-41.

The Internet has revolutionized newsmaking, commerce and education while at the same time created an entire new set of problems stemming from this accessibility to information.

This thesis asks the question: does the Internet facilitate the creation, development and mainstream popularity of conspiracy theories? If so, what differentiates the Internet from television and print with regards to the dissemination of paranoia? Have the similarities between old and new media been underscored by the mainstream, who may be looking to retain their market advantage among everyday consumers of information?

Chapter One, “New Media vs. Old Media: The Case of TWA Flight 800”, looks at the historical and technological aspects of old or traditional media (television and print) versus new media (the Internet and World Wide Web) through the case of TWA Flight 800, a 1996 plane disaster which caused worldwide cries of conspiracy due in large part to Internet speculation and the attention garnered by one respected journalist. Old media, as is the case whenever a bold new technology enters the fore, has been wary—oftentimes accusatory—of the power of the Internet: its speed in news reporting, its market expansion possibilities, and its new sociological determinants. In this chapter one will see how an online conspiracy is created, disseminated and legitimized.

Chapter Two, “Paranews & the Meme”, examines the how online conspiracies display memetic behaviour, a key factor in their successful dissemination. An analysis of the meme will use as its example the phenomenon of “paranews”, conspiracy-centered news that embodies the viral nature of digitized information. The conspiracy meme, coupled with Baudrillard’s notion of the *simulacra*, will further add to the argument.

In Chapter Three, “Roswell.com: Myth & Millennium Online”, the online conspiracy theory and paranoia are analyzed through the lens of popular culture and

commodification. The media's interest in the Roswell incident, buoyed by hundreds of websites offering their own explanation of events, came at a time when the "millennium problem" was beginning to attract mainstream attention. How the Internet has played a role in public fascination with UFOs, Y2K and government cover-ups will be the focus here.

Finally, the conclusion of the thesis will address larger questions within this debate. Is the definition of "news" changing? As the Internet is become more commonplace in homes across North America, are we becoming more sensitive to what is bad/false and good/true? Is the Internet a source of cultural corruption or just a hyper-reflection of millennial society? And ultimately, does the conspiracy theory offer closure to narratives that otherwise resist linearity? Throughout my thesis, I will attempt to illuminate these words of Friedrich Nietzsche, who posited "if he will not be satisfied with truth in the form of a tautology, that is to say, if he will not be content with empty husks, then he will always exchange truths for illusions."¹⁴

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1979, p. 81.

Chapter One

New Media vs. Old Media: The Case of TWA Flight 800

Bad news reveals the character of change; good news does not.

— Marshall McLuhan

“Bomb Recipes an Easy Find on the Net.” “Pedophile Nabbed After Chat Room Incident.” “Cult Finds New Flock Via Website.” Since the Internet gained popularity a few years ago, headlines like the above have become commonplace in newspapers and on nightly newscasts. Public perception of the Internet is still characterized by skepticism, and even fear. With mazes of networks, unregulated mediaspace, and the ability to conceal and/or distort data, one does not have to look far for alarmist rhetoric about the Net: the medium invites scaremongering.

Whether these predilections are true or not, they are easily exploited, either by traditional media, who still hold the power and trust of most citizens, or by politicians, who say it is their duty to safeguard their constituents. In 1996, the United States Congress passed the Communications Decency Act after curtailed debate. The Act was later repealed after a public outcry, both on and off the Net.¹⁵

Many media pundits are blaming the Internet for violence, suicides, divorce rates, and contributing to the “tabloidization” of Western culture. Traditional media outlets accuse Net journalists of shoddy journalism: negligible fact-checking,

¹⁵ Jon Katz, *Media Rants: Postpolitics for a Digital Nation*, San Francisco: HardWired, 1997, p. 57.

reactionism, and faddism. New media journalists respond by charging that their print, TV and radio counterparts are ignorant of the medium and its diversity and feel threatened by Net journalism. Cause-and-effect theory, studied through the lens of the debate of violence on television, has migrated to a larger, digitized arena, the main focus being that of authenticity, the lack of which contributes to the growing number of conspiracies.

In order to illuminate the differences (and similarities) between traditional and new media, the TWA Flight 800 and Heaven's Gate tragedies will be examined. In the first case, a conspiracy theory surrounding the crash surfaced on the Net and made its way into the hands of respected journalist Pierre Salinger, who was promptly derided after vouching for its authenticity. In the second, an alleged CIA conspiracy to censor hatred through mass murder evolved on the Internet after thirty-nine people, some of whom were web designers and all of whom were members of the Heaven's Gate cult, were found dead in California.

Where these two media controversies converge is the fact that they are both products of a phenomenon called the technotragedy, a term coined by *Wired* columnist Jon Katz. Technotragedies "are caused by events that are not immediately clear or comprehensible, involving technology with often unknown capabilities. They tap into our propensity toward paranoia and fuel our lust for conspiracy."¹⁶ News stories that evoke our own ignorance about the power (and limits) of technology, technotragedies pervade the media in the late 1990's: the Gulf War, the O.J. Simpson trial, the Unabomber, the death of Diana Spencer, and the murder trial of British nanny Louise Woodward.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jon Katz, "Technotragedies," in *Wired* 6.02, February 1998, <<http://www.wired.com/wired/6.02/newmedia.html>>.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

Is the Internet responsible for our current fascination with conspiracy culture? Or are traditional media as much to blame? How can conspiracies inform the opposition or parity between these forms of media? By drawing on the theories (and musings of) of Jon Katz, Marshall McLuhan, David Shenk, S. Elizabeth Bird, Jodi Dean, and Friedrich Nietzsche, I will examine how the conspiracy theories surrounding TWA Flight 800 and Heaven's Gate inform the debate between traditional and new media, through issues of truth, authorship, authenticity and the public sphere.

On July 17, 1996, TWA Flight 800, en route from New York to Paris, exploded and fell into the waters off Moriches Inlet, Long Island. After eyewitnesses came forward to declare that they had seen a flash of light near the plane before it blew up, a message entitled “Did the Navy Do It?” was posted on August 22, 1996, to the *rec.aviation.piloting* newsgroup stating that a U.S. Navy guided missile had shot down the plane. It implicated the U.S. Government and the White House in a conspiracy to cover up the accident. Allegedly written by a high-ranking Federal Aviation Association (FAA) officer or a former Safety Chairman for the Airline Pilots Association (depending on which version one read) but posted anonymously, the email was forwarded dozens of times on the first day alone, and ultimately gained such a wide circulation that *The New York Times* ran it on the front page. On November 7, after the story had been widely debunked by experts, both on the Internet and in the mainstream press, former Kennedy aide Pierre Salinger declared he had proof of the “friendly fire” theory. Because he was regarded highly by the mainstream press, his scoop was carried on the front page of the *Times* and other major North American and European newspapers, and the lead story on major TV networks.

Where had this “proof” come from? The Internet, of course. Matthew L. Wald remarked in the *Times* that

Theorizing about plane crashes is nothing new, but it used to be called gossip. Now it takes the form of e-mail or Internet postings, and it has a new credibility.¹⁸

Salinger’s “proof” was the infamous email posting that had originated two months previously; he was even photographed holding a printout of the version he

¹⁸Matthew L. Wald in Scott Rosenberg, “Blame it on the Net” in *Salon*, 96/11/12. [<http://www.salonmagazine.com/media/media961112.html>]

had downloaded from <<http://www.lsoft.com>>.¹⁹ When confronted with the news the following day, Salinger was visibly disillusioned and the press, humiliated by its own gullibility, was quick to crucify him.

After almost eighteen months of investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) stated in December 1997 that an explosion in the central fuel tank contributed to the plane's rupture, although it refused to say definitely what may have triggered the explosion and declared the case closed. In July 1998, during the week leading up to the second anniversary of the crash, Harvard professor Elaine Scarry posited that a disruption in the electromagnetic field caused the explosion, while retired Navy Commander William S. Donaldson, in an 109-page document released to the Aviation Subcommittee of the House of Representatives and available on the Internet, re-asserted that a missile brought down the plane.²⁰ While the anniversary was marked with little TV or newspaper coverage, and Donaldson's report was ignored by all news agencies except *USA Today*, the conspiracy theories surrounding the tragedy do not appear to be diminishing on the Internet.

Why do TWA 800 conspiracies still flourish online? Thirty years ago, historian Richard Hofstadter characterized what he called "the paranoid style in American politics... the sense that all our ills can be traced to a single center and can be eliminated by some kind of final act of victory over the evil source."²¹ This "paranoid style," has created a new cultural and media phenomenon unique to the modern age: the technotragedy.

Technotragedies can be defined as tragic events in which technology is a liable cause, or whereby technology is expected to furnish an instant explanation. In

¹⁹ Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, New York: The Free Press, 1997, p. 200.

²⁰ See "What Really Happened to Flight 800?", <<http://members.aol.com/fl800/>>.

²¹ Hofstadter in Dowe, p. 54.

the case of TWA Flight 800, tons of debris were recovered from the Atlantic Ocean floor and reassembled in giant hangars over the course of two years. In spite of this feat, the cause of the explosion is still undetermined. According to Jon Katz, technotragedies represent some of the greatest, most continuously covered news stories of the 20th century, and elicit our own hubris and naiveté about technology:

They raise elemental moral questions about our time's most interesting and controversial phenomena: the evolution of technology, its limits, and its meaning. Hypnotic and irresistible, they can transfix, distract, and overwhelm us.... They pose new challenges for government; they lend themselves to paranoia and conspiracy; they capture the public imagination. They are addictive because they are puzzles and problems.²²

Once a technotragedy occurs, media transmit information, arguments and theories immediately: satellite images are shown, correspondents or local reporters are soon on the scene, experts are called in to the studio, updates are posted to websites every five minutes. Stories like TWA Flight 800 become fodder for both mainstream and tabloid journalism, newspapers and websites, and interactive and passive audiences, generating a massive web of media fascination and speculation. Before the advent of television news, events like TWA Flight 800 lasted only a few days, only long enough to report on the facts. Today, images and theories surrounding technotragedies endure for months and even years (or, in the case of the Titanic, almost a century), as they are made the subject of books, television specials, movies, newsgroups or websites.²³ According to Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, who maintain *The 60 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time* website and authored a piece for *The New York Times* on the incident, the TWA 800 conspiracy is the first to have been buoyed by the power of the Internet:

²² Katz, "Technotragedies."

²³ *ibid.*

So why should we give this conspiracy theory any further attention? Because the TWA 800 theory ushers the culture of suspicion into the age of the Internet. And it shows how conspiracy theories — traditionally dismissed with a sneer or a chuckle by the “mainstream” media — are beginning to play a part in shaping important public debates, thanks largely to the buzz they generate on the global information network.²⁴

This “buzz”, or “data smog” as coined by media scholar David Shenk, is testament not only to the power of modern technology, but also to the power of information:

Data smog...crowds out quiet moments, and obstructs much-needed contemplation. It spoils conversation, literature, and even entertainment. It thwarts skepticism, rendering us less sophisticated as consumers and citizens. It stresses us out.²⁵

Shenk’s theory is premised on the notion that information, contrary to popular belief, is neither unbiased nor neutral, but rather contaminated and potentially destabilizing to “mainstream” conservative culture. Ironically, the disintermediation of the Internet creates a power that is at times uncontrolled and spurious. Without a means of mediation (and the origins of the Internet were created precisely to disintermediate²⁶), *disinformation*—false information designed to confuse or mislead—easily infiltrates cyberspace, making it more difficult, according to numerous techno-cultural theorists, to distinguish between fact and fiction.²⁷ On the other hand, even with the mediation of network censors and fact-checkers, television news, according to W. Lance Bennett, creates its own “vicious cycle” whereby

²⁴ Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, “The Times, They Are A-Changin’ — Our Copy” in *The 60 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*. <<http://www.conspire.com/twa.html>>

²⁵ David Shenk, *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, San Francisco: HarperEdge, 1997, p. 31.

²⁶ The Internet grew out of the military’s ARPANET, a vast network of computers “deliberately given a distributed, redundant structure so that it could survive partial nuclear destruction and the knockout of military headquarters.” (William Mitchell, *City of Bits*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 150)

²⁷ Katz, Shenk, Jodi Dean and Mark Kingwell (in *Dreams of Millennium: Report from a Culture on the Brink*, Toronto: Viking, 1996), among others, who will figure in my thesis.

official versions of reality are legitimized because they dominate news content, and the news, in turn, seems credible because official versions of events fall into such familiar, standardized patterns.²⁸

These “legitimized” versions of reality dominate news content in large part due to the interests of the corporations who own the media. According to Michael Parenti, “the dominant capital interests not only structure the way the media report reality, they structure much of reality itself.”²⁹ And with the ubiquity of news sources available to consumers today, the likelihood that at any given moment multiple versions of reality will co-exist is considerable. Newspapers, for example, often scoop themselves when putting a story on their website before it goes to print, and this, only to scoop other online news sites. Whereas in print and broadcast media, import is placed on investigation and the journalist’s code of ethics, the immediacy of the Internet produces a continuous flow of news that is “instantly outdated and overtaken”.³⁰ Robert Logan, in *The Fifth Language*, says that

The Internet is a double-edged sword. At the same time that it is retrieving some of the cooperative patterns of an earlier era when the pace of commerce was considerable slower, it is also accelerating the pace of business by creating the expectation that information can be made available instantaneously.³¹

According to Christopher Hanson, information glut produces three effects: reactivity (on the Internet there is little or no time to react to an event—one must

²⁸ W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers, 1996, p. xvi. For example, news distortion at CNN has been uncovered on several occasions, including their coverage of the Gulf War, where some backdrops were manufactured in studio and an entire drama fabricated (the Kuwaiti incubator incident), and the more recent June 1998 nerve gas debacle, where the network erroneously reported that the U.S. military used nerve gas on its own defectors during the Vietnam War. (Gulf War: Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, “A Lovely Little War,” in *The 60 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*, Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1996, p. 48. Nerve gas story: <http://www.abcnews.aol.com/sections/us/DailyNews/cnn_nervegas980703.html>)

²⁹ Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986, p. 50.

³⁰ Katz, p. 28.

³¹ Robert Logan, *The Fifth Language*, Stoddart, 1995, p. 283.

publish immediately in order to scoop the competitor and keep readers), lower standards of reporting (online stories often contain information or graphics deemed disreputable in print),³² and an emphasis on novelty (due to the pace of online reporting, readers become accustomed to heroes, scandals or dramas every five minutes).³³

As new media technologies accelerate the pace of news reporting, and more and more news is reported, many people can become overwhelmed or “unhealthily addicted” to the mania.³⁴ When the FBI, the NTSB and the FAA were incapable of explaining why TWA Flight 800 exploded in the days following the crash, callers flooded television stations and newsgroups were inundated with messages suggesting various conspiracy theories.

This information “explosion”, evidenced by the exponential increase in newsgroup postings and the creation of dozens of websites devoted to the crash and subsequent investigation, was not altogether restricted to the Internet, as the Salinger incident made apparent.³⁵ It is the digital nature of the Internet, however, where technology is both the medium and the message, that renders the technotragedy, and

³² For example, in 1996 the *San Jose Mercury News* published a feature story linking the CIA with cocaine smuggling. In the online version there was a questionable graphic that juxtaposed the CIA logo over pictures of cocaine, and the author of the feature, Gary Webb, participated in an online chat in which he further exaggerated his original claims. (Dowe p. 184) Online reporter Matt Drudge, who broke the Monica Lewinsky scandal, admitted to a National Press Club audience that he “sometimes goes with one [source]” and just “follows [his] conscience”. (transcript from the National Press Club, June 3, 1998 luncheon)

³³ Christopher Hanson, “The Dark Side of Online Scoops,” in *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 6, 1997, <<http://www.cjr.org/html/97-05-06-scoops.html>>.

³⁴ Shenk, p. 36.

