

Contested Visions, Imperfect Information, and the Persistence of Conspiracy Theories

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As I write this chapter for Project Censored's fortieth anniversary, philosopher David Ray Griffin's talk "9/11: The Myth and the Reality" plays in the background. In this YouTube video, Griffin addresses "nine of the major myths contained in the official story about 9/11."¹ Myth 3, for example, argues that the attacks of September 11 were "such a big operation, involving so many people, [they] could not have been kept a secret, because someone involved in it would have talked by now." As support for Myth 3, Griffin compares the official narrative about 9/11 with the secrecy of the "Manhattan Project to create the atomic bomb, and the war in Indonesia in 1957, which the United States government provoked, participated in, and was able to keep secret from its own people until a book about it appeared in 1995."²

On the surface, these connections with secrecy appear convincing. US government secrecy *did* become institutionalized through the regulation of information related to bombmaking, so much so that ideas and inventions were not merely marked classified, they came into existence "born classified". This concept "grew quite naturally out of the American experience in World War II. The atomic bomb project was one of the best kept secrets of the war."³ As for the dark history of the Indonesian war as cited by Griffin, and documented by scholars Audrey R. Kahin and George McTurnan Kahin in their *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia*,

this too has plausible roots in government secrecy. In part, Kahin and Kahin's research was made possible by the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, published by the Office of the Historian, US State Department. In the graduate course I teach on secrecy and intellectual freedom, we study the dynamics of *FRUS*, generally described as the "official documentary historical record of major US foreign policy decisions and significant diplomatic activity."⁴ *FRUS* is constructed from public and formerly classified records of the National Security Council, the intelligence community, the Departments of Defense and State, and the private papers of policymakers involved in formulating US foreign policy. A special nine-member committee, comprised of scholars and archivists with security clearances, review records for inclusion in *FRUS*.⁵ *FRUS* has been criticized for its historical inaccuracy as well as for its significant time lag in publishing subject volumes.⁶ History by delay aptly describes *FRUS*' time lag, described in 1983 as growing at "an alarming rate: fifteen years in the 1920s and 1930s, by the late 1950s the gap had grown to twenty years, and today is closer to thirty."⁷ In its 2015 report, the Advisory Committee on Historical Diplomatic Documentation noted that the "series has never averaged a 30-year lag time, and the current average exceeds 35 years."⁸

I use these cases alongside Griffin's Myth 3 to illustrate that government policies and events often *do* reveal themselves as records seep from federal bodies, Freedom of Information Act requests, and leaks, which all have power to transmute fragmented official accounts into public histories. Once wedded to secrecy, the post-WWII Operations Sunset, Paperclip, and Gladio, the role of the US in the overthrow and assassinations of foreign leaders, multiple CIA Cold War projects (e.g., Artichoke, MKNAOMI, MKULTRA), the exploits of CIA director Allen Dulles, decades-long rumors of NSA surveillance, the Bush administration's plan to bomb Al Jazeera, and CIA-run black sites in Europe—turned out to be authentic.⁹

At this point, it is possible to identify several key features of conspiracy theory ideation and formation: *one, the past imprints on the present*. While it is no longer the same world, *it is*. The past, like one technology of yesteryear, the acetate transparency, overlays the present and shapes perceptions and tests relationships; and *two, it*

is often difficult to dismiss conspiracy theories (CTs) merely on the basis of what is known now in terms of publicly available knowledge. In the parallel government, where regulatory secrecy runs course with partial publicity and transparency, histories are written over decades and constructed on redacted, fragmented, perhaps even faulty information. None of my comments regarding Myth 3 should imply I support Griffin's claim; what I am interested in pointing out is the nature of imperfect information, which carries with it the potential to create suspicion, which as Jeremy Bentham observed, "always attaches to mystery. It thinks it sees a crime where it beholds an affectation of secrecy; and it is rarely deceived."¹⁰ Historian Kathryn S. Olmsted offers a more contemporary view of suspicion and conspiracies, one that is compatible with my discussion in this chapter:

More often, however, the culture of suspicion created by the revelations of government conspiracies undermines democracy. When citizens cannot trust their government to tell the truth, when they are convinced that public officials routinely conspire, lie, and conceal their crimes, they become less likely to trust the government to do anything. The result is a profoundly weakened polity, with fewer citizens voting and more problems left unaddressed for a future generation that is ever more cynical about the possibility of reforms.¹¹

In this chapter, I discuss these ideas, as well as offer a sketch of information conditions that affect the development and evolution of CTs. I then offer a brief review of the research literature regarding conspiracies, conspiracy theorists, and conspiracy theory-making. I propose nine patterns that take the scholarly community to task for its framing and views of CTs. These patterns explore the underlying dynamics that potentially lead to the building of conspiracy theories and suggest a pressing need for new directions in critical and interpretive research and methods. The patterns are also a set of recommendations, or what might be seen as a manifesto for the research community to consider in its future study of CTs.

