

What Do We Mean by “Conspiracy Theories”?

The Ceaseless Torment of a Vigilant Public

By [James F. Tracy](#) and [Jaime Ortega](#)

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Professor James Tracy was recently interviewed by Jaime Ortega of [The Daily Journalist](#) to address the topic of conspiracy theories and their impact on public discourse for the site’s forum, [The Expert](#).

“Jaime Ortega stated in an introductory email that he contacted me not only because of my academic background, but also given the fact that major media have bestowed on me “the reputation of a conspiracy theorist”(!) Mr. Ortega produced a thoughtful set of questions to contemplate in the exchange which appears below”.-JFT

[Image Credit: David Dees]

Jaime Ortega: There is a certain danger in the way conspiracy theories have altered social media, especially on such platforms as YouTube. Do people distrust mainstream television, radio, and print media?

James Tracy: First of all, we have to seriously think about what we mean by “conspiracy theories” before delving into such a discussion. What are the term’s origins? How and why is it used? Without nailing these things down at the outset any discussion of such communicative and sociopolitical dynamics tends toward the nonsensical and comes to eventually become absorbed in the discourse it is seeking to examine or critique.

A cursory look at reportage and commentary in major US news media from the late 1800s through the 1950s indicates that the term “conspiracy theory” is used sporadically in stories on criminal and court proceedings. In the late 1960s, however, there is a major spike in usage of the term, specifically in items discussing criticism of the Warren Commission Report—President Lyndon Johnson’s commission mandated to investigate the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. On January 4, 1967 the Central Intelligence Agency issued a memorandum that became known as Document 1035-960. The communique was directed at the Agency’s foreign bureaus recommending the deployment of the term by “media assets” to counter critics of the Warren Commission. The main strategy involved suggestion that such individuals and their inquiries were flawed by slipshod methods and ulterior motives. The then-foremost Warren Commission critic and JFK assassination researcher Mark Lane was even referenced in the document.

This document was indicative of an apparent strategy via press and public relations maneuvers to undermine New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison’s then-fledgling investigation of the assassination. 1035-960 explained quite rightly that the CIA had a substantial investment in the credibility of the Warren Report. Press reportage of Garrison’s ongoing probe revealed a heavy bias from the very outlets that had been long-compromised

by Agency-friendly owners, editors, and reporters. These included NBC and CBS networks, in addition to Time and Newsweek magazines, where the disparaging coverage of Garrison and his inquiry reached truly farcical proportions.

Though he was repeatedly and vociferously decried as a “conspiracy theorist,” a corrupt and opportunistic politician, and even mentally deranged by such outlets, Garrison has been vindicated by the historical record. For example, we now know, through copious records released as a result of the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Review Board, that the CIA was intimately involved in the assassination and cover-up, as were other US government agencies. Yet the same news media that denounced Garrison almost fifty years ago still tout the legitimacy of the Warren Commission Report.

Since the Garrison episode, but in an especially pronounced fashion over the past twenty years, the conspiracy theory label is routinely mobilized by major corporate media to denigrate honest and intelligent individuals who bring forth important questions on vital events and issues. Keep in mind that most major media still have often strong ties to the US intelligence and military communities. With this in mind, a rational citizenry has an obligation to scrutinize what is reported and analyzed in corporate media, and balance their observations and conclusions by considering reportage of foreign and independent alternative media. In this regard the Internet provides a wealth of opportunity. One needs only exercise the fundamental principles of logic to locate and assess quality information and research.

At the end of the day what we have in the “Conspiracy theory/ist” label is a psychological warfare weapon that has from the perspective of its creators been overwhelmingly effective. Here is a set of words that is used to threaten, discipline and punish the intellectual class—mainly journalists and academics—who might question or otherwise refuse to tow the party line. Using the term to designate pedestrian skeptics and researchers is redundant. After all, as Orwell said, “The proles don’t count.”

Thus, unless we forthrightly interrogate the phrase and its unfortunate history we will be prone to the same confusion and misdirection that its originators intended.

Ortega: We did a poll here at *The Daily Journalist* a few weeks back, and the results indicated that 60% of people believed there was US government involvement in the Boston Marathon bombings, in addition to the events of September 11, 2001. When people suspect their own government is involved in these attacks on US soil, what comes to mind?



Tracy: It is cause for optimism because the US government was almost without question involved in the Boston Marathon bombing and the events of September 11, 2001. Major media were also complicit in wide-scale public acceptance of the official narrative put forth concerning each incident.

For example, with the Boston bombing the *New York Times* played a key role in persuading the nation's professional class and intelligentsia that a terror drill using actors, complete with a multitude of gaffes and outright blunders, was genuine. In reality there were no severed limbs, no deaths, no injuries from shrapnel—only pyrotechnics and actors responding on cue. This is not only my view, but also that of multiple independent researchers and even former CIA officer Robert David Steele.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is well-known for entrapping and otherwise orchestrating such events to justify its own existence. With the Boston bombing there were numerous federal, state and local agencies involved in an exercise that had been taking place in the city annually over the past few years with a similar scenario. A plan for what would become the Boston Marathon bombing was authored by Director of Boston's Emergency Medical Services Richard Serino in 2008. Serino was tapped by President Obama in 2009 to become Deputy Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and there are photos of him directing the aftermath of the April 15, 2013 "bombing."