³⁵ Flight 800 speculation could be found on <rec.aviation.piloting>, <alt.disasters.aviation>, <talk.politics.gun> and <alt.conspiracy> newsgroups, as well as the newly-formed <alt.security.terrorism.flight800> newsgroup. Websites devoted to the tragedy include The Home Page of J. Orlin Grabbe <<http://www.aci.net/kalliste/>>, TWA Flight 800: The Facts <<http://www.erols.com/igoddard/twa-fact.htm>>, TWA 800 Case Files <<http://www.webexpert.net/roosedale/twacasefile/>>, TWA Anonymous Informant <<http://www.copi.com/articles/TWAnon.html>>, and FL800's Home Page <<http://twa800.com/>> among many others.

the conspiracy theories that surround it, so entertaining.³⁶ The technotragedy reflects not only our use and abuse of technology, but also how we use and abuse the media in order to sensationalize the incident:

Victor Frankenstein's ghost permeates the computer industry, rushing to crank out the latest machinery, but not preoccupied with mulling its consequences or taking much responsibility for who gets this technology or how it is used...What makes technotragedies hypnotic is that they almost always reveal technology's awesome power and, as often, its horrible and bloody consequences.³⁷

The technotragedy by definition causes one to ask: why did it happen? who or what is responsible? This uncertainty provides the catalyst necessary for conspiracy theories to arise. When TWA Flight 800 crashed off Long Island Sound, there was no terrorist accusation and no physical evidence pointing to a mechanical malfunction. The FBI and NTSB, despite numerous press conferences held in the days and months following the disaster, appeared, in the eyes of the mainstream press, to have little explanation for the cause of the explosion.³⁸ Ordinary citizens who had an opinion, any opinion, about TWA Flight 800, wrote email messages and created websites.

³⁶ The guilty pleasure we take in the technotragedy is also a result of our culture's fetishization of technology and death. With the seemingly hypnotic repetition of technotragedies in the media, we feel powerless but find it difficult to respond or to tune out. According to Michael Warner, the mass display of bodies (or the imagined display) that creates "an already abstracted body, assembled in simultaneity, but somewhere other than here..." that makes mass subjectivity available and desirable. The popularity of disaster discourse demonstrates "how deeply publicity has come to inform our subjectivity." ("The Mass Public and the Mass Subject" in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 248-49.)

³⁷ Katz, "Digi-Fables," *HotWired*, May 20, 1997, <<http://www.hotwired.com/netizen/97/20/index2a.html>>.

³⁸ *Time* magazine reported on Nov. 25, 1996 that the crash investigation had "exasperated federal agents", and that there was an "absence of a conclusive explanation", a story mirrored by the major networks and newspapers. Richard Lacayo, "Shot in the Dark" in *Time*, <http://www.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/archive/1996/dom/961125/nation.shot_in_the_dark.23.html>.

The tragedy raises important issues about the role the Internet plays in the spawning of conspiracy theories. As mentioned earlier, conspiracies on the Internet gain momentum because of the very way they are broadcast: through email and newsgroup postings. Anyone can post a message with a false, official-looking address, and this scenario can multiply ten-fold when the message is forwarded *ad infinitum*.³⁹ For many mainstream media pundits, for whom the Net is a giant, churning rumour mill, the idea that authenticity can rarely be guaranteed is controversial to say the least. James Coates, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, described the Salinger incident as

merely the latest outbreak of the disturbing new information-age phenomenon of bogus news... America is awash in a growing and often disruptive avalanche of false information that takes on a life of its own in the electronic ether of the Internet, talk radio and voice mail until it becomes impervious to denial and debunking.⁴⁰

With duplication being so endemic on the Internet, the question of authenticity—of an “original”—is an important one. Salinger’s “discovery” of friendly-fire evidence can be seen as a case of Baudrillard’s pure simulacrum: a message that exists in a void with no referent or traceable source, gaining credibility though multiple simulations (in this instance, email forwarding). For Walter Benjamin, authenticity lays the ground for any truth or historical claim:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when

³⁹ A popular way to get attention on newsgroups is to sign off with the White House domain, e.g. johndoe@whitehouse.gov.

⁴⁰ James Coates in Rosenberg.

substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.⁴¹

According to technology consultant Richard Thieme, whether there was ever an authentic email about friendly fire is immaterial on the Net:

Without corroboration or external evidence to use as a triangulating point, that's as far as the Internet can take us. Words originate with someone—but who? Is the name on the email real? Is the domain name real? Is the account real? Secrecy. Fascination. High energy.⁴²

Following early media reports that claimed the friendly fire email was written by an FAA official, it was revealed in September 1996 that the post had been written by one Richard Russell, a 66-year-old Florida resident and former United Airlines pilot.⁴³ Russell had intended his email, sent to a dozen friends via his America Online account, to be private. According to Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, who authored a *New York Times* piece detailing the birth and growth of the friendly fire theory online, Russell believed one of his friends forwarded his message <rec.aviation.piloting>, where it left a data trail that would encompass half-a-dozen newsgroups, websites, and mailing lists. It would eventually be emailed and faxed to major newsrooms, including *CNN* and *Newsweek*, by September, when the mainstream media hype began in earnest.⁴⁴ According to *Wired*'s Tom Dowe, "some versions changed hands half a dozen times in a day."⁴⁵

Russell's email was relatively immune towards authenticity of author and meaning, underscoring a *différance* that permeated the conspiracy theory. What was deemed the "original" had no identifiable sender (Russell's message being cut and

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 221.

⁴² Richard Thieme, "How to Build a UFO...Story" in *Internet Underground*, Nov. 1996, p. 41.

⁴³ Ian Williams Goddard, "The Veracity of the Russell Report." Nov. 20, 1996. <<http://www.bigeye.com/twa800.htm>>

⁴⁴ Vankin.

⁴⁵ Dowe, p. 56.

pasted anonymously), and subsequent versions added, deleted or altered statements that detracted from the intended referent. Who were once the intended addressees of Russell's message became the senders themselves, *ad infinitum*. The possibility of breaching the link between the sender, the addressee and the referent exists as each data packet is transmitted, a characteristic that would suggest the Internet is the best example of deconstructionist media today.⁴⁶ For Jacques Derrida, the deconstructionist nature of new media technologies threaten to impair our "critical capacities for evaluation" by the 'control, manipulation, diversion or cooptation of discourse.'⁴⁷

Print and television, however, and not without their anonymous sources. While deconstruction threatens "to impair our critical capacities for evaluation", it also leaves room for a self-conscious and ironic audience. Bird notes that some tabloid readers "seem to enjoy reading tabloids *as if* they are true, playing with the definitions of reality, wondering if it could be so."⁴⁸ The same could be said for fans of Internet-based conspiracy sites and newsgroups.⁴⁹

While conspiracies may create pleasurable diversion, they can also illuminate the weak links, not only on the Internet but in the mainstream press as well. The manipulation of the Internet-based friendly fire conspiracy had repercussive effects on network news and in major newspapers. According to Katz, technotragedies like TWA Flight 800 cause journalism, the bastion of "clear and truthful perspective," to transform into "a new kind electronic mob, transmitting distortions instead of

⁴⁶ Mark Poster, "Derrida and Electronic Writing: The Subject of the Computer" in *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 109.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida in *ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ S. Elizabeth Bird, *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992.

p. 122.

⁴⁹ Thieme, p. 41.

correcting them, pursuing revelation over truth, pathos over reason.”⁵⁰ In November 1996, after saying initially he had been given the document in Paris by a U.S. secret service agent, Pierre Salinger admitted he had received it five weeks previously “from [an unnamed] Frenchman involved in various government things who had met a man from the U.S. Secret Service who had written a paper on what happened in the TWA crash.”⁵¹ Several mainstream media outlets that had previously reported on and later dismissed the missile theory in September ran the Salinger press conference as their lead story, and were caught in the literal “web” of conspiracy until it was revealed that his “smoking gun” had been the Russell document all along.

Because Salinger believed his source to be reputable, he did not verify the facts and was only apprised that his “classified” information came from the Internet once the press recognized it as the Russell document. He nevertheless continued to stand by the document’s allegations. Online news sites berated both Salinger and traditional media for their ignorance of the Internet (the Conspire.com website advised Salinger: “Well, Pierre, if you’d get a little Net-savvy, you’d figure it out. Learn to surf, dude.”), and congratulated themselves for being the first to debunk the conspiracy theory,⁵² while “old-school” journalists like Walter Cronkite criticized the incident, saying that

People get on [the Internet] and pretend they’re giving the news and have absolutely no ethical standards on which they’re operating and no facilities, nor experience to do it. It’s a very dangerous thing.⁵³

⁵⁰ Katz, “Technotragedies”.

⁵¹ “Flight 800 missile story was on Internet for two months,” in *The Irish Times*, November 9, 1996, <<http://www.irish-times.com/irish-times/paper/1996/1109/for5.html>>.

⁵² Vankin. The military terminology and language contained in the memo had been deemed a hoax by Usenet readers, even though fragments of it persisted on the Internet for some time.

⁵³ Walter Cronkite in Edward Epstein, “That’s the Way It Is Now,” in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 10, 1996, <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1996/11/10/SC73657.DTL>>. Cronkite, who also called the Internet “a passing fad,” made his remarks at the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley the same week that Salinger “unveiled” the friendly fire theory.

While it is true that the Internet is conducive towards disinformation, it is also an important source of information, a fact largely ignored by traditional media during the Salinger incident. Jack Shafer, writing in *The New York Times* about the Matt Drudge/Monica Lewinsky scandal,⁵⁴ explains why traditional media are prone to viewing the Internet as contemptible:

So why was the criticism so intense? Perhaps because the new media exposed a wound. The real sin was that they laid bare, for all to see, how news is made. Like the preparation of sausage and legislation, the process can be ugly. Facts, rumors and hunches are collected and set down in the jigsaw puzzle of narrative. Editors and reporters move the pieces around to see if they form a pattern. Meanwhile, the competition is doing the same. The first organization to complete the puzzle wins the scoops and the readers.⁵⁵

One cannot say whether Salinger would have put his faith in the conspiracy had it been transmitted to him via regular channels, but neither *CNN*, *ABC News*, or *Newsweek* believed the friendly fire story warranted coverage when it was circulating heavily on the Internet in August and September. When Salinger, former ABC reporter and government official, endorsed the conspiracy theory it became a legitimate news story. Ultimately, the fact that the “maligned” Internet was linked to a major disaster made good copy.

The Internet, however, is a conduit for information like any other medium, and its capacity for unfettered speech, both valuable and useless, is a characteristic championed by online journalists and intellectuals. As Pennsylvania court Judge Dalzell said in the decision to overturn the Communications Decency Act:

⁵⁴ In January 1998, journalist Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek* was set to run an indictment of President Bill Clinton concerning an alleged affair he had had with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Because of the explosive nature of Isikoff's claims, however, *Newsweek's* editors pre-empted the story at the last minute, prompting online gossip reporter Matt Drudge <<http://www.drudgereport.com/>> to print the story first, thus scooping the mainstream press.

⁵⁵ Jack Shafer, “The Web Made Me Do It” in *The New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1998.

As the most participatory form of mass speech yet developed, the Internet deserves the highest protection from governmental intrusion... Just as the strength of the Internet is chaos, so the strength of our liberty depends upon the chaos and cacophony of the unfettered speech the First Amendment protects.⁵⁶

There are questionable consequences of protecting the right of unfiltered information, however, with any medium. With data entry now employing a majority of American workers, coupled with the low cost of producing and distributing information, there is today, according to Shenk, a “proliferation of expert opinion...[and] endless argumentation.”⁵⁷

Unlike traditional media, there is little difference on the Internet between a speaker and an addressee. One can read about a topic almost as easily as one can post one’s opinion about it online. The speaker, regardless of his or her qualifications, can and does become the content provider, as can those to whom he or she is addressing. This is a phenomenon unique to the medium. Although to some extent this loss of distinction between author and public was characteristic of the early days of television, it never attained the ability to self-publish that the Internet affords today. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” written in 1936, Benjamin described how technology will break down these barriers:

[T]he distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willy-nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Decision, American Civil Liberties Union vs. Janet Reno, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, June 11, 1996, in *Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition* <http://www.ciec.org/decision_PA/decision_text.html>

⁵⁷ Shenk, p. 91, 93.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, p. 232.

Conspiracy theories have always been a part of our culture. Pre-Internet, however, their audience was limited to radical political and social movements, and harmless conspiracy buffs for whom the interest was pure entertainment. On the Internet, this is no longer the case. When there is guaranteed freedom of speech, and anyone who is online can become an author and self-professed expert, it comes as no surprise that conspiracy theories are uncontrollable. Lesley Stahl, a respected reporter for the CBS news program *60 Minutes*, illustrated this point in a segment called "Internet: The Rumor Mill." Stahl interviewed J. Orlin Grabbe, whose website was one of the first to report on the TWA 800 conspiracy, and addressed the issue of authorship and accountability with a traditional media bias:

Stahl: You have a platform around the world.

Grabbe: Yes, I'd like to think that in the small, narrow subjects of which I'm writing about, I can compete with *The New York Times*.

Stahl: When you say you compete with *The New York Times*, it's actually true. If you plugged in TWA 800 [into a search engine], you might get a couple of articles from *The New York Times*, and you'd get a couple of articles from you, and an unsophisticated person really wouldn't be able to distinguish in terms of accuracy, validity, checking journalism and all that...

Grabbe: Well, that's true. The good side to this is that everyone can become a source, and the bad side is that everyone can become a source.

Stahl: Now you say flat out that TWA 800 was shot down by a phosphorous-headed missile. You don't say it's a theory, you don't say maybe, you don't say there are indications that... You just say it.

Grabbe: Yeah. And that's what I have to say.

Stahl: But you don't have any proof of that.

Grabbe: I know.

Stahl: Well...

Grabbe: So? ⁵⁹

Media critic Wendy Kaminer echoes Grabbe's assertion that, in our quest for democracy through interactivity, we "assume that everyone who has a right to be heard has something to say that's worth hearing."⁶⁰ With everyone becoming a source, there are more opinions to choose from, and more claims to negotiate. Derrida's assertion that authorship becomes "indeterminate" and "disappears"⁶¹ as computer technology erases the speaker's traces alarms many mainstream journalists like Stahl who, while believing that this trend portends danger for the masses, realize that they now share the dissemination of news with "raucous and opinionated loudmouths—us."⁶²

The ease with which one can post to a newsgroup or create a website has transformed millions of people into reporters, publishers and broadcasters. Computer writing, describes Mark Poster, "destabilize[s] existing hierarchies in relationships and rehierarchy[s] communications according to criteria that were previously irrelevant."⁶³ This rehierarchyization creates an environment in which anyone with Internet access can freely express an idea and have it as accessible as any major news source. J. Orlin Grabbe and his far-fetched conspiracy theories can now, in theory, compete with *The New York Times*. In the existing hierarchyization of communication, according to Doane,

television incessantly takes as its subject matter the documentation and revalidation of its own discursive problematic. For information is shown

⁵⁹ Lesley Stahl (reporter), "Internet: The Rumor Mill," *60 Minutes*, aired March 2, 1997.

⁶⁰ Wendy Kaminer in Katz, p. 140.

⁶¹ Poster, p. 114.

⁶² Katz, *Media Rants*, p. 69.

⁶³ Poster, p. 116.

to be punctual; it inhabits a moment of time and is then lost to memory. Television thrives on its own forgettability.⁶⁴

Computer writing, and consequently the Internet, destabilizes this hierarchization because digital information can be stored and retrieved indefinitely. When inaccuracies occur in print and on television, they are usually retracted immediately and expended “in the moment of their utterance.”⁶⁵ Conspiracies flourish on the Internet because once they are uttered, they *cannot* be exhausted. In a matter of seconds they can be copied, forwarded and/or altered, taking on new and different forms as their authorship strives to uncover information that might lead them closer to the “truth”.