TRUST NO ONE

Research by the American National Election Studies, Pew Research Center, and scholars such as Russell J. Dalton indicate that trust in government, including but not limited to the US government, has declined since the 1950s.¹³ Sociologist Anthony Giddens likens trust to “a form of faith in which confidence vested in probable outcomes expresses a commitment to something.”¹⁴ Building conceptually on Giddens, we can delineate trust as dependence upon some individual or body because *we are not in a position to know everything*.¹⁵ If secrecy has the ability to modify relationships, including relations between citizens and their government, then the ability to trust or distrust does as well.¹⁶ While it may reduce social complexity, trust “simplifies life by the taking of a risk.”¹⁷ However, the identification of risks, responding to risk, and risk taking are highly dependent on information; information as knowledge communicated becomes the central means that enables connection—it then becomes a “key question *who* gets what information, by *what* means, and in *what* order, about *whom* and *what*, and for *what* purpose.”¹⁸ A two-way street, trust is a mutuality, for in entrusting government, citizens take risks in choosing leadership in exchange for political stability and protection from “critical situations,” or those “circumstances of radical disjunction of an unpredictable kind” which may affect individuals and institutions.¹⁹ Therefore, trust is directly connected to the state of knowledge and security, no matter what side of the fence one is on.²⁰

A review of US information policies finds persistent use of conditions of information such as secrecy,²¹ blowback,²² censorship,²³ lying,²⁴ plausible deniability, “colors” of propaganda,²⁵ redaction, misinformation,²⁶ disinformation,²⁷ eyewash,²⁸ and hearsay.²⁹ Reclassification of previously declassified records³⁰ and removal of personal papers from special collections to review “security material”³¹ add to this problem. Over the course of US history, these information conditions have become *de facto* national security information policies used to cloak details of assassinations, clandestine programs, covert surveillance,³² human experimentation,³³ torture,³⁴ careless environmental practices,³⁵ weapons research and development, election fraud, interference with the media, and “cultural pathologies” of cer-

tain federal agencies.³⁶ Yet other conditions, such as the “twisting” of language, also contribute to the concealment of information in order to meet some objective and sway public opinion. Not quite propaganda, but a “tampering of communications” nevertheless, an example of twisting is the differently worded classified and unclassified versions of the National Intelligence Estimate to select members of Congress that led to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.³⁷

Additional scenarios, such as poor preservation and organization of information, risk communication during crises and disasters (e.g., 9/11, the Flint water crisis, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Hurricane Katrina, the Sandy Hook shooting, and the nuclear crisis at Three Mile Island) and institutional failures (e.g., the FBI’s destruction of the Koresh compound in Waco, or the financial crisis of 2007–08) are often interpreted as secrecy, active censorship, and much worse. Moreover, what Ulrich Beck described in 1992 as the “enabling power of catastrophes” with their endless state of emergencies (e.g., homeland and national security) have now become a normal state.³⁸ Threat level conditions bring “totally new kinds of challenges to democracy,” one of which is the post-9/11 range of surveillance, which includes vigorous collection of biometric data and monitoring of communications.³⁹ This new normal reflects a “tendency to legitimate totalitarianism of hazard prevention.”⁴⁰ These “critical situations” may contribute to lack of trust in official accounts, which have the potential to lead to speculation, fictions, rumors, and the formation of CTs as a passive form of protest and rejection of “legitimate knowledge.”

Christopher L. Hinson lumps many of the categories listed above as *negative information actions*, or “the willful and deliberate act designed to keep government information from those in government and the public entitled to it.”⁴¹ While these information conditions are surely negative in the sense of tempering and arresting the flow of information, it must be acknowledged there are legitimate reasons for the use of some, or all of these conditions, one among them, state security. One scholar suggests that in cases of government information restriction, officials share select details accompanied with a timeline projecting when information can be publicly released in full.⁴² However, even with the best of intentions, moderating the flow of

information impedes understanding of policies, modifies public trust, and with it, the ability to exercise oversight.