The public is being asked to believe that two Chechen immigrants expertly devised extremely sophisticated and deadly explosives with consumer fireworks, scrap metal and pressure cookers. No such refractory ordnance was found at the scene because no thorough forensic investigation ever took place. The entire affair was a photo shoot and an opportunity for federal authorities to gauge public response to a military-style lockdown in a major metropolitan region.

With such a transparently phony event being proffered as "real" one needs to ask what the other 40% in your poll are actually thinking. One can fool some of the people some of the time, and there's still a significant portion of the population—including those who are highly educated, who can't imagine it's own government could be so corrupt. This is a testament to the continued effectiveness of our educational and media apparatuses, each of which emphasize an unhistorical worldview and unquestioning deference to authority figures.

Ortega: Modern media seems to have commercialized and sold its soul to sponsors, and media giants that profit from investments. Is modern day news a fictional representation of reality? Are journalists allowed to do their job of investigating serious cases? Is there an agenda to not report on stories with higher impact?

Tracy: If a news media outlet gets most of its revenue from advertising it is to a significant degree compromised. If its main revenue source is advertising and its owned by a transnational corporate conglomerate, "compromised" is not sufficiently powerful enough of a term to describe the given outlet's probable journalistic vulnerabilities. It should be barred from tying the term "journalism" to any of its information-related activities.

When we use the term, "transnational corporate conglomerate," which is often used to denote companies like News Corp and Viacom, we should include the US and British governments, each of which are in the practice of imperial expansion while either subsidizing or forthrightly funding news media. All such powerful entities understand the importance of concealing, disseminating, and using information to shape public opinion in ways that will be favorable to its corporate and policy interests. Walter Lippmann describes how this dynamic played out in World War One. Such powerful corporations and governments shouldn't even be involved in journalism, unless of course they describe what they are doing in honest and appropriate terms, which is often, as your question suggests,

entertainment and public relations masquerading as journalism.

The best journalism today is being produced by independent writers and news media. At present there is a renaissance taking place in this regard because of the internet. Corporate news media don't want to invest the money in true journalism because for them it's a net loss anyway they figure. If major outlets fund investigative journalistic ventures and there's little impact on readership (and thus advertising/revenue) then there's no return on investment. On the other hand, if such investigative work is genuine and worthwhile, it's often delving into areas that reveal how political or economic power operate, which can bring complaints or retaliation from influential entities. Real investigative journalism from mainstream outlets has been subdued for decades because of this very dynamic.

Ortega: It's hard not to distrust the government in some cases. Take, for example, the assassination of John F. Kennedy or CIA involvement in the Watergate scandal to name a few. Has the government had to change its ways for people not to believe in conspiracies?

Tracy: The US government doesn't have to care a great deal about what the public thinks so long as it has major news media committed to producing a steady stream of non-journalism and infotainment to distract the people from considering the things that really impact on their lives. Events such as 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombing aren't questioned by such media because those media are more or less part of the operations. As was the case almost 50 years ago with figures such as Mark Lane and Jim Garrison, those asking serious questions and conducting potentially meaningful research are dismissed within the parameters of permissible dissent as "conspiracy theorists," at least long enough for a majority of the public to stop caring and forget.

What is somewhat new is how the government and psychiatry are now involved in psychologizing the practice or tendency of asking questions about or interrogating disputed events. In other words, certain interests want to deem "conspiracy theorizing" as mental illness, or otherwise associate it with aberrant and perhaps violent behavior. In other words, ponder ideas that certain forces deem beyond question and one runs the risk of being institutionalized, losing their job, and so on.

We saw this take place in the case of upstate New York school teacher Adam Heller, who, under the direction of the FBI, was involuntarily institutionalized and later fired from his tenured teaching position simply because of private exchanges where he discussed his views on the Sandy Hook massacre and probable government involvement in weather modification. We have to keep in mind that the punitive use of psychiatry to punish thought crimes was common practice in the darkest days of the Soviet Union. Now it's emerging here. In this way, government is changing its ways in order to force its own versions of reality on the public.

Ortega: Looking at this from a logical perspective, overall, is it harder to trust the government over the conspiracy theorist?

Tracy: The US government is responsible for devising and publicizing some of the most outrageous conspiracy theories in modern history while it accuses independent journalists and authors of being conspiracy theorists. The major political assassinations of the 1960s (JFK, RFK, MLK) were all government operations, and "patsies" were produced with untenable scenarios accompanying the overall events. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11, and the Boston Marathon bombing were all "false flag" terror

events that were intentionally misrepresented to the American public. One need look no further than the plans for Operation Northwoods, or the attack on the USS Liberty, to develop a distinct understanding of how certain forces within government regard the public and those who fight their wars.