The desire to find a truth—any truth—and elevate it to an almost mythic status, is by definition part of the conspiracy theory:

When you can recall things at a very high speed, they take on a new mythic and structural meaning that is quite alien to ordinary perception. So the computer...has, in spite of itself...revealed the knowledge of the mythic, pattern, structures, and profiles, all of which are quite excitedly loaded with discovery.⁶⁶

In “The Medium is the Message,” McLuhan describes how the “instant speed of electricity confers the mythic dimension on ordinary industrial and social today.”⁶⁷ He believed that myth is the “instant vision of a complex process”, much like believing in conspiracy theories is the instant gratification of what is likely a complex event. To experience the process mythically was to “recreate the experience” of the medium from within.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” in *The Logics of Television*, Patricia Mellencamp, ed., Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990, p. 226.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 227.

⁶⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., Concord, Ont.: Anansi Press, p. 295.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, “The Medium is the Message,” p. 164.

⁶⁸ Arthur Kroker, “Digital Humanism : The Processed World of Marshall McLuhan,” <http://www.ctheory.com/a28-digital_humanism.html>.

The new media are not ways of relating us to the old “real” world; they are the real world and they reshape what remains of the old world at will.⁶⁹

Jodi Dean elaborates on this mythic relationship from the perspective of nostalgia:

If the rise of radio and television occasioned a nostalgia for the sewing bees and storytelling of some people’s mythologized frontier, then the emergence of a popular appropriation of computer and communications technologies results in a similar nostalgia for a similarly mythic experience as a public.⁷⁰

For Dean, the Internet does not interpellate a public. Rather, it forms “networks of association around ideas, desires and fears that previously may floated alone outside the ‘public sphere’... [and] contributes to the production of a perspective, a way of being, a subjectivity, as extraterrestrial as a new hybrid species.”⁷¹ One subjectivity that was not traditionally contained in the public sphere is the conspiracy theory, whose resistance within the public sphere was made evident by the Heaven’s Gate tragedy.

In February 1997 thirty-nine bodies were discovered in a house in Rancho Santa Fe, California. They were first identified by traditional media sources as Web designers, white males in their twenties and thirties, and members of a group called Heaven’s Gate. Once their website was accessed, it was established that they had “left their bodies” in order to board a spacecraft they claimed was traveling in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet. After the story broke it was discovered that both men *and* women in their forties and fifties had committed suicide, and that they had been long-time followers of a man named Marshall Applewhite.

⁶⁹ McLuhan, p. 272.

⁷⁰ Dean, p. 162.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 138.

Most of the traditional media coverage focused either on why the people “committed suicide” or on the inherent dangers of the Internet. Online commentary denounced traditional media, reminding them that “Jonestown didn’t need the Web and that the Heaven’s Gate group understood themselves not as dying but as leaving their bodies.”⁷² The tragedy occurred during the fallout from the TWA 800 disaster, and regard for the Internet in the mainstream media was at a obvious low. Rumors surrounding Heaven’s Gate shared bandwidth with friendly fire theories, military conspiracies to blow up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and speculation that the government was knowingly infecting Zairians with the Ebola virus.⁷³

The mass suicide of Heaven’s Gate members, in fact, was no different than Jonestown in 1978 or, more recently, The Order of the Solar Temple in 1994. The fact that Heaven’s Gate members had a website, however, and used the medium to support themselves, led to the indictment of the Internet by the mainstream press as a vast recruiting ground for dangerous cults. In actuality the website was for their business, and contained little information about the group’s activities until shortly before their suicide. Rather, one could sample photos of the pyramids on Mars, read about their collaboration on the Human Genome Project, and learn how to make a chocolate cake.⁷⁴

Although the group had existed since the 1970’s, and manifestoes had appeared previously in *USA Today* and the conspiracy magazine *Steamshovel Press*, their link to the Internet made them an easy scapegoat for the mainstream press. Online, this scapegoating was further “evidence” for conspiracy theorists. Some believed that the cultists were murdered by the CIA in light of statements made by

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 154.

⁷³ George Johnson, “From Porn to Suicide Cults: The Net Looks Nasty,” in *The New York Times*, March 30, 1997.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* A mirror of the Heaven’s Gate website can be found at <http://www.disinfo.com/prop/media/hgate/>.

CNN spokesperson and former CIA agent Gerald Post, who stated five days before Heaven's Gate that the "Internet was full of conspiracy theorists spreading hate and it had to be censored."⁷⁵ Others posited that Heaven's Gate members had a "top secret" connection to classified U.S. military information about UFOs, and allegedly were murdered because their website vexed SAIC, a shadow company who owns Network Solutions, the body responsible for all Internet domain name registrations. According to a conspiracy website called *What's Hot*, the SAIC board of directors, reputedly made up of retired high-ranking U.S. military officials who were key figures in the cover-up of UFO information, are based out of San Diego, the headquarters for Heaven's Gate.⁷⁶

The incident raised two important points concerning the mediation of conspiracy theories: the legitimacy and trust held by traditional media, who ignore conspiracy theories unless they are supported by a reputable source, or implicate the Internet itself, and the resulting scapegoating of the Internet when conspiracy theories arise or facts are distorted. The TWA Flight 800 and Heaven's Gate incidents were both examples of this scapegoating. Dean argues that the Internet as a medium sustained both the cult and the conspiracy theories surrounding it:

Of course, after Heaven's Gate, it comes as no surprise that the Internet produces aliens. Those who were drawn to this apocalyptic UFO group, like many whose actions on the Net are important aspects of their lives, relied on a network of associations that resist conceptualization within the specialized discourses of public spheres, states, and communities predicated on the virtual reality of original, face-to-face interactions.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Gerald Post in Sherman A. Skolnick, "Heaven's Gate, Jonestown, and Mass Media Fables" in *Conspiracy Nation*, Vol. 10 No. 40, <http://www.netizen.org/arc-hive/KOO_0038.TXT>.

⁷⁶ J.P. Essene, "Heaven's Gate," <<http://www.whatshotin.com/Features/heavensgate6.shtml>>.

⁷⁷ Dean, p. 139.

For those who cannot (or will not attempt to) comprehend “the specialized discourses of public spheres, states, and communities” that comprise the Internet, the medium may continue to loom suspicious and censurable. Following the TWA 800 and Heaven’s Gate tragedies, the subject of content regulation on the Internet and the possible resurrection of the CDA surfaced in many traditional news sources. In her interview with Andrew Kantor, then editor of *Internet World* magazine, and Grabbe, Lesley Stahl did not hesitate in vocalizing her support for online censorship and labeling the Internet “a dangerous place”:

Stahl: Shouldn’t this [sites like Grabbe’s] be expunged?

Kantor: On what grounds?

Stahl: That it’s wrong, inaccurate, it’s irresponsible. It is spreading fear and suspicion of the government? 10,000 reasons...

Kantor: (sarcastically) Oh, sedition? So it’s anti-government? So it spreads fear? Who should do it, first of all? Who should be in charge of regulating this? Should the government do it?

Stahl: So you think that it’s better just to leave all this junk out there...

Kantor: Yes.

Stahl: ...than the alternative, which would be some force that you don’t trust making decisions about what stays and doesn’t stay.

Kantor: Some force that *no one* should trust.

Stahl: How is a kid supposed to discern what’s true and not true? Everything looks the same.

Kantor: Well, what if a kid goes to the library, and gets a whole bunch of magazines on a subject. Whitewater, there’s a political subject. Well, there’s some conservative magazines, some liberal magazines. Who do you believe?

Stahl: You don’t have very many magazines filled with people who are just spouting off.

Kantor: Very true. But there’s a lot of bad information in the world in general. This lets everyone have a voice, and it forces people, that ninth grade student, to look and say “Who is saying this”? Is this a real

organization saying something? It forces them to not just take what's handed to them and accept it as true. But to *think* about it.⁷⁸

Stahl bases most of her argument around *différance*—the context for much of the information we consume online is missing—and asks the important question: because the Internet as digital medium calls into question the authenticity of information, how can we distinguish rumour from fact? How can we dispel the opinion of a former airline pilot or decry the recruiting methods of the Heaven's Gate cultists simply because it appeared on the Internet? McLuhan identified this dilemma long before we were using the medium:

Perhaps the terrifying thing about the new media for most of us is their inevitable evocation of irrational response. The irrational has become the major dimension of experience in our world. And yet this is just a mere by-product of the instantaneous character in communication.⁷⁹

Internet critics presume that in order to put an end to the irrationality and subsequent transmission of disinformation, we must regulate the use of new technologies that accentuate more controversial notions of reality. This argument ignores the fact that the by-product of any new medium is to some extent disinformation. At the same time, traditional media disciples invoke the truth value in television with little regard for their own medium's intrinsic decontextualizing and seductive nature.⁸⁰ Mary Ann Doane argues that television can indeed incite disinformation—the technology itself makes it possible to manipulate informational texts:

⁷⁸ Lesley Stahl (reporter), "Internet: The Rumor Mill," *60 Minutes*, aired March 2, 1997.

⁷⁹ McLuhan, "The Media Fit the Battle of Jericho," p. 311.

⁸⁰ In Moses Znaimer's 1995 documentary *TVTV*, tabloid talk show host Jenny Jones asserted that "I'm exactly what you see," Camille Paglia stated that television "gives you a realistic sense of life" and "shows the truth," and prominent news consultant Jacques de Suze said that news is "not controlled, tightly wrapped, and packaged." (Lianne McLarty, "Television: The Great Wired Hope," in *TVTV: The Debate*, ed. Robert Anderson *et al.*, Vancouver: Canadian Journal of Communication, 1996, p. 27.

If information is everywhere, then the true scandal of *disinformation* in the age of television is its quite precise attempt to *place* or to *channel* information—to direct its effects. Even if it is activated through television, it uses broadcasting in a narrowly conceived way. Disinformation loses credibility, then, not only through its status as a lie but through its very directedness, its limitation, and its lack of universal availability. The scandal is that its effects are targeted. Disinformation abuses the system of broadcasting by invoking and exploiting that automatic truth value associated with this mode of dissemination—a truth value not unconnected to the sheer difficulty of verification and the very entropy of information.⁸¹

So begs the question: if we do not believe what we see on television, why should we believe what we read on the Internet? If we question the meaning of truth on the Internet, argues Dean, it becomes easier to trust in other types of mediated communication that may serve to justify our Net-based paranoia.⁸² This “fugitivity of truth,” concurs Dean, either expands our possibilities, or evokes insecurity that can be remedied through trust.⁸³

For Serge Proulx and François Yelle, however, truth can only be reflected upon through forgetting, something for which the Internet is ineffective:

a critical reflection on the regime of truth installed by the current omnipresence of electronic images is favoured by a tactical distancing in the face of the cult of immediacy and the forgetting of the past systematically practiced by the televisual media.⁸⁴

On television, images appear momentarily and are only repeated should the network choose, but on the Internet content can remain indefinitely, whether it be outdated, disproved or simply lies. Websites devoted to the TWA disaster remain online three years after the disaster, some pages veritable time capsules of public

⁸¹ Doane in Mellencamp, p. 224.

⁸² Dean, p. 139.

⁸³ Dean, p. 55.

⁸⁴ Serge Proulx and François Yelle, “When a Showman Pontificates: In the Beginning Was... Moses!” in *TVTV: The Debate*, ed. Robert Anderson et al., Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing, 1996, p. 38.

frustration at the time. While the original Heaven's Gate site was removed the day following the suicides (fueled by speculation that the continuing presence of their website might spark copycat incidents or at the least attract more adherents) , mirror sites appeared all over the world and can still be viewed to this day.

Certainly these two tragedies would not have had the impact they did had the Internet not played such a key role in the events' *dénouement*. The Internet was the medium through which the alleged TWA conspiracy was publicized and through which the Heaven's Gate cultists made their living—eventually being censored because of it. These events served, rightly or wrongly, to illuminate the question of authorship and authenticity on the Internet. While television news standards are stringent enough to prevent most incidents of false reporting, the TWA friendly-fire reports and Heaven's Gate military/UFO cover-up allegations were symptomatic of the Internet's unregulated content. Without the Internet's presence in millions of homes around the world, and the illiteracy of many computer users with regards towards the new medium,⁸⁵ the conspiracies surrounding these events, would not have likely found their way so quickly into the mainstream press (the JFK conspiracy, for example, took several years—until the Jim Garrison/Clay Shaw trial—before making headline news). It would be presumptive to conclude that the Internet is responsible for the present-day conspiracy culture, for the general tabloidization and post-Cold War, pre-millennial quest for the "truth" have given conspiracy theorists wider media recognition than in the past. Like the search for God, however, the pursuit of the truth is a timeless.

⁸⁵ Many articles have been written in online and print magazines on Internet users who continue to be duped by false news sites, email hoaxes and virus scares, regardless of how long they have been online. See *C|NET* <<http://www.cnet.com>> and *ZDNet* <<http://www.zdnet.com>>.

According For Friedrich Nietzsche, truth is in effect only a belief in one's possession of truth.⁸⁶ If one discovered the truth behind conspiracy theories, or any purported news story on the Internet, for that matter, the fascination and pleasure one derives from not knowing would be gone. For R.L. Rosnow and G.A. Fine,

truth is only accepted when it is consistent with one's frame of reference. Information is processed in light of the assumptions one holds about the nature of the world, for knowledge is culturally determined.⁸⁷

In postmodern culture, truth is often fetishized to the extent that it is all that matters. This is not the case on the Internet or on television. People want information, and quickly, as made evident by the popularity of CNN and its online counterpart.⁸⁸ While there are important differences between traditional and new media where conspiracies are concerned, *i.e.* increased speed of reporting, disintermediation and ease of authorship in the case of the Internet, they are in large part heightened characteristics already present to some extent in print and television. As vast amounts of information, opinions, and imagery inundate us from all sides, however, we have to learn how to be skeptical and patient. Ultimately, we have to accept the ironic reality that, in an era when information is transmitted instantaneously, the truth, if it exists at all, is bound to arrive slowly.

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, p. 94.

⁸⁷ Rosnow and Fine in Bird, p. 121. (argument also made in Bennett, p. 169.)

⁸⁸ CNN.com is regularly one of the top 20 most visited sites on the Web, according to *Internet World* magazine. <<http://www.iworld.com/>>

Chapter Two:

Coming Soon to a Screen Near You: Paranews & The Meme

*To believe too much is dangerous, because it is the near neighbor of
unbelief.*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

PROLOGUE (received by email the other day):

WARNING, CAUTION, DANGER, AND BEWARE!

Gullibility Virus Spreading over the Internet!

WASHINGTON, D.C.— The Institute for the Investigation of Irregular Internet Phenomena announced today that many Internet users are becoming infected by a new virus that causes them to believe without question every groundless story, legend, and dire warning that shows up in their inbox or on their browser. The Gullibility Virus, as it is called, apparently makes people believe and forward copies of silly hoaxes relating to cookie recipes, email viruses, taxes on modems, and get-rich-quick schemes.

"These are not just readers of tabloids or people who buy lottery tickets based on fortune cookie numbers", a spokesman said. "Most are otherwise normal people, who would laugh at the same stories if told to them by a stranger on a street corner". However, once these same people become infected with the Gullibility Virus, they believe anything they read on the

Internet.

"My immunity to tall tales and bizarre claims is all gone", reported one weeping victim. "I believe every warning message and sick child story my friends forward to me, even though most of the messages are anonymous."

Another victim, now in remission, added, "When I first heard about Good Times, I just accepted it without question. After all, there were dozens of other recipients on the mail header, so I thought the virus must be true". It was a long time, the victim said, before she could stand up at a Hoaxes Anonymous meeting and state, "My name is Jane, and I've been hoaxed". Now, however, she is spreading the word. "Challenge and check whatever you read," she says.

Internet users are urged to examine themselves for symptoms of the virus, which include the following:

*The willingness to believe improbable stories without thinking.
The urge to forward multiple copies of such stories to others. A
lack of desire to take three minutes to check to see if a story is
true.*

T.C. is an example of someone recently infected. He told one reporter, "I read on the Net that the major ingredient in almost all shampoos makes your hair fall out, so I've stopped using shampoo". When told about the Gullibility Virus, T. C. said he would stop reading email, so that he would not become infected.

Anyone with symptoms like these is urged to seek help immediately. Experts recommend that at the first feelings of gullibility, Internet users rush to their favorite search engine and look up the item tempting them to thoughtless credence. Most hoaxes, legends, and tall tales have been widely discussed and exposed by the Internet community. Courses in critical thinking are also widely available.

~

In an age of wireless communication and information superhighways, the role of reality and fiction—and of truth and lies—has taken on a whole new twist. The Internet is quickly displacing the television as the source for breaking news, as round-the-clock news sites get their information online quickly and often without the red tape of editors, producers and censors. Its far-reaching, unmediated publishing opportunity has afforded thousands of would-be journalists, or rumour-mongers for that matter, an international audience.

Because the Internet does not yet (or may never) have the same journalistic standards as traditional media (*i.e.* the same editing, filtering, etc.), the transmission of information happens more quickly: even on the websites of prominent daily newspapers, the text of a story might have a more sensationalist bent than in the print version.⁸⁹ As was elaborated in Chapter I, this has led many media pundits to label the Internet a giant rumour mill or, at the very least, a medium rife with speculation, anonymous sources and bogus facts. Often those most critical of the Internet are those who are the least familiar with its idiosyncrasies. There remains, however, an aspect of the medium that helps to substantiate these criticisms: the absence of the original—or, its corollary, the excess of the copy.

In a world where simulation creates warped versions of reality, half-truths and transparent fiction, the tiniest conjecture can spread like a virus, evolving into a full-blown conspiracy theory that may infect Internet users and regularly dupes reputable

⁸⁹Take the case of the *San Jose Mercury News*, which published an exposé of a CIA crack conspiracy which was never published in its print version. See Rebecca Vesely, "Watchdog Snaps at Major Media for CIA-Crack Coverage" in *Wired News*, Dec. 19, 1996. <<http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,1073,00.html>>

media establishments. The mere mention of TWA Flight 800 and Pierre Salinger makes this painfully evident.

In order to understand the duality of reality and fiction on the Internet, the notion of the *meme*, and its online corollary *paranews*, must be examined further. Paranews stories, be they about downed airliners, assassinated presidents or UFOs, emerge from the ether, and develop their own set of values, experts, and alternate realities. Acting like a virus, this form of “news” permeates the Internet with stories that, on the surface, seem perfectly legitimate and newsworthy.

This chapter will examine three aspects of paranews: the evolution of paranews and its role as a memetic simulacrum, *i.e.* erasing traditional sources (or “originals”) of information and infecting our minds; how the Internet, while often criticized for being a repository for disinformation, is redefining the way we think about information and its truth value, and; how disinformation might be regarded as entertainment for the skeptical masses. Using the works of Jean Baudrillard, Richard Brodie and Jodi Dean as primary sources, I will show how the Internet, rather than being either a social scourge or a democratic ideal, has inherent self-reflexive properties made evident by paranews that make it a fluid and postmodern medium.

*We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.*⁹⁰

— Jean Baudrillard

While Baudrillard's thesis on "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" focuses on traditional forms of mass media (mainly television and radio), it resonates particularly well when applied to the Internet. The Internet, by definition, is possibly the most ideal form of mass media. Its presence on the home computers of millions of users worldwide has quickly caused an information overload. Now local, national and international news stories, once confined to broadcast and print media, is available with the click of a mouse. As a result, the media are everywhere. The Internet reaches millions and offers news bites instantaneously—and from parts of the world that our local and national broadcasts ignore.⁹¹

While tuning in to traditional media is largely a passive experience, the Internet fosters active participation: it is a borderless forum for the exchange of ideas, interpersonal communication, and growth of virtual communities through email, online bulletin boards and chat among other devices. Baudrillard calls participation the "phantom content, this homeopathic grafting, this awakening dream of communication."⁹² Knowledge production occurs as often as consumption; the result of this consumption is a new production. Connecting to previously unknown networks, linking to new sites, replying to news stories through email or online

⁹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 79.

⁹¹ Widespread Internet access, however, is still largely limited to middle- and upper-class incomes in North America, Western Europe and Australia. Until it becomes more affordable and the telecommunications industry in developing countries advances, it will remain a potential ideal.

⁹² *ibid.*

bulletin board postings—these are some ways in which one can participate without even being cognizant of one's actions.

On the Internet there is a greater participation, and a sense of belonging, than was ever realized with television or radio. Internet users (usually “newbies”), like their channel-surfing predecessors, often react obsessively to the new medium and click through as many sites as they can, reading only snippets of information on each page. Because the computer dematerializes the written word, rendering it as rows of zeroes and ones in its most basic form, it becomes easier to pop the information in like a pill, swallow unconsciously and move onto the next drug.⁹³ Words on a screen appear ephemeral and instantly alterable (pages come and go, sites change daily), much like our thoughts or the spoken word. Mark Poster, in *The Mode of Information*, posits that the mind/body model is obscured by the immateriality of the pixelated word:

At the phenomenological level of the user's experience, computer writing resembles a borderline event, one where the two sides of the line lose their solidity and stability. Positioned on the line dividing subjectivity and objectivity, computer writing brings a modicum of ambiguity into the clear and distinct world represented in Cartesian dualism.⁹⁴

This follows the Baudrillardian belief that computer-mediated communication displaces mind from body. In *Transparency*, Baudrillard writes of “Telecomputer Man”, who perceives through the screen “a very special kind of distance which can only be described as unbridgeable by the body.”⁹⁵ The screen creates a barrier, but the medium allows for virtual travel within its circuits, not by the body, but by the mind (represented by a simulated self or avatar).⁹⁶ As with all new technologies, a new

⁹³ Here I paraphrase Ezra Pound's famous quote, “Knowledge is a drug.”

⁹⁴ Poster, pp. 111-12.

⁹⁵ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, New York: Verso, 1993, p. 55.

⁹⁶ Much of Baudrillard's thought in regards to virtuality was synthesized by Mark Nunes in “Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity”, *Style* 29, 1995, pp. 314-27.

configuration of reality perception arises, both in regards to self and society. This comes in the form of a trauma. We are confronted with both the real and the virtual, a “stereo-reality”, where referents are non-existent—we are everywhere and nowhere are the same time. Paul Virilio posits that the Internet has created a “disorientation of alterity”—a world dominated by instantaneous communication and disinformation that spreads through networks around the world.⁹⁷

Virilio’s point is elaborated by Charles Levin, who describes the Internet as a “self-perpetuating growth system...resistant to administrative regulation and control”. Like the infamous “ghost in the machine”, the Net develops a life of its own, dependent on information overload to grow and change:

It feeds off everything with which it connects, converting all it encounters into self-substance. Expansion is limited only by the absolute parameters of its ecological niche: the continuing supply of labour, fresh blood, electronic interfaces.⁹⁸

With the extensive news sources available on the Internet, information drain is no surprise. Everything happens at once, so once something has been read online it may already be obsolete. As a result, the future moves closer to the present, and it becomes easier for us to believe and disbelieve at the same time. Ironically, it is often the most extraordinary stories that make us suspend our disbelief. The Roswell incident, to be discussed in Chapter 3, is an example. To believe that alien life forms landed outside a small desert town in New Mexico, were captured by the U.S. military and then dissected seems preposterous, yet believing it makes ironic sense in light of eyewitness accounts, allegedly leaked covert reports, and the growing pre-millennial suspicion surrounding top-secret governmental activities.⁹⁹ As we attempt

⁹⁷ Paul Virilio, “Red Alert in Cyberspace!” in *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1997.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/surf/020597surf-redalert.html>>

⁹⁸ Charles Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Cultural Metaphysics*, London: Prentice Hall, 1996, p. 174.

⁹⁹ Not to mention the cultish popularity of *The X-Files*.

to find out the truth behind these incidents, *paranews* provides a convenient way to explain what we do not yet know.

For all intents and purposes, *paranews* could indeed be news, or perhaps a distorted picture painted by a clever mind, or even the fruit of a careless journalist. Regardless of its origin, *paranews* uses the Net's disposition towards exposés and melodramas to spread disinformation. While this characteristic is by no means limited to the Internet, the newness of the medium allows for a legitimacy (brought on by a convincing domain name and expert design) that is less apparent in print and on television.¹⁰⁰ According to Tom Dowe, the Internet's ability to propagate *paranews* is boundless:

Like a finely tuned seismograph, an ever more sophisticated chain of Web links, email chains, and newsgroups is now in place to register even the slightest tremor in the zeitgeist, no matter how small, distant, or far-fetched. And then deliver it to the desktop of anyone who...[declares] "I Want to Know!"¹⁰¹

Disseminators of false information rely on our age-old desire to know (and to speculate about what we do not), and the growing numbers of Internet amateurs, in order to gain a large part of their audience. This deceptive information, called "disinformation," is

deliberately provided to groups or individuals for the purpose of obfuscating an issue, and/or effecting a specific psychological response (such as denial, disbelief, fear, ridicule etc.)... The most effective disinformation is information which is related to a truth, at least in part, but which is then embellished and deliberately distorted by combining disinformation with the information. The presence of a minimal but

¹⁰⁰ During the 1996 U.S Presidential election, parody sites were displayed with such seemingly sanctioned domains as www.dole96.com in order to fool people into visiting their sites and reading their cutting, if not overwhelmingly derogatory, satire. While not paranoia-driven, the site was a fine example of how legitimate-sounding domains can draw visitors and engage them through popular design metaphors and/or skillfully worded content, a tactic used by many *paranews* sites.

¹⁰¹ Dowe, p. 54.

adequate degree of truth enables the false information to be more readily accepted, or for the intended psychological response to occur.¹⁰²

Disinformation is made up of silly (like the infamous “Microsoft buys the Catholic Church” email hoax), harmless (e.g. urban legends) but sometimes dangerous ideas (e.g. Holocaust denial sites). Conceived in a human mind and transmitted virally through a computer, it then copies itself to other computers and storage media. Finally, if the disinformation has staying power, it may make the jump to traditional media, resulting in a campaign of untruths that gains additional legitimacy from the printed word or a trusted news anchor. According to theologian Andrew Brown, who quotes psychologist Susan Blackmore, it is also possible for factual information to degrade into disinformation:

‘Language allows for more accurate copying of thought as it grows more precise. Writing makes copying still more accurate, and thus will increase the size of the memosphere.’ The Internet is the most recent expansion of this force. What has happened with the development of the Internet is a huge step toward high-fidelity copying—with just enough errors to make evolution possible.¹⁰³

Brown argues on the side of caution here, as the statement “just enough errors” downplays the ease with which digital information can be altered while maintaining the semblance of truth.¹⁰⁴ (Esther Dyson remarked once that “People who aren't looking for truth but for confirmation will find it” on the Net.)¹⁰⁵ Paranews falls squarely into these simulated truth scenarios.

¹⁰² Stephen J. Greer, “UFO/ETI Disinformation” in *The Center for the Study of Extraterrestrial Intelligence*. <<http://www.cseti.org/fdis.htm>>

¹⁰³ Andrew Brown, “The Meme Hunter,” in *Salon*, July 10, 1997.

<<http://www.salonmagazine.com/july97/21st/meme970710.html>>

¹⁰⁴ This point was made glaringly evident during the fallout surrounding the TWA Flight 800 disaster. Several messages had been posted to Internet newsgroups with the .mil domain, each successive version containing minor alterations, but nonetheless appearing to originate from a reliable source.

¹⁰⁵ Esther Dyson in Dowe, p. 185.

On a social level, the glut of information, which creates an ideal environment for the germination of paranews, “[is] absorbed in the only dominant form of the medium. Only the medium can make an event—whatever the contents, whether they are conformist or subversive.”¹⁰⁶ Information is circulated and re-circulated, creating a closed, hyperreal mediaspace. Baudrillard’s theory posits that “information devours its own content” because, “*it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication.*”¹⁰⁷

Today’s mediaspace, according to Baudrillard, dissolves content.¹⁰⁸ While this statement is quite extreme, the Internet, with millions of websites, is an easy target for this type of alarmist rhetoric: many mainstream journalists have labeled it a hazy mess of news reporting, rumour-mongering, opinion pieces and demented rants.¹⁰⁹ The Net itself has become the most accessible source of subversive news—creating its own mythology that is recycled constantly in traditional print media and on television.

While Baudrillard does not speak of the Internet in this article, and only ever briefly talks about the medium in an interview granted in 1995, he synthesizes its post-McLuhanesque dimension by stipulating that traditional media are now jeopardized by the dissolution of the medium itself:

There is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of the medium and of the real in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined.¹¹⁰

Mass audiences are different from the open or closed crowds posited by Canetti in *Crowds and Power*. They are *electric crowds* who live at an accelerated

¹⁰⁶ Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media,” p. 82.

¹⁰⁷ Baudrillard, p. 80.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁹ Johnson.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

pace, moving from sound bite/byte to sound bite/byte and ingesting just enough information to keep themselves entertained.¹¹¹ These postmodern crowds are absolutist and despotic, in a sense, because they are disembodied. Without the body, explains Eric McLuhan in *Electric Language*, no reference exists on which to base individual perception or experience—therefore “people who participate in the same thing at the same time participate in each other.”¹¹² This absence of referentiality makes us amenable to the myth of an online utopia where information is free. By subscribing to this myth, however, our sense of temporal reality is disrupted, allowing for the parasitical spread of information. Without the ability to identify the source and age of online information, we are compelled to read more, in constant search of the original but instead finding memetic variations. According to Charles Levin, if we consider the Internet to be viral in nature,

it [then] depends for its survival on the evolutionary resilience of its host. If the host is the human nervous system, as McLuhan suggested, then the invasion of the Internet will depend on adaptive mutations of the nervous system itself.¹¹³

While my focus here is not biotechnological symbiosis, I want to emphasize the role of the brain, or more relevantly the mind, in this parasitical metaphor. While the Internet has fostered positive global interaction and an unparalleled access to information, it has also generated a *catastrophe of meaning* that has allowed paranoia—“a fear of social death and incorporation into the machine”¹¹⁴—to fester. In order to regain the meaning that has been diluted through excess of information,

¹¹¹ Eric McLuhan, *Electric Language: Understanding the Present*, Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co., 1998, p. 143.

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 145.

¹¹³ Levin, p. 174.

¹¹⁴ Iain Boal, “A Flow of Monsters: Luddism and Virtual Technologies” in *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1995, p. 9-10.

we must allow ourselves to be infected with the media viruses that cause paranoia, so that we can better understand how disinformation spreads.

Enter the meme. Memes, or mind viruses, are units of information or “infectious pieces of our culture that spread rapidly throughout a population, altering people’s thoughts and lives in their wake. [...] They are the building blocks of your mind, the programming of your mental ‘computer’.”¹¹⁵ Coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, the meme is the basic unit of cultural imitation, and reproduces by being passed from mind to mind. An “internal representation of knowledge that results in outward effects on the world,” the meme is to culture what the gene is to biology.¹¹⁶ Instead of traveling through our circulatory system, memes travel through media networks. Typically associated with mnemonic cues, popular memes include advertising jingles, superstitions, chain letters, sex scandals, clothing styles, pyramid schemes and cult religions. “Media virus shells,” as Douglas Rushkoff calls them, will attach themselves conspicuously to whatever amenable cultural environments they detect, injecting “more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of *ideological codes*.”¹¹⁷ Once established within a host, a meme can also spawn mutant copies of itself, either defective or improved, that alter the original message and may take on new and more ideologically potent forms—a key feature that will be examined subsequently in greater detail.

¹¹⁵ Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*, Seattle: Integral Press, 1996, pp. 14-15.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹⁷ Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture*, New York: Ballantine, 1996, p. 10.

Memes are everywhere—in our consumer habits, our educational system, our faith (be it in religion or government), and our relationships—but it is only the most effective ones that infect and replicate from mind to mind. When there are susceptibilities within society, (*i.e.* when our attitudes about a particular subject are not hard and fast), and ideologies are scant, memes find it easy to self-generate— attracting our attention and penetrating minds at breakneck speed. It makes sense, then, that memes which entice, disturb, anger, or threaten will thrive the most.

Panic-driven, or paranoid memes, are some of the most identifiable. Buzzwords like *danger*, *epidemic*, *cover-up*, *scandal*, *unexplained*, and *paranormal* are so commonplace that without them the evening news would likely seem quite lackluster. Witness the rise of tabloid television and programs that tap into the supernatural—everywhere we look there are stories about dangerous new diseases, celebrity murders with dubious drug/mafia connections, right-wing terrorist plots, nymphomaniac presidents, or alien abductions. Routinely we idealize new technology as the ultimate social prosthesis and democratizing agent, despite the fact it can create “a paranoiac environment; mediating an omnipotence phantasy [and] convert[ing] internal threats into thing-like enemies.”¹¹⁸ Especially in this post-Cold War society, the need for new enemies has resurfaced. There is now a proliferation of sophisticated surveillance and simulation technologies aimed at monitoring “an unidentified and amorphous threat ‘out there’.”¹¹⁹ These new technologies, however, create the environment through which an unseen enemy can exist: a structure itself predisposed to paranoia.

The Internet, with a built-in, virtual panopticon, is tailor-made for the efficient replication, mutation and survival of paranoid memes. Online databases, search

¹¹⁸ Kevin Robins and Les Levidow, “Soldier, Cyborg, Citizen” in *Resisting the Virtual Life*, p. 112.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

engines, and news archives save information long after its initial publication, and data storage utilities keep copies of our hard drives. The Internet promises “all information, all the time”, and its origins do little to bolster the need for public scrutiny. Paul Gilster, author of *Digital Literacy*, explains the phenomenon:

There's a lingering public perception...of the computer's ferocious accuracy: computers don't make mistakes. Couple that with the general public's sense of the Internet as having been developed by the academic-scientific community, under government auspices, as a high-level information source, and you do indeed have some people accepting far too quickly any information that appears on a computer screen simply because it does appear on a screen.¹²⁰

Indeed, the wealth of data on the Internet is often overwhelming and ambiguous, making it more difficult to ascertain where the mainstreaming of the Internet begins and ends. This is not surprising considering the chaotic nature of the medium. With thousands of networks connecting millions of computers around the world, the moniker “electronic frontier” is not misplaced. Governments are only now starting to enact laws that will protect users’ privacy, prohibit the use of spam, and, in some jurisdictions, filter for “appropriate” content. In the meantime, the Internet is an anarchist’s paradise. With no international governing body and no way to control the flow of information, this new medium is ground zero for alternative media and underground countercultures to flourish. When you have access to a global, unmediated space such as the Internet, your information can reach 200,000 readers whereas before it might reach only twenty. Internet users share the same mediaspace, regardless of race, culture or gender, and can publish a website with the same impact as the most prominent media establishments-- online reporter Matt Drudge being the most famous example.

¹²⁰ Paul Gilster in Keith Ferrell, “Truth, Lies and the Internet,” *C|NET*, Oct. 9, 1997.
<<http://www.cnet.com/Content/Features/Dlife/Truth/index.html>>

This deregulation of mediaspace also displaces our notion of traditional communities and social memory. According to social historian Iain Boal, “all interiority and psychological depth are either effaced or reappear under the guise of ‘the irrational’ and ‘the subjective’.”¹²¹ If the medium is inherently irrational and subjective, what should we believe? How do we know what is fact, and what is fiction?

From an essentialist standpoint, you cannot ever really know. Digital information lacks authenticity and exists in the realm of third-order simulacrum. Baudrillard’s definition of the simulacrum— “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference”— describes with uncanny accuracy the Internet and how it works.¹²² Compared to other traditional media, the Internet is quite possibly Baudrillard’s ultimate incubator. Like speech, writing, and print, the Internet represents information through symbols and icons, but its digitized, fleeting format all but removes the symbols from their intended context.¹²³ Original news items, opinions, and studies—credible or not—often are transmitted from writer to reader unadulterated. From speech, to writing, and then print the distance between the reader and the producer and the consumer has become more and more great.¹²⁴

Now, on the Internet, images are digitized and any text can be uploaded with the click of a mouse. Using a simple graphics program, photos can be retouched or altered altogether. Without correlation to other data, digitized information is

¹²¹ Boal, p. 10.

¹²² Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 6.

¹²³ Richard Thieme, “How to Build a UFO...Story” in *Internet Underground*, Nov. 1996, p. 38.

¹²⁴ This bears a striking resemblance to the first books published, which were of a religious nature. The reason Luther succeeded in breaking off from the Catholic Church was because his texts were printed and distributed unhindered, making it difficult for the Church authorities to suppress him. (J. Orlin Grabbe, “The Internet and the Death of the News Monopoly”). <<http://www.aci.net/kalliste/webrevol.htm>>

impossible to verify. Whether it is a copy of an original, a copy of a copy, or a copy without an original, its digital fingerprint is exactly the same. Consequently, this culture of the copy so commonplace on the Internet has obliterated the need for an original to exist at all. The authenticity of a website is meaningless, for the code, the text, and/or the images are infinitely reproducible.

When images or texts are copied endlessly and circulated on the Net, information must mask the absence of a referent through self-referentiality. According to political scientist Jodi Dean, “the variety of networks through which information is produced, accessed, deployed, and integrated...[creates] an unending disruption of settled beliefs and ideas.”¹²⁵ Online, as opposed to on television and radio, information is not filtered or offered to us in advance. Another unique feature on the Internet is its use of hypertext, which creates a virtual web of cross-referenced links that can often appear credible, if only because of their sheer numbers. After all, if one hears a news story over and over in the course of a week, it is hard not to believe; familiarity, on the Internet, breeds trust. And trust, according to *Wired* contributor Tom Dowe, “is one of those metaphysical concepts the Web has already thrown into high relief.”¹²⁶

In our postmodern world, human culture is composed of an “arbitrary collection of beliefs... [where] everything is relative; nothing is natural.”¹²⁷ In order to fill the ideological void left by postmodern, pop-culture reality, the Internet, the world’s largest meme pool, allows multiple truths to coexist and prosper. When these (often false or exaggerated) truths are thrown together in email, newsgroups and on

¹²⁵ Dean, p. 137-38.

¹²⁶ Dowe, p. 185.

¹²⁷ Edward Rothstein, “‘Memes’ Spreading Rapidly Across Web” in *The New York Times*, June 10, 1996. <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/techcol/0610techcol.html>>

websites uninterpreted, it is not surprising that, in online discourse, *unnatural/irrational* forces figure prominently.

These forces are conspiracy theories. Traditional memetic theory posits that in order for a meme to replicate successfully, it must be stable and predictable. *New Age* contributor Michael Hutchison writes that

The survival of memes depends on their ability to replicate themselves without copying errors...To maintain their stability, memes must be intolerant of error, variation, or mutation; alterations become heresy. Memes that generate incorrect copies of themselves—that get ‘misunderstood’ each time they leap from mind to mind—would, like in the game of ‘telephone,’ tend to degenerate rapidly and would disappear from the meme pool.¹²⁸

Conspiracy theories on the Internet, however, disprove Hutchison’s argument time and time again. They thrive on mutations: what was once rational, fact-based information can degenerate into speculation and lies. The fact that the Internet has such a large meme pool makes disinformation more likely to attract an audience and survive long enough to reproduce. Matt Drudge, the online reporter who broke the Monica Lewinsky scandal, is proof that you only need the basis of a true story, along with a dose of confidential hearsay, to attract the attention of a nation.

Aaron Lynch, author of *Thought Contagion: How Belief Systems Spread Through Society*, believes that the success of a meme hinges on several ingredients, *i.e.* the speed with which it is transmitted, how much zeal it generates, the period of infection and its resistance factor amid society. Mainstream ideas do not need a fervent following because their memetic type is stable by nature. Conspiracy theories,

¹²⁸ Michael Hutchison, *New Age Journal*, August 1990 (quoted in Laura Bryannan, “Intolerant Memes.” <<http://www.isp.nwu.edu/~laura/memes.html>>).

on the other hand, have to adapt to a largely antagonistic environment that regards their ideas as heresy.¹²⁹ Richard Brodie further argues that

A belief system, through its memes, can spread in a way that looks just like a conspiracy without any conscious intention on the part of the participants.... In fact, all but the most interesting conspiracies are extremely easy to keep secret, simply because news about them won't spread if it doesn't have good memes.¹³⁰

Brodie, however, like Hutchison, does not account for the self-publishing opportunities the Internet affords, and how a crackpot conspiracy theorist with a good eye for Web design can rival *The Globe and Mail* or *Wired* in terms of sheer believability. Top-notch conspiracy websites create a pseudo-legitimacy through an already simulated reality, one where cyberspace becomes the hyperreal—more important than the real mediaspace it once simulated. According to Mark Nunes, in “Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality and Postmodernity,” in the spaceless, limitless world of digital code, “distance disappears into immediacy, and presence becomes a state of simultaneity and transparency.”¹³¹ In traditional mediaspace, radical conspiracy theories are often dark and obscure, its adherents isolated from the rest of society, not only because of their beliefs, but because of their own suspicion towards the mainstream. Advertising their online presence, however, conspiracy theorists can take full advantage of the medium's lack of authenticity in order to spread disinformation. Tom Dowe credits Internet users with an inherent skepticism which prompts them to evaluate online information:

amid the surfeit of potentially dubious data, a lot of people learn very quickly to be unselfconsciously, even involuntarily, suspicious. Because

¹²⁹ Aaron Lynch, *Thought Contagion: How Belief Systems Spread Through Society*, New York City: Basic Books, 1996.

¹³⁰ Brodie, p. 171.

¹³¹ Nunes, pp. 314-27.

the bar for presenting things honestly on the Web is pitifully low, suspicion is very nearly hardwired into the nature of netizenship.¹³²

Baudrillard asked in "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media:

do the media neutralize meaning and produce uninformed or informed masses, or is it the masses who victoriously resist the media by directing or absorbing all the messages that the media produce without responding to them?

I would argue that the Internet produces both (un)informed masses and masses who resist the medium. While the Internet contributes to the spread of disinformation, it also makes us relearn our critical thinking skills. Contrary to Tom Dowe, who advocated more information to dilute disinformation, Steve Silberman of *Wired* is convinced that a grander solution is in order:

we need metadata, truths that tell us how to manage the torrent of information that washes over us every day. The taunting, cynical voice that says, "Yeah, right," won't help us. The voice we'll need is the wise, compassionate, hopeful voice that speaks in any writing of lasting value, perennial as grass...¹³³

Metadata may come in the form of memetic disinfection, or, at least, awareness. The digital character of the Internet calls for different and stricter applications of personal journalistic standards, and by this I do not mean use filtering techniques or government intervention. Adopting a skeptical attitude, *i.e.* questioning these "cyber"-truths, is crucial in order to sort through the endless stream of data the Internet offer us. For all the conspiracy theories found on the Internet, the medium itself teaches us about the value of skepticism. As Spacks notes:

¹³² Dowe, p. 185.

¹³³ *ibid.*

When information comes in by means of gossip, one can hardly avoid noting that it has been filtered through multiple consciousnesses. The problem of assessing its value inheres in the act of receiving it.¹³⁴

In going online, we choose to receive information and subsequently must learn how to filter it. This requires us to assert media control: honing our critical thinking skills and identifying content, such as paranews, for its truth (informative) or its fictional (disinformative) value. One of the positive aspects of the Internet is that it allows us to learn more through any other medium of communication, both about the world and about ourselves.¹³⁵ Some choose to use this opportunity to spread false memes, and while these memes may titillate our neurons and make X-Philes out of all of us, they can only evolve into grander, more ridiculous schemes. Hopefully, the Internet will make editors out of all of us, and the right to know (and to know *better*) will be ours to reclaim.

¹³⁴ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985, p. 9.

¹³⁵ One can now read the great works of literature, watch CNN, have access to all major world newspapers, take university courses and do serious research all on the Internet.

Chapter Three:

Roswell.com: Myth & Millennium Online

Paranoia on the Internet takes many forms: "scaremail" (hoaxes that warn us of computer viruses, modem taxes, or shady governmental secrets), frequent spamming on Usenet newsgroups warning netizens of some impending doom, and, most often, websites which contain articles, opinion pieces, testimonials, and alleged evidence of covert activity. Unexplained phenomena that were once only the subject of underground journals, specialized serial books and the occasional network television special are now flourishing as the subject of thousands of websites around the world. Fox's cult hit *The X-Files* is one of today's most popular television shows, and has spawned many similarly-themed programs that deal with the paranormal, aliens and conspiracies.

Why this surge in paranoia? Even a decade ago, paranoia, be it centered around government or the paranormal, was limited to the margins of society: right wing organizations, scientific outcasts, religious fanatics. At that time popular interest in paranoid culture was due largely to its entertainment value, and, particularly in the years following the Watergate scandal, because the issues of scandal and conspiracy were now close to home.

Now it seems as if popular culture increasingly favours paranoid culture. Mainstream newspapers continue to report on the shadowy circumstances surrounding the death of Clinton adviser Vince Foster, more than two years after his suicide. Two of the most popular radio shows in syndication are those of Art Bell and

Richard Metzger, who focus exclusively on paranews. *Entertainment Tonight* devoted an entire show to the hype surrounding the airing of the “Alien Autopsy” footage in a two-hour documentary hosted by *Star Trek*’s Jonathan Frakes.

In a Gallup poll conducted in September 1996, 45 percent of the 1,000 people surveyed said they believed unidentified flying objects had visited the Earth, and 48 percent believed UFOs to be “something real.” Thirty-one percent of Americans believed an *actual* alien craft had crashed in 1947, and a full seventy-one percent believed that U.S. government officials were hiding a deeper knowledge of UFO phenomena. Thirty-one percent of respondents, on the other hand, said they thought UFOs were just a figment of the imagination.¹³⁶

Is the media’s obsession with paranoia in the latter half of this decade due to the commodification of the Internet? Or is a convergence of other ambient factors? Americans’ historical mistrust of government, exacerbated by our need for a new, post-Cold War enemy, and millennial anxiety are both In order to better explore these factors, I will examine the Roswell Incident, a memetic mythology of modern conspiracy, and *Disinformation*, a website which serves as a compendium not only for Roswell criticism but for subcultural topics in general.

¹³⁶ ““Your Views on the UFO Phenomenon”, *MSNBC News*.
<<http://www.msnbc.com/news/79556.asp>>

While the Roswell Incident is not recent news, it has emerged from the annals of ufology to become a mainstream news item, and the watershed event for late 20th century conspiracy theorists. During the first week of July 1947, an unidentified flying object crashed on a ranch near Roswell, New Mexico. The debris, according to a former military officer's 1979 claim, was allegedly an alien spaceship whose entire crew, with the exception of one, had died upon impact. According to this "witness", the military quickly descended on the site, restricting access to its perimeter, and removed all traces of the craft and the alien bodies within.

A few days later the *Roswell Daily Record* ran the headline "RAAF Captures Flying Saucer on Ranch in Roswell Region", based on eyewitness accounts and corroborated by the Roswell Army Air Force public relations officer. This official announcement was retracted almost immediately by the regional general, who asserted that the wreckage was the remnants of an errant weather balloon.¹³⁷

Some local eyewitnesses claim they were visited shortly after the incident by men in black (who were likely government officials), whom they allege threatened them with reprisal and even death if they told their version of the event.¹³⁸ The army's report was ordered classified and interest in Roswell waned until 1979 when the former military officer came forward. Ironically, many previously unknown "witnesses" then came forward to tell their versions of the event, and by 1994 a group

¹³⁷ Benson Saler et al., *UFO Crash at Roswell: The Genesis of a Modern Myth*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p. 3.

¹³⁸ Beginning in the late 1950s, reports surfaced of strange men arriving, unannounced, sometimes alone, sometimes in twos or in threes, at the homes of particular UFO witnesses usually before they had reported their sightings to anyone. Often seeming to know more than a stranger should know about the witnesses, MIB caution against reporting their sightings or close encounters. MIB typically walk with a strange limp, speak in mechanical monotones or annoying sing-songs, wear black suits and black shoes, often arrive driving black cars, and convey an overall eerie 'otherworldly' aura. The legend of the MIB gained mainstream popularity after they were featured on an episode of *The X-Files*, as well as being the subject of a 1997 feature film, also titled *Men in Black*, starring Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones. See *MIB - The Magazine* <<http://www.meninblack.com/meninblackmag/>>.

of concerned New Mexicans successfully petitioned their congressman to have the Roswell report, codenamed Project Mogul, made public.

This report contradicted the 1947 Army statement that the debris was a weather balloon; it was now identified not as an alien ship, but rather the remainder of top-secret “balloon-borne radar reflectors”. Launched as intelligence-gathering devices, the Project Mogul reflectors were to spy on the Soviet Union in an attempt to monitor its development of an atomic weapon.¹³⁹

Angered by the fact that this new information was only slightly different from the original report, conspiracy theorists refuted the documents as part of a ongoing effort to suppress the “real” evidence. This evidence that conspiracy theorists needed appeared to arrive in January 1995, when the “Alien Autopsy” footage was made public. The film, bought by British video producer Ray Santilli from an unknown cameraman, contained footage of a purported alien autopsy conducted on one of the Roswell casualties.

Once the existence of this footage was made public, stills from the film appeared on the Internet and speculation as to their origin and veracity began. The Fox Television Network bought the rights to the film and in August 1995 it aired “Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction?”, hosted by *Star Trek*’s Jonathan Frakes. The film was later debunked by medical specialists and professional filmmakers, a conclusion endorsed by noted Roswell theorists, who, although they held to their belief in the alien crash, could not disregard the glaring errors and omissions outlined by the expert analysts.¹⁴⁰ In 1996, talk radio host and aficionado of the paranormal Art Bell received a piece of the metal in the mail, sent to him by the son of a military officer who allegedly witnessed the Roswell clean-up and the transportation of alien bodies.

¹³⁹ Saler, p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ See Kal K. Korff, *The Roswell UFO Crash*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997, pp. 208-16.

In the weeks following the airing of Bell's "evidence", Internet newsgroups and websites were flooded with stories of found UFO fragments.

Online speculation reached its peak in the months leading up to the 50th anniversary of the Roswell crash. Dozens of websites, ranging from *Parascope*, a repository of articles on paranormal phenomena, to a week-long segment in *The New York Times*, published special features on the crash, including alleged new evidence, additional witnesses, and events in and around Roswell to celebrate the anniversary. The anniversary was heralded in the newspapers, on TV and the Internet as a summit of alien hype, and of mainstream America's fascination with UFOs and the paranormal.¹⁴¹ It was an event of pure spectacle—the media presence, in fact, outnumbered the tourists:

They wanted pictures of alien freaks, of folks in costumes, of people who made each themselves into opportunities for the rest of us to laugh, secure in our own normality, our own good sense and rationality.¹⁴²

The event, however, was not lacking in "new" evidence. Shortly after the anniversary, an Associated Press report appeared on the Internet, stating that the CIA covered up its investigations of UFO phenomena. The source of the report was Gerald K. Haines, who penned "CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-1990" in *Studies in Intelligence*, a CIA journal. The article describes "the Agency's efforts to solve the mystery of UFOs, its programs that had an impact on UFO sightings, and its attempts to conceal CIA involvement in the entire UFO issue."¹⁴³ According to Haines, a CIA-sponsored panel on UFOs that met in 1953 recommended that the National Security Council should "reassure the public of the lack of evidence behind

¹⁴¹ The actual Roswell celebrations were noted more for their commercial nature and pop culture decor than for their critical examination of the event they were commemorating. For a first-hand account of the celebrations at Roswell and the media response, see Dean, pp. 183-92.

¹⁴² Dean, p. 184.

¹⁴³ Gerald K. Haines in Dean, p. 190.

UFOs”, and further endorsed the use of “mass media, advertising, business clubs, schools, and even the Disney corporation to get the message across.”¹⁴⁴ We must not forget that this was 1953, at the height of McCarthyism in America, and whether the CIA carries out similar activities of media manipulation today is a closely-guarded secret.

But for Roswell devotees, it seems there is never enough evidence to warrant diminishing fervour. The name “Roswell” has achieved one-word status among UFO enthusiasts, and, according to Benson Saler, has altered the way many Americans view the possibility of extraterrestrial life and their own faith in government¹⁴⁵—a culture of distrust accumulating around half-truths, fabricated evidence, and dead witnesses. Roswell websites expose so-called “top-secret” documents that allegedly prove the cover-up, display “exclusive” photographs of fragments from the crashed saucer, and reprint confidential letters sent from former military officials (or children of deceased officials) that allegedly reveal the “truth”.¹⁴⁶ Online there is literally no end to the amount of supposed “evidence” accrued and repeated over and over.

This repetition, both offline and on, has created the Roswell myth, which, according to anthropologist Charles A. Ziegler, is

...a process of transfiguration that involved successive retellings in which some of the historically recorded events were retained, some were distorted or repressed, and entirely new elements were inserted.”¹⁴⁷

The myth exists because it has a “constituency of true believers, who, by virtue of a shared avowal of their belief, constitute a subculture.”¹⁴⁸ I would argue that the

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁴⁵ Saler. One of the most popular topics on the X-Files among fans of the show is “Roswell”, who know that the word indelibly is tied to aliens and government coverups.

¹⁴⁶ See *The Roswell Centre* <<http://www.paragon.co.uk/ros/ros.htm>>, *Roswell.org* <<http://www.roswell.org/>>.

¹⁴⁷ Saler, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.

Roswell myth does not necessarily require *true* believers—only enthusiasts willing to pass on the story. This is not only characteristic of myths originating from paranoia, but also of late 20th century mythmaking, in which informants enact a performance replete with morbid entertainment value (like our ongoing cultural obsession with the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe), making their transmission almost guaranteed. The Roswell myth existed long before the Internet, but the medium has increased its transmission potential exponentially.

In the fifty years since the Roswell crash, the accounts given by witnesses became more vague or changed altogether from their initial testimony. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes this loss of historicity from the perspective of reality:

...myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made... A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.¹⁴⁹

The absence of reality in the Roswell myth informs both the belief and the skepticism surrounding the event. On one hand, true believers hold that *their* reality has been emptied of its historicity by the government's suppression of evidence. Richard Dawkins, in his article "Viruses of the Mind" argues from a neurobiological standpoint, that faith is a

¹⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 142-43.

deep, inner conviction that something is true, or right, or virtuous: a conviction that doesn't seem to owe anything to evidence or reason, but which, nevertheless, [is] totally compelling and convincing.¹⁵⁰

Dawkins' theory posits that religious adherents, like Roswell devotees, find virtue in their staunch faith, in spite of the absence of evidence. In fact, the less evidence there is, the more virtuous the belief. The presence of "mystery" is also important, according to Dawkins, because it is not a virtue to solve mysteries:

Rather we should enjoy them [mysteries], even revel in their insolubility.¹⁵¹

Many Roswell believers did not abdicate their position in spite of the final report refuting the alien crash scenario. They are skilled, however, at molding new findings into positive evidence of their truth. In his work *Dreams of Millennium*, Mark Kingwell describes that when

...a shard of metal from the Roswell incident was proved to be part of a weather balloon and not, as the conspiracy theorists had long argued, made of a material unknown to earthly metallurgy, they reacted by agreeing (as they had to) about the weather balloon—only to suggest that it was actually the balloon that caused the alien ship to crash.¹⁵²

This shows a fervent, if not spirited, faith in ufology, as also witnessed by the celebrations surrounding the 50th anniversary of the crash.

Skeptics, on the other hand, argue that the memory and meaning of the original event has been lost through the spread of disinformation. They share, however, a fascination with mystery and a desire to spread the myth, if only to add their "debunk" disclaimer to the story.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Dawkins, "Viruses of the Mind," 1991.

<<http://physserv1.physics.wisc.edu/~shalizi/Dawkins/viruses-of-the-mind.html>>

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*

¹⁵² Kingwell, p. 273.

As previously mentioned, myth (and, as a corollary, disinformation) gains credibility through repetition, so that “by reducing quality to quantity, myth economizes intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply.”¹⁵³ The authors of *Prime Time*, as quoted by Ziegler, take Barthes’ argument further by positing that “the 1990s mark the historical moment when such developments reach a critical mass, and the rapid accumulation of quantitative changes produced a qualitative change in the social role.”¹⁵⁴ In today’s mediaspace, the social is experiencing a phenomenon popularly known as “dumbing down”, where information takes on the form of entertainment in order to entice viewers.¹⁵⁵ TV networks package news stories into smaller and smaller segments and commercials, which used to run at thirty seconds, are seen more often in fifteen and nine second “bites”. Many newsworthy stories are transformed into movies-of-the-week, and newsmakers are frequent guests on tabloid talk shows. This selling of what has been termed “infotainment” has been significant in the popularization of Roswell. According to Paul Kurtz, chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, the media feed the Roswell myth because they are

...packaging the paranormal and selling it as a product. So they may have a book, a hardcover, a paperback, a movie, a made-for-TV show, syndicates... It’s a selling of a fictionalized account.¹⁵⁶

The Internet, by reason of its sheer expanse, allows for more effective quantification than other media. It “sells” the Roswell myth not only because it has a

¹⁵³ Barthes, p. 153.

¹⁵⁴ Lichter, Lichter and Rothman in Saler et al., p. 164.

¹⁵⁵ The popularity of WebTV, an inexpensive console which allows consumers to surf the Web using their television and a simplified keyboard, is an example.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Kurtz in Alan Boyle, “The Skeptics: Cults set off an alarm,” *MSNBC News*.
<<http://www.msnbc.com/news/118895.asp>>

larger, more receptive audience,¹⁵⁷ but because it becomes a “feature of the landscape.”¹⁵⁸ By expanding on Marshall McLuhan’s “hot/cool medium” analogy, one realizes the Roswell story must attain mythic scope in order to be disseminated effectively online:

Your brand must always be present in the back of the user's mind. Everything they see, no matter how unrelated, should give them "memories of you." Any moment of questioning or hesitation (and there will be many, since cool media require lots of participation and demand many choices) should call forth the suggestion, "Click here." To become part of the landscape in a cool medium, you must connect on a mythic level to the structure of the medium.¹⁵⁹

To connect on a mythic level to the structure of the Internet, a story or event, as previously mentioned, must be repeated (“a myth ripens because it spreads,”¹⁶⁰ said Barthes), but must also be spread by those who are attuned to the “organismic nature of the mediaspace.” According to Douglas Rushkoff, these informants

are, almost invariably, counter-culture members whose vision of media is only one facet of their reality. The more self-consciously mimetic a virusmaker’s creation, the more you can bet her world-view is based on conclusions reached through chaos math, psychedelics, environmentalism, magic, spirituality, radical, sexuality, conspiracy theory, or cyber-technology.¹⁶¹

In essence, mythologizing thrives when packaged *memetically*. A highly successful meme is

¹⁵⁷ In most cases Internet users will arrive on a site not by chance, but because they have found it through a search for that particular information.

¹⁵⁸ Gary Wolf, “Channeling McLuhan” in *Wired*, January 1996, p. 187.

<<http://www.wired.com/wired/4.01/features/channeling.html>>. Interview was done with an anonymous poster who called himself Marshall McLuhan, and whose answers garnered enough respect, both in light of McLuhan’s “life and inimitable perspective”, to be featured as the cover story in the January 1996 issue.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Barthes, p. 149.

¹⁶¹ Rushkoff, p. 254.

Fed by fascination, incubated in the feverish excitement of devotees transmitting stories of cosmic significance, the UFO meme mutates into new forms, some of them wondrous and strange. "The Roswell Incident" is but one.¹⁶²

As described in Chapter 2, memes, whose life cycles have found a parasitical home on the Internet, are often characterized by their tendency to get out of control.¹⁶³ Evidence is linked to evidence, and articles are reprinted, paraphrased (often out of context) or dissected. Self-styled experts attack each other's credibility, giving more weight to their own words, which they choose carefully and repeat for authenticity's sake. Texts and images in a meme circulate as a simulacrum in a void, thus giving the illusion that they are on par with other texts and images whose sources and time frame may be completely inconsistent with their own.

The Roswell meme, as well as the hundreds of other conspiracy theories on the Internet, multiply and divide in much the same way as does gossip. While gossip resides in its own cultural and discursive space, "constructing its own oral artifact"¹⁶⁴, so too do conspiracy theories, which involve incestuous linking, the manufacturing of credibility through repetition, and a itemized lexicon used to weave a credible scenario. Gossip speaks about persons not present; conspiracy focuses on persons or events not visible—hidden agendas, as it were.

Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her book *Gossip*, indirectly substantiates the link between conspiracy and gossip when she states that "gossip readily inspires paranoia because of its immeasurable threat to reputation [just as paranews is seen as a threat to order], to what others think of about us, and because one can do little to counter

¹⁶² David Pescovitz, "What's a Meme Got to Do with It?" in *Computer Life*, April 1997, p. 56.

¹⁶³ A prime example of this phenomenon is the Monica Lewinsky scandal, exposed on the Internet by Matt Drudge. Within a few days after the story broke there were already several websites devoted to key players, gomonica.com and lindatripp.com among others, and the scandal reached its inevitable Net peak once allegedly nude (but obviously doctored) photos of Lewinsky were published online.

¹⁶⁴ Spacks, p. 15.

circulated slander, however unfair [just as conspiracy theories are difficult to quell].”¹⁶⁵

The private nature of gossip might be considered at first glance incompatible with the extended sphere of the Internet, but the latter is in reality a very intimate medium, whereby a user reads and types at a computer by his or herself, unsure of how many people out there are “listening” to what s/he has to say.¹⁶⁶ The absence of historical referents on the Internet, resulting from the instantaneous transmission of information that may change, stagnate or disappear altogether (a phenomenon called “link rot”), also contributes to the gossip-like nature of the medium.¹⁶⁷

Mark Nunes, in the essay “Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity”, formulates a compelling argument as to why words on a screen induce “virtual chatter”:

As communication becomes more immediate, absence/presence and writing/speech distinctions lose meaning; the *fort:da* game of emergence and disappearance begins to implode. The written word takes on a more immediate nature and begins to function as though it were speech. No longer a counterfeit or a reproduction, writing achieves its “transcendence” on Internet: as third-order simulation of speech... With increasing immediacy comes the simulation of “transparent” communication in which the medium appears unmediated.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶⁶ One might also argue that while gossip is seen largely as a woman’s vice, paranews is spread mostly by men. As mentioned previously, the Internet has created a space for anonymous intimacy, which appeals to men who are used to communicating through technological interfaces and not face-to-face. Now, men are finding that through the Internet, they have more social freedom for gossip-like activities, the formulating of paranews being one of them. The source of paranews is often right-wing organizations and former militia, run largely by men. This could be a topic for an entirely separate paper...

¹⁶⁷ A characterization endorsed by William Gibson, inventor of cyberpunk and author of *Neuromancer*, in “Nostalgia for the Future”, interview by Dale Sproule, *Books in Canada*, March 1995, pp. 6-10.

¹⁶⁸ Nunes, pp. 319-320.

Characterized by this ahistorical immediacy, the Internet has become a stereo-reality where real time overrides real space, disinformation supplants information. Distances are eliminated and replaced with a microscopic duration, and the result of this speed gap between the real and the virtual worlds is a disorientation of the individual that can be manipulated by those who control the flow of information—be they governments, multinationals, or any conspiracy theorist with a modem and a talent for storytelling.