CTs are perhaps intensified by the “mixed media culture,” with its “varying standards of journalism, and a fascination with inexpensive, polarizing argument.”⁴³ The late Gary Webb saw journalistic integrity and the production of news influenced by “nervous editors” who avoid reporting controversial stories unless a reporter obtained “an admission of wrongdoing (preferably written) or an official government report confirm[ed] the story’s charge.”⁴⁴ This “new rule,” as Webb terms it, overwrote traditional methods of journalism where a reporter “diligently investigated the issue, used named sources, found supporting documentation, and [if] you honestly believed it was true, you went with it.”⁴⁵ I’ll let Mr. Webb speak for himself in recounting firsthand how the shift from traditional journalistic methods influence the public right to know, morphing into a kind of censorship that is subtle and insidious:

... stories about serious, unacknowledged abuses [no longer] get printed, and eventually reporters learn not to waste their time turning over rocks if no one will officially confirm when something hideous slithers out. And once that happens, they cease being journalists and become akin to the scribes of antiquity, whose sole task was to faithfully record the pharaoh’s words in clay. It is this latter standard that was championed by Abrams in the Tailwind case and to some extent by *San Jose Mercury News* editor Jerry Ceppos in the case of my “Dark Alliance” series in 1996. Under these new rules, it isn’t enough anymore for a reporter to have on-the-record sources and supporting documentation. Now they must have something called “proof.” Investigative stories must be “proven” in order to reach the public; having “insufficient evidence” is now cause for retraction and dismissal.⁴⁶

It is under these complex information conditions that I propose that CTs occur within social systems that are not only imperfect in terms of publicity and transparency, but suffer from a “security obsession.” Many of the information conditions as listed above, I conjecture,

enable CTs, thereby influencing public trust. Zygmunt Bauman outlines the problem in a far more cohesive way:

To sum up, perhaps the most pernicious, seminal and long-term effect of the security obsession (the “collateral damage” it perpetrates) is the sapping of mutual trust and the sowing and breeding of mutual suspicion. With lack of trust, border-lines are drawn and with suspicion, they are fortified with mutual prejudices and recycled into frontlines. The deficit of trust inevitably leads to a wilting of communication; in avoiding communication, and the absence of interest in its renewal, the “strangeness” of strangers is bound to deepen and acquire ever darker and more sinister tones which in turn disqualifies them even more radically as potential partners in dialogue and the negotiation of a mutually safe and agreeable mode of cohabitation.⁴⁷

In short, put together and over decades, these conditions, coupled with technology platforms that place demands on information seeking skills and literacies, create an environment ripe for speculative thinking, conflicting perspectives, alternative research avenues, and conspiracy theory building.⁴⁸

OF CONSPIRACIES AND CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

The popular and interdisciplinary research literature on conspiracy theories, as many theories themselves, is richly imaginative and descriptive.⁴⁹ The one “truth” is that no definitive theory or model offers a completely satisfactory explanation of what constitutes a conspiracy, or how CTs are constructed, propagated, and become entrenched within social systems.

Conspiracies in US law “include the fact that regardless of its statutory setting, every conspiracy has at least two elements: (1) an agreement (2) between two or more persons. Members of the conspiracy are also liable for the foreseeable crimes of their fellows committed in furtherance of the common plot. Moreover, statements by one conspirator are admissible evidence against all.”⁵⁰ Conspiracies then, as

noted by Julian Assange, “take information about the world in which they operate (the conspiratorial environment), pass through the conspirators and then act on the result.”⁵¹ Assange categorizes conspiracies as a type of “cognitive device” that contain “inputs (information about the environment), a computational network (the conspirators and their links to each other) and outputs (actions intend[ed] to change or maintain the environment).”⁵² An example that supports Assange’s views of conspiracy are the graceful, revealing drawings by conceptual artist Mark Lombardi, whose own death in 2000 propelled numerous CTs.⁵³ Lombardi’s “maps” envision social networks, or the “narrative structures” as Lombardi explained his work, underlying among other subjects, political leaders, spy agencies, and their role in covert financing and shadow banking, the global drug trade, and terrorism.⁵⁴

A *conspiracy theorist* is characterized as an individual who “actively investigates whether conspiracies have taken place or are taking place, and when and if he discovers them tries to publicly identify the conspirators.”⁵⁵ Theorists are depicted as “victims of cognitive failure,” not necessarily suffering from irrationