

Probing the Ebola Conspiracy Panic

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In 2008 media studies scholar Jack Bratich introduced the concept of [conspiracy panics](#) to interpret powerful government and media reactions to the “collective intelligence” activities enacted by laypersons and evident within broader forms of popular culture.[1]

The idea is useful when observing how over the past several weeks mainstream media outlets have busied themselves decrying various critiques of the US government’s response to the Ebola phenomenon, the government’s potential intentions concerning the predicament, and speculations on the disease’s uncertain origins and means of diagnosis as a similarly dangerous “strain of contagion”: “the Ebola conspiracy theories.”[2]

The conspiracy theory term essentially designates inquisitive perspectives and analyses that have been generated by corporate media nor routed through salaried journalists’ Rolodexes of conventional establishment sources—in this instance experts in healthcare, academe, government, and the corporate sector itself.

Rejecting or explaining away differing perspectives on how powerful institutions operate is a foremost function of mainstream media. From this worldview alternative media outlets, many of which provide valuable insights on Ebola and a host of other events and concerns, are understood by corporate media managers as so much “noise” in society’s informational and explanatory conduits that they perceive as essentially belonging to them.

Yet unlike would-be terrorist attacks or political assassinations, the Ebola phenomenon is one that fundamentally involves an understanding of and ability to interpret scientific and medical evidence and procedure—things most journalists know little more of than the broader public they seek to serve.

Thus in the midst of such a “crisis” what passes for a good deal of journalism is in fact a propitious platform for the high-level public relations maneuvers of interested parties—in particular certain government agencies and for-profit healthcare and pharmaceutical companies which are closely intertwined via the revolving doors often linking them.

Despite the complex and uncertain terrain of such sourcing and reportage it is telling how corporate media move to condemn what essentially amounts to practical wariness and critical thinking, both of which have become increasingly essential in light of the multitude of events—from 9/11 and the so-called “war on terror” to “weapons of mass destruction” and the Boston Marathon “bombing” spectacle—where such media have at best failed in conducting due journalistic diligence and at worst have intentionally misled their audiences and readerships into accepting dubious if not largely invented narratives that pervert public discourse and impair popular memory.

Academics in particular are well aware of the tentative and thus potentially manipulative nature of what constitute “truth” and “truth claims.” In the humanities especially “truth” itself is commonly deemed to be socially and historically constructed.

Along these lines, events and issues are frequently deemed “controversial” by those seeking to frame a perceptible disagreement by parties authorized to analyze pertinent facts. Lacking such approval are those falling outside the accepted parameters of debate.

Yet such a disingenuous stance is commonly open to contradiction. In its quest to bolster the Ebola conspiracy panic and disparage unwelcome parties to the exchange, the *New York Times*’ Alan Feuer recently called upon cultural studies scholar and University of Florida law professor Mark Fenster. “The truth is that we do rely on private corporations to develop and produce our pharmaceuticals,” Fenster remarks.

“While we may not like that fact, it’s not so hard or paranoid to imagine private companies acting in their own best interests.” According to Fenster, “The theory works ... because it is ‘truthy,’ to borrow from the comedian Stephen Colbert.” In other words, “it has just enough veracity ‘that it rings true when carried to Ebola.’”[3]

Fenster’s 1999 volume, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, employs a cultural studies approach which at its core upholds and often celebrates “truthiness”—or the relative notion that truth is akin to that which passes for such and is overall socially and historically constructed.[4] This allows Fenster to proceed throughout the book to conveniently omit important facts concerning momentous events such as the JFK assassination, the Oklahoma City bombing, and 9/11, in order to establish and sustain an object of study that in reality is as much a component of the CIA’s prolonged psychological warfare program against the American public [5] as it is a doctrinal strategy to corrupt entire intellectual enterprises, in particular US journalism and academe.

Most of the journalistic and scholarly analyses of “conspiracy theories” that carry the implicit burden of “objectivity” are far less excusable. While they feign outrage at unorthodox (though often accurate) ideas and commentary, they succeed as commonplace demonstrations of the bias they condemn, suggesting a recurrent balance between society’s two main ideological engines that form the bulwark of the established order. “Power,” George Orwell reminds us, “is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.”

Notes

[1] Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

[2] Quote from Alan Feuer, “[The Ebola Conspiracy Theories](#),” *New York Times*, October 18, 2014. See also Eric Owens, “[Crackpot, Taxpayer-Funded Professor in Delaware Warns US Military is Killing Liberians with Ebola](#),” *Daily Caller*, September 27, 2014; Abby Phillip, “[Delaware State U Won’t Interfere With Free Speech of Professor Spreading Ebola Conspiracy Theories](#),” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2014; John Blosser, “[Professor Floats Conspiracy Theory Implicating US in Ebola Spread](#),” *Newsmax*, September 26, 2014; Jessica Firger, “[Ebola Fears, Conspiracies Spread Through Social Media](#),” CBS News, October 3, 2014; Alice Audley, “[Ebola Conspiracy Theories: Separating Fact From Fiction](#),” *UK Telegraph*, October 8, 2014; Jason Millman, “[The Inevitable Rise of Ebola Conspiracy Theories](#),” *Washington Post*, October 13, 2014; Ludovico Iaccino, “[Ebola Cause by Red](#)

[Cross and Other Conspiracy Theories](#)," *International Business Times*, October 14, 2014.

[3] Feuer, "The Ebola Conspiracy Theories."

[4] Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 1999/2008.

[5] Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013.

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James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at [MemoryHoleBlog.com](#), [TracyLegalDefense.org](#), and [jamesftracy.wordpress.com](#).

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