Disinformation, dubbed the “Subculture Search Engine”, is an example of a website whose aim it is to subvert the flow of fact-based information, and to cater to the paranoid style. On the site you can find hundred of links to various topics of disinformation: propaganda, censorship and counterintelligence to name a few. The site was designed, according to its creator, Richard Metzger, “to be the search service of choice for individuals looking for information on current affairs, politics, new science and the ‘hidden information,’ that seldom seems to slip through the cracks of the corporate owned media conglomerates.”¹⁶⁹

The site is extremely well-designed and maintained; for sites of this nature, aesthetic impression is crucial to the establishment of credibility. Richard Metzger, the creator of *Disinformation*, has borrowed stylistic nuances from both *Wired News* (www.wired.com/news), a highly respected website in terms of design and content. Metzger has adapted the buttons from *Wired News*, the online news source for the popular techno-culture magazine, to fit his own categories. The layout is also similar, right down to the placement of the headers and the black-and-red colour scheme. Some of the graphical elements on *Disinformation* are borrowed from Razorfish, a

¹⁶⁹ Richard Metzger. “About Disinformation” in *Disinformation*.
<http://www.disinfo.com/gen/gen_aboutdisinfo.html>

trendy San Francisco Web design studio who created the site. All of these elements combine to make a sophisticated news site that aims not only to subvert mainstream news sources, but to entertain at the same time.

Disinformation is unique in that it categorizes its news stories in such a way that pure conspiracy site like *The Fortean Times* are found right next to alternative sources (*Mother Jones* and *The Atlantic Monthly*) which are themselves next to *The Washington Post*, *Time* and *CNN*. Metzger does not pretend, however, to be a *sanctioned* source of news, only an alternative one. Unlike many conspiracy sites, *Disinformation* makes no claims to a source of truth, a fact readily admitted by Metzger:

“When I get irate email from humorless lefties accusing me of ‘disinforming’ the public, I just roll my eyes. It’s called Disinformation for God’s sake! The clue phone is ringing, pick it the fuck up!”¹⁷⁰

Disinformation is disorientation with a purpose: to be an informative and critical space for conspiracy theories and the nature of paranoia, but also a source of entertainment and self-reflexive play. Appealing to readers' sense of irony, the site can not only offer information but also an excessive "schlock" aesthetic. It is this aesthetic which attracts self-conscious readers and enables them to enjoy the tabloid nature of the site (and others like it)--mocking it while at the same time incorporating it within their sphere of literary convention. This reading applies to tabloids in every medium, be it television or print. According to Elizabeth Bird,

The "self-conscious" reading accepts the view that tabloids are "sleazy" and "vulgar," but reading them is an enjoyable kind of "slumming." Some of these readers may claim to be trying to share a culture to which they do not belong; all mock the "genuine" readers, who they perceive as being

¹⁷⁰ Mark Frauenfelder, "Everything You Know Is Wrong" in *Wired News*, Apr. 17, 1997. <<http://www.wired.com/news/culture/story/3168.html>>

gullible and stupid, swallowing completely the absurdities through which they, as superior people, can see.¹⁷¹

The difference between paranews in traditional and new media is that it will appear most often in tabloid form in the former (i.e. the *National Enquirer*, *Weekly World News*, *Hard Copy*, *Psi Factor*), letting the reader engage passively with the text and images, while in the latter it can appear legitimate with regards to sophistication of design and content, and may incorporate elements of reader response and customization (i.e. polls, bulletin boards, personalization of information through cookies). When hyperlinks take us on infinite paths to sources of new (and copied) information, the medium, according to Baudrillard, begins to engage us critically:

All is presented today in a spread-out series, or as part of a line of products, and this fact alone tests you already, because you are obliged to make decisions... We live less like users than readers and selectors, reading cells. But nevertheless: by the same token you also are constantly selected and tested by the medium itself. Just like cutting out a sample for the ends of the survey, the media frame excise their message bundles of selected questions, samples of their audience.¹⁷²

The whole purpose behind *Disinformation*, according to its creator, is to teach the reader how to discriminate between the multiple “truths” espoused by mainstream, alternative, and underground media sources. Unfortunately, there are countless websites that blur the line between fact and fiction. The question is, how do we discriminate between sites that purposefully disinform, and those which entertain us through suspension of disbelief?

Just as a fascination with Halley’s Comet enticed my generation into learning about science, the intrigue of conspiracies and the paranormal *can* teach audiences critical thinking. The audience should be given more credit. Like *The X-Files*’ Fox

¹⁷¹ Bird, pp. 118-19.

¹⁷² Baudrillard, p. 121.

Mulder, we may “want to believe,” but that does not necessarily mean we will blindly accept what we see and read; as Kingwell envisions, we may in fact take an ironic position within postmodern play,

enjoy[ing] not just the interconnections of the tale but also the perception of irony that opens up a distance between the tale and our own feelings of paranoia. This double-edged enjoyment of wacko ideas is a delicious kind of pleasure, and perhaps one peculiar to our own credulous times.¹⁷³

When paranews spreads from alternative websites and fringe zines to mainstream television, one must wonder whether the negative portrayal of the scientific/rational in shows like *The X-Files* or *Psi Factor* encourages paranormal myth-making. Recent statistics estimate only 5 percent of the U.S. population is scientifically aware—*i.e.* familiar with method and evaluation—a number barely greater than the percentage of working U.S. scientists. In the MSNBC article “Beyond the realm of common sense,” skeptic Michael Nisbet argues that as the issues surrounding policy become increasingly abstruse, the population obsessed with conspiracies and paranormal beliefs will be unable to sort the misinformation from the valuable information: “We risk heading into the next millennium as a country of foolish and gullible believers.”¹⁷⁴

Certainly shows like *The X-Files* represent a popular model for millennial anxiety. It provides, explains Kingwell, “a focus for aimless expectation of visitation and distrust of government—standard features of millennial unease—even as it draws an audience from a young and well-educated minority who feel themselves generally out of step with mainstream culture.”¹⁷⁵ This argument is echoed by *Wired* political analyst Jon Katz, who believes these disenchanted twentysomethings, many of whom

¹⁷³ Kingwell, p. 263.

¹⁷⁴ Michael Nisbet, “Beyond the realm of common sense,” *MSNBC NEWS*.
<<http://www.msnbc.com/news/172732.asp>>

¹⁷⁵ Kingwell, p. 258.

believe traditional media have sold out to multinational conglomerates, will look for answers online:

Small wonder the young shake their heads at national politics and trawl the Web for truth instead. In a world where people are left to depend for information on a news media almost completely absorbed by giant corporations run by venerated, greedy, and valueless monomaniacs, paranoia seems sometimes not to be a personality disorder but a reasonable precaution.¹⁷⁶

While our century is not the first to construct elaborate conspiracy theories, it is the first which has legitimized conspiratorial thinking as a symptom of millennialism. Instead of religion, we are putting our faith in what Barthes called “empty reality”.¹⁷⁷ For Kingwell, the paranoid style seems all too *à propos*:

When displaced by a world of apparent meaninglessness, it is natural to crave explanations, however unlikely, for events that defy normal categories of understanding. In the hothouse atmosphere of the late twentieth century, a crazy explanation begins to seem to many people better than no explanation at all.¹⁷⁸

In trying times, trust makes an easy prey for paranoia: anyone can invent a paranoid scenario, whereas uncovering the complex truth is much more difficult. *Fusion* paranoia, or the grand conspiracy, is a prime example of the linking of various “truths”, both alien and conspiratorial in nature. These elaborate plots link Roswell, JFK, Freemasonry, the New World Order and Disney all into one sinister plot. In *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, the character Causabon describes the fusion paranoia at the heart of the novel:

¹⁷⁶ Jon Katz, “Why do UFOs Fly in the US?” in *Wired News*, 1997

[<http://www.wired.com/news/news/wiredview/story/6257.html>]

¹⁷⁷ Moscovici in Graumann, p. 153.

¹⁷⁸ Kingwell, p. 265.

“There exists a secret society with branches throughout the world and its plot is to spread the rumour that a universal plot exists.”¹⁷⁹

Even though the FBI, in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act, posted reports on Roswell and Project Mogul on their website in June 1998, accusations of fusion paranoia have not escaped the agency. Walter Andrus of the Mutual UFO Network suggested that the website itself could be part of a bigger government conspiracy:

The U.S. government has lied for over 50 years about UFOs and now no one wants to be put in the position to admit that. So they have elected to leak the information out gradually. This latest FBI release is just part of that tactic.¹⁸⁰

Obviously Andrus is an ardent believer in UFO phenomenon, but one may regard his search for the truth as indicative of a greater dearth of authenticity and historical memory in the 1990s; one can cite the constant references to the postmodern, Disneyfied, mall-centric, café latte culture where people buy up Gap-like simulacra wear in droves and learn history from *The Heritage Minutes* as examples of what many cultural theorists call “the decline of Western culture”. According to Baudrillard, we are searching for a posthumous truth and a posthumous absolution:

[the search] comes at a moment when there is, precisely, insufficient truth available to ensure the verification of anything; when there is, precisely, no longer enough philosophy to underpin any relationship between theory and practice; and when there is, precisely, no longer enough history to back up any historical proof of what happened. We forget a little too easily that the whole of our reality is filtered through the media... This means that it is too late to verify and understand these events historically, for the characteristic thing about the present period, the present *fin de*

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 262, 267.

¹⁸⁰ Walter Andrus in Courtney Macavinta, “FBI posts the real ‘X Files’,” *News.com*, June 19, 1998. <<http://www.news.com/News/Item/0,4,23343,00.html?st.ne.ni.lh>>

siècle, is the fact that the tools required for such intelligibility have been lost.¹⁸¹

In anticipation of the millennium, the media have galvanized the public's already-existent sociological susceptibility to conspiracy culture; a fact that, while not unique with regard to other *fin de siècle* paranoia, is distinguishable by its subjection to information technologies. The Year 2000 bug is at the forefront of this millennial fear. Y2K, as it is better known, is a code, devised in the 1950s, that only allows for two-digit years instead of four. Instead of 1999 switching to 2000, 99 will become 00, or 1900. The bug, present in a majority of computer networks and automated devices, will manifest itself most visibly in situations where dates play a crucial role: credit and social security card renewal, automated banking, supermarket bar-code readers, meteorology reports, and air traffic control are some examples. Governments and corporations are presently working on Y2K fixes, but many technology specialists believe most bugs will not be fixed in time.

While print media seem to downplay the critical nature of this problem, the Internet is replete with daily articles, feature reports and websites devoted to the problem.¹⁸² Obviously the Internet, built entirely around computer networks, will be more at risk than any other medium, but many Y2K stories exploit our millennial anxiety. *Salon*, a popular and respected magazine on the Web, recently ran a front-page article with the title "Millennium bugging out: Year 2000 Survivalists, fearing digitally induced chaos, are heading for the hills." The article, while somewhat cynical in nature, used apocalyptic metaphors and quotes from industry insiders that might press readers' panic button, so to speak. Following its publication, similar articles appeared in *The New York Times* and featured on CNN. Although it is easy

¹⁸¹ Jean Baudrillard, "Necrospective" in *The Transparency of Evil*, London: Verso, 1993, p. 90-91.

¹⁸² This is based on my own personal observations of Y2K coverage in both print and online media during 1997-98.

to dismiss the beliefs of survivalists as extreme, the tone of the article allowed for a measure of skepticism in light of the government's placid reassurances. One is never entirely sure whether authors of these somewhat caustic narratives really believe in the proliferating degrees of paranoia they depict, or are merely satirizing those who do.¹⁸³

The relative ease with which the Y2K buzzword (a meme of the highest order due to its literal *and* figurative viral ability) has spread is indicative of synergetic relationship between the concept of millennium and cyberspace. We depend, most of us unknowingly, on decades-old computer code to regulate the transactions and networked relationships that make up our lives, the millennium bug is significant in that it has been taken up with equal enthusiasm by both traditional and online news sources. The distinctions between mainstream news and paranews have collapsed in favour of a hybrid form of dissemination, where official narratives of truth, authority and reality are disrupted¹⁸⁴: Alien autopsy specials, whose pure entertainment value is evident, are broadcast as news documentaries, and *Time* puts a UFO on its cover. Many Gen-Xers, known as the first wired generation, are skeptical of the corporate-controlled media economy, preferring to browse varied news sources and believing that there exists not one universal truth, but a "network of truths".¹⁸⁵

One could argue that the blurring of entertainment/news, and of fact/fiction, is symptomatic of the low-browsing of North American culture. Arthur Kroker, in an interview for *Mondo 2000*, argues that the approaching millennium is responsible for this shift in our awareness:

Millennial consciousness... is a form of obsession which has a two-fold effect. It simultaneously creates an immense speed-up, which is palpable in the air—this sense of let's-get-it-over-with. At the same time, there is

¹⁸³ Kingwell, p. 263.

¹⁸⁴ Dean, p. 137.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 177.

also a counter-movement of inertia, an immense slow-down. If you look at the popular media, it's all about dumbing down, bunkering in... The millennium creates a change in the psychology of time itself. The change it creates is almost a centrifugal pressure to put human consciousness under. The time of the millennium is a time for apocalyptic possibilities.¹⁸⁶

With an arbitrary millennial date¹⁸⁷ set by the Romans after the death of Christ, an apocalypse seems likely only if it was man-made, brought on by "the destruction of hope, of faith in ourselves."¹⁸⁸ To believe in Roswell is to disbelieve history and admit one's fear of the future, a common phobia in light of our millennial anxiety:

Roswell is an effort at enchantment in an increasingly postmodern world, one of many efforts to rescue decentered selves by proclaiming that the universe, after all, is not indifferent to us. Its future, I think, will not depend on efforts to refute it. Its future, rather, will depend on the kindred narratives with which it becomes associated, and on their powers or lack of powers to sustain themselves in the imaginations of those persons who are open to such stories. And therein lies the pathos, for it is only in their imaginations that the truly unempowered are empowered.¹⁸⁹

"I Want To Believe." "The Truth is Out There." "Trust No One." These *X-Files* aphorisms posit an openness to paranoid style, and acknowledge an "inability to access reliable networks, to find meaningful connections."¹⁹⁰ They might be considered the mantra of a new millennial quest for truth—a belief system that, according to Mark Kingwell, "offer[s] its initiates the same all-enveloping comfort and security expressed in religious belief, even while playing on many of the same

¹⁸⁶ Arthur Kroker in Kingwell, pp. 160-61.

¹⁸⁷ In *Mythologies*, Barthes argued that we should dispense with our *fin de siècle* altogether: "I would suggest that the 1990s be abolished in advance, and that we go directly from 1989 to 2000. After all, the *fin de siècle* has already arrived, complete with its necro-cultural pathos, its endless commemorations and mummifications. Is there any reason why we should have to languish for another decade in this hellish atmosphere?" (p. 146)

¹⁸⁸ Kingwell, p. 344.

¹⁸⁹ Saler, p. 149.

¹⁹⁰ Dean, p. 169.

vague fears and anxieties.”¹⁹¹ With respect to the Roswell Incident, Charles Ziegler arrives at the same conclusion and takes the argument one step further, by positing that we have the *right* to know:

The Roswell myth is not a religious myth. Nor, in itself, does it point to any religion. It does, however, contain elements that remind us of religious elements, for we sometimes encounter them in contexts that we clearly deem religious. It suggests the existence of beings that are superior to humans in science and technology and who therefore are potential threats or boons to human existence. It expresses dependency longings. It incorporates a metaphysical-cosmological dualism that affirms an interest in space. It is redolent of mystery, yet in effect it has been rendered nonhypothetical. And it suggests that our right to know, the very cornerstone of our dignity as mature human beings, has been compromised and deliberately subverted by a conspiracy of establishments, military, scientific, and governmental—and that salvation of a sort depends on unmasking the conspirators and proclaiming the knowledge that they seek to conceal.¹⁹²

It is this notion of salvation through truth that inspires us to push the technological envelope further, developing new media like the Web in order for us to be linked to more and more information. For us to exploit this information, one must rely, according to Jodi Dean, on “a certain excess in the technologies of truth.”¹⁹³ This interconnection underlies the excess in consumer entertainment culture, whereby

Anything we have is connected to something we lack. Anything we see is connected to something we haven’t yet seen. What we haven’t seen is connected to what we don’t have.¹⁹⁴

Paranoia plays off the link between excess and lack by impelling fear on the one hand, and play on the other, and vice versa. Fear conjures up the worst of information technology—surveillance, insecurity, contention, alienation and lies,

¹⁹¹ Kingwell, p. 273.