Ortega: Conspiracy theories through the use of social media could cause irreparable effects on the future of mainstream news media because they report on stories, where journalists might not have done a good job or gone deep enough reporting. When there is distrust, what follows next for the future and credibility of most media outlets, particularly if people believe media such as YouTube?

Tracy: Again, we need to be precise. YouTube is a medium with a multitude of “channels,” information, interpretations, and perspectives. Some are potentially reliable and others may be dubious. This is, again, where education and, more specifically, the ability to employ logic and reasoning come to the fore. How can we distinguish between good information and analysis versus that which is unhelpful or even purposefully misleading.

Many researchers who use YouTube or blogs are sincere in what they are seeking to do, which is relate ideas and information to broader publics. They may not be professionally-trained journalists, yet they are also subject to often profuse commentary and criticism from peers in a given research community examining a particular issue or event. This process of scrutiny frequently yields fruitful exchanges where new information and insights are collectively revealed. The participants may not have gone to graduate school to study politics or the media, and yet many of these exchanges are much more intense than that which takes place between a journalist and her editor as they vet a potential story. There’s something going on there. Of course, this assumes that those involved are serious in their participation, which is usually the case. This depends on the quality and sincerity of participants. The comments sections of many mainstream online news outlets can be bereft of serious exchanges.

In my view, certain YouTube channels or blogs are successful and worth checking out as forms of citizen journalism because they have something of substance along the lines described above to offer.

Mainstream commercial journalism has been challenged by counter forces since at least the early 1990s. An initial challenge came from Hollywood in Oliver Stone’s *JFK* film. That project incensed many establishment journalists and their institutions because it contested their fundamental investment and propagation of the flawed “lone gunman/magic bullet” explanation of the event ensconced in the Warren Report.

If truth be told, Stone’s screenplay is among the most accurate renderings of the Garrison investigation and the events surrounding the murder itself. This is because it was based on key works by Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, journalist Jim Marrs, and Garrison himself. *JFK* was in retrospect the initial last rights of mainstream journalism proper, which sold its soul to protect John Kennedy’s executioners. The advent of the internet and Gary Webb’s brilliant exposé of the role played by the CIA in the crack cocaine epidemic vis-à-vis Webb’s excoriation by his own journalistic peers confirmed corporate journalism’s absolute demise.

Ortega: Do conspiracy theorists have a solid opinion of the problems they observe when interpreting raw data, or is such data made to create propaganda to feed their belief systems?

Tracy: There is sometimes an undue amount of paranoia among some conspiracy researchers that can contribute to flawed observations and analysis. Again, this is where one must use careful discretion to interpret between worthwhile information and evaluation versus misguided and poorly-conceived study.

Because conspiracy research communities have no institutional bearings or specific research theories and traditions, as do academic schools of thought that take the shape of “disciplines” or “fields” with often considerable organizational and financial resources, there is a tendency toward infighting and fractiousness. This is much more so the case than in academe where such disagreements, in the rare event they are exhibited, are often subsumed in other actions that enforce ideological conformity. These include the refusal by scholarly organizations and their publications to entertain countervailing analyses and, ultimately, the denial of employment, promotion, tenure, and meaningful professional relationships. Compulsory toleration of peers is entirely absent given the voluntary nature of conspiracy research collectives. At the same time, a critical sense that comes with researching government conspiracies, combined with known attempts by government to “cognitively infiltrate” such research communities, can sometimes lead to unwarranted suspicion of colleagues or public figures and their motives.

Ortega: Since the rise of conspiracies is higher than ever before, and un-education accompanies this, how do you think it will affect the government’s relationship with its citizens, particularly if government credibility vanished? Could there be a future uprising of people who will oppose the government?

Tracy: As my previous responses suggest, I am unconvinced that interest or acceptance of “conspiracy theories” has any correlation with a lack of intelligence or education. In fact, some recent research suggests that entertaining conspiratorial explanations of reality—meaning that one does not take what their political leaders offer as explanations of policies or events—is likely indicative of a higher intelligence and simply good citizenship.

I’m not sure if there is any more credibility left for the government to lose, at least among those inclined to rebel in the first place. I think it’s important for us to keep in mind that the government is regarded by some as paternal or maternal protectors. President Franklin Roosevelt was emblematic of the welfare state—a savior of the common man—even though he further established the banking sector’s control over the country and laid the groundwork for the present technocracy. Since the Roosevelt administration and the aggressive expansion of the government in the post-World War Two era we have largely had a government by cult of personality. For example, Barack Obama is the equivalent of a rock star, nevermind his family’s ties to the intelligence community and otherwise opaque background. Like other recent presidents, his personality and charisma supersede public realization of the actual policies and trade deals he is enacting on the behalf of his sponsors—mostly powerful, anti-democratic interests.

As this response is written, the United States is arguably being undermined by the Obama administration’s politicization and exploitation of the nation’s immigration policies. The notion that such maneuvers will ultimately change the overall constitution of the American polity is subsumed by Obama’s simple rejoinder, “Let’s give these people a break.” Enough of the population is trusting enough of Obama to dismiss his critics. Many of those who know better are too afraid of either being called “racists” or “conspiracy theorists.” And so it goes.

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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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