¹⁹² Saler, p. 149.

¹⁹³ Dean, p. 151.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*

while play reminds us why we “want to believe”—voyeurism, refuge from the mundane, stimulation, community and, finally, truth. One can argue, however, that truth claims are unrealizable when the reality we experience is virtual. There is room, on the other hand, to let the medium evolve (and to let its users familiarize themselves with it) so that data retrieval methods will be more reliable and accurate, allowing for a quantification of truth claims.

In a time where citizens’ distrust of government and big business is at an exceptional high, paranoia enables us to reclaim truths appropriated by the powers that be. By subverting traditional forms of media in the guise of a New (Ir)rationalism, paranoia, whether it be a conspiracy surrounding a downed UFO or Y2K, abets in the creation of new communities amid the hype. Alone in front of the screen, however, it seems fitting that paranoia also induces in us a desire to suspend our disbelief in order to be entertained. The enormous popularity of *The X-Files* and other shows of a paranormal nature, as well as the ongoing investigation of unexplained phenomena by scientists and hackers alike, is testimony to this millennial search for answers. Whether we uncover the truth behind the disinformation remains to be seen, but at least we will get to sit back enjoyably, watching it all unfold on our screens. :-)

Conclusion

There can be neither society nor culture without untruth. The tragic conflict. Everything which is good and beautiful depends upon illusion: truth kills—it even kills itself (insofar as it realizes that error is its foundation).¹⁹⁵

– Friedrich Nietzsche

This thesis has examined how and why conspiracies spread on the Internet, their role as memetic simulacrum, and the question of disinformation as both entertainment and subversion. While many articles about the Internet have treated the medium as a dubious source of information, one from which our children must be safeguarded,¹⁹⁶ it is often the mainstream media's misunderstanding of the Net that forms popular opinion.

Of course there *is* a causal relationship between this new medium and the spreading of paranews—the Internet is ideal for disseminating data, reaching a wide audience, and creating a tabloid-like atmosphere (a computer monitor is, after all, not that far removed from your TV screen). It is not, however, an exclusive relationship: the festering of conspiracy theories cannot be blamed on media hype and the popularity of *The X-Files* alone. It is a reflection of a much larger culture of distrust, both on the Internet and in society as a whole. Jon Katz, *Wired* contributor, believes that

On the Net and the Web, as well as off, it's easy to see how suspicion of and frustration with government seems to do nothing but grow. The idea that information should be free and open isn't a hacker notion. Nevertheless, you will rarely see it mentioned in *The Washington Post* or

¹⁹⁵ Nietzsche, p. 92.

¹⁹⁶ Sales of Internet filtering software like NetNanny and Cybersitter were in the millions in 1998.

on ABC News, but it shouldn't be the nearly exclusive province of odd journals like the *Fortean Times*.¹⁹⁷

Freedom of information is a fundamental right embraced by democratic nations worldwide. Although the Internet has popularized this idea and made it a fashionable topic for online discussion, its renewed interest emphasizes an age-old media precept: that we should govern our affairs straightforwardly, act honestly and spread the truth to others. Public outcry over government-related conspiracies is especially vitriolic because our government is expected not only to be an arbiter of truth, but an important source of universally accessible information. This perception is idealist, however, as we are well aware governments are susceptible to the same corruption as corporations. It is perhaps time to realize that, in our highly interactive society, information, and in particular the definition of "news", is undergoing a profound transformation. Katz wonders whether "it's time to consider whether black-and-white newspapers that come out once a day, teachers lecturing in front of classrooms for hours, presidents offering State of the Union speeches before Congress or daily briefings in the White House press room are effective ways to present information."¹⁹⁸

What constitutes news today, both online and offline, is not restricted to geopolitical events, the economy, sports results, weather forecasts and human interest stories. News has become omnipresent: freeway billboards, stock tickers, trash talk shows, reality-based television, zines, PalmPilots, and Internet newsgroups are just some of the ways we can keep informed. What information we receive from these sources, however, is quite different than traditional newspapers and television newsmagazines. Newsworthiness now includes alien autopsy videos, *True Hollywood Stories*, Monica Lewinsky's stained Gap dress, *Survivor* castaways, and body part

¹⁹⁷ Katz, "Why do UFOs Fly in the US?".

¹⁹⁸ Katz, "Digi-Fables".

auctions on eBay. News does not just happen anymore; it is manufactured by networks, lobbyists, public relations firms, and Web authors.

The tabloidization of popular culture in the 1990s and into the new millennium was a social shift occurring before the Internet gained mainstream recognition. Why this so-called “dumbing-down” of the news? The economic growth and relative prosperity of middle-class North Americans may have left them disinterested in conventional stories. The 24-hour availability of news through CNN and other similar channels has made the news instantly available, and therefore commonplace. To maintain viewer interest in this age of perpetual novelty, news stories must offer an “added punch”, be that live video feeds of breaking events, dramatizations, victim interviews or celebrity content. Accuracy in reporting may be sacrificed for potential high ratings, i.e. the Kuwaiti baby incubator incident during the Gulf War, or a recent *60 Minutes* exposé on organic produce whose alleged scientific tests were fabricated.

News and entertainment have become indelibly linked through shows like *Access Hollywood*, *Hard Copy*, *Larry King Live* (whose guests include politicians, entertainers and other newsmakers), *Alien Autopsy* and *The Mummy's Tomb*, the latter two of which the Fox network handled like bonafide news programs and would go on to inspire mainstream coverage. *Ally McBeal* has become a poster child for the death of feminism, appearing alongside Gloria Steinem on the cover of *Ms.* magazine, and *Survivor* finalists make the cover of *Time*. It seems as though, in more and more instances, entertainment is hard news.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ During the summer of 2000, many radio and television stations played *Survivor* as hard news, leading off their programming with “breaking” stories about ongoing show developments, even though the episodes themselves had been taped four months prior to airing.

The Internet takes this notion even further. For every *Entertainment Tonight*, there are dozens of websites that carry the same information; for every Roswell article, there are ten times as many online.²⁰⁰ In the last two years, as the Internet has grown from a medium largely exclusive to scientists, academics and computer buffs to a common fixture in middle- and upper-class households, the question begs: are we more perceptive to legitimate as opposed to bogus news? In "Technotragedies", Jon Katz offers up guidelines for tackling this flurry of information:

As these stories become red-hot, we have to stay cool. As emotional imagery is beamed at us from every direction, we need to stay detached. As vast amounts of information, opinions, and imagery rain down on us via talk shows and Web sites, we have to learn how to be skeptical and patient. We have to grasp the ironic reality that, in an era when stories come to us faster than ever, the truth, if it comes at all, is apt to arrive slowly.²⁰¹

If the TWA Flight 800 and Heaven's Gate tragedies are any indication, we still have much to learn about how the Internet disseminates information. While traditional media are gradually embracing the Internet with online versions of newspapers and complementary websites for television programming,²⁰² there continues to be fearmongering among old-school journalists (Leslie Stahl's accusatory interview with J. Orlin Grabbe, for example), especially where children's use of the medium is concerned. Articles and reports continue to portray the Internet as a dangerous place for children, where they are not only easy prey for predators but are exposed to adult or inappropriate information.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ E!Online, Mr. Showbiz, and Entertaindom are some of the most popular entertainment websites, offering news, features, gossip, celebrity sightings and live chats. Any search for "Roswell" on a search engine will yield literally hundreds of results.

²⁰¹ Katz, "Technotragedies."

²⁰² The AOL-Time Warner merger is the most encouraging example of this acceptance, both in terms of content quality and financial viability.

²⁰³ See Daniel Okrent, "Raising Kids Online" in *Time*, May 10, 1999.

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/articles/0,3266,23918,00.html>>. See also Jamie

The average Internet user, however, is more educated about the medium and how it works than s/he was in 1995: there are now countless books, courses and cross-media pollination that makes the Internet more inclusive and less technologically alienating, and its use in the workplace is widespread. As early as 1997, George Johnson wrote in the *New York Times* that

the Web—like old media—appears to be self-policing: the very velocity that spreads untruths on the Web also brings instant accountability. As anyone who works on the Web knows, readers spank you via e-mail the moment you make an error. In the end, maybe the uneasy feelings about the Internet come from seeing all the old plagues and sins recast in an unfamiliar new form. An ancient accumulation of inchoate fears has become focused inside this high-profile medium, made more easily touchable—and, it's tempting to believe, easier to control.²⁰⁴

It is not difficult to understand why this new medium is considered by many to be a source of cultural corruption; the Internet takes the power of television, coupled with the influence of print media, and releases it to the masses for their consumption *and* reaction. Interactive by definition, the Internet magnifies both public and personal opinions, as well as socio-political trends that shape our everyday life. In this sense, the Internet, more than other media, portends a kind of hyperreality without memory, where our sense of the historical is distorted and the digital word exists only ephemerally: to be rewritten and altered infinitely or deleted altogether, its authenticity lost amid the bits and bytes. While the Internet offers freedom and power that traditional media cannot, it also specializes in the anonymous, the atomized, the source without progenitor. Our cultural context is being shaped by a technology that enables the spread of disinformation through hypertext—where informational texts may be fragmented, manipulated and reconstituted for popular consumption. Should

Wilson, "Agencies help deal with concerns about Internet", *MSNBC*, Feb. 18, 2000.
<<http://www.msnbc.com/local/kmtr/7135.asp>>

²⁰⁴ Johnson.

the text metamorphose independently of its author into a hyper-state it becomes memetically charged, as have the conspiracy theories examined in the preceding chapters. This decontextualization and absence of referentiality, creates an environment where the appearance of fact may *become* fact.

As explained through the Roswell meme, repetition breeds trust. Does the sheer amount of information online foment the conspiracy theory? Modern technology forces our minds to speed up, presenting us with information packets instantly and simultaneously, while our body stays inert. Online we can be everywhere—and nowhere—at once. According to McLuhan,

Our present conceptions of what constitutes social cause, effect, and influence are quite unable to cope with this electronic simultaneity of conspicuous co-existence.²⁰⁵

This dichotomy creates intense stimulation for the user who, by means of multiple mouse clicks, is creating a personalized hyper-narrative. Throughout this thesis it has been shown that information (and sensory) overload is not always a positive process. The Internet, while accessible to many, distributes information in a non-linear fashion, and in a way we are still learning how to dissect. Jodi Dean argues that in the “complex techno-cultures of late capitalism, we are all information poor. Fluid skepticism becomes sensible paranoia.”²⁰⁶

This “sensible paranoia” could account for the countless articles devoted to Y2K and the problems predicted to occur with computer networks worldwide on January 1, 2000. While the millennium bug turned into a non-event, causing only minor difficulties, it did illuminate our dependency on technology and evince a renewed cynicism about whether this dependency is healthy, or even necessary. Have we perhaps reached the point, according to techno-pundit Langdon Winner, where we

²⁰⁵ McLuhan, “Milton had his daughter: I have my dictaphone,” pp. 199-200.

²⁰⁶ Dean, p. 177.

already know what the future holds, so “intelligence, inventiveness, and concern effectively cease to have any real impact on the ways in which technology shapes the world”?²⁰⁷

This discouraging position could be countered by showing how the Internet challenges our own assumptions of creativity and readership—creating new versions of traditional canons while at the same time retaining a healthy skepticism of them. In 1995, when the Web was little more than text and simple graphics, authorship was conspicuous by its absence (or at least obfuscation) over much of the medium.

Advances in the functionality of the Internet, as well as the credibility commanded by established media outlets now online, have made it easier to identify paranoia-fed memes and disinformation. Since the Pierre Salinger episode, Internet content branding (how information is identified, classified or marketed) is more sophisticated so users can better distinguish between an average person’s opinion and an official or endorsed statement: designs are crisp, logos prominent, trademarks and copyrights enforced. Today there are far fewer websites unaffiliated with traditional media. Many have foundered, like the acclaimed online magazine *Word*, been acquired by larger entities (*Mr. Showbiz*, bought by ABC, or *Suck*, owned first by *Wired* who was then bought by Lycos), and many of those remaining, like *Slate*, now charge subscriptions fees for unrestricted access to their content. While the standards of Internet journalism have been raised through marriage to old media conglomerates, the Internet’s capacity for disseminating objective information has been undermined as a result. However utopian the potentiality of the Internet still seems to many entrepreneurs, think tanks and end-users, online news passes through more filters en route to our desktops than it did five years ago.

²⁰⁷ Jon Katz, “Listening to the Monster,” *HotWired*, May 20, 1997.
<<http://www.hotwired.com/netizen/97/20/index0a.html>>

Whether it be through filtering, fragmenting or the memetic altering of digital information, the Internet is based on non-linear narrativity, calling into question, as hypertext pioneer George P. Landow posits,

(1) fixed sequence, (2) definite beginning and ending, (3) a story's "certain definite magnitude," and (4) the conception of unity or wholeness associated with all these other concepts.²⁰⁸

Hypertext is infinite in length and resists closure. Not only does the Internet mock traditional narrative techniques, it has the power to immortalize the new, reconstituted canons it creates.

Online conspiracy theories may very well owe their popularity to their prospects for narrative closure: people by nature are drawn to mesmerizing stories around which ordinary information converges and begins to make sense. Richard Hofstadter argues that conspiracy scholarship is on the one hand irrational, while on the other "far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic".²⁰⁹ The cause of the TWA Flight 800 disaster was unknown until online speculation labeled it a military blunder covered-up by the government (an ending rewritten three years later by the final FTSB report); Roswell websites offered their own explanations to unexplained phenomena dating back fifty years.

Whereas paranoid ideas and opinions once resided outside the public sphere, they are now reunited within new "online communities", whose perception of the world is unlike any face-to-face organization:

This extraterrestrial subjectivity linked to the Internet is about the technological alien, about the noncitizen produced as an effect of actions

²⁰⁸ George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 102.

²⁰⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965, p. 36.

and interactions, connections and communities that cannot be imagined within our nationally established terms of community.²¹⁰

The Internet has created many new communities—each with their own subjectivities—where those on the fringes of society can find like-minded individuals. These communities defined the Internet in the 1990s and served as an important draw for new users intimidated by the technology. Today the medium is evolving from global community, where everyone with access could be informed and hold the same learning tools as the next user, both geo-politically and sociologically, to global marketplace. Whereas two years ago the Internet was viewed largely as a source of information and/or entertainment, now it has become a consumer-driven medium. Banner ads were once non-existent on the Web; now they are commonplace and ubiquitous. Established brands once doubtful of the economical advantages of selling their goods online are now spending millions of dollars on e-commerce initiatives; successful Internet-only brands, such as Amazon.com and CDNow, are a rarity.

Conspiracy theories, at one time a popular source for news, both online and off, are receding into the ether. *The X-Files* are out; reality-based television is in. The novelty of new media has worn off, and it seems as though we lack the energy (or perhaps, sadly, the knowledge) to process narratives in the exhaustive juggernaut of popular culture that informs 21st century society. By losing interest in traditional narrative forms and turning instead to the instant gratification of online shopping and *Survivor* mania, we may not only be revealing our penchant for newness, but also our atrophication of aesthetic, political and cultural sensibilities.

²¹⁰ Dean, p. 138.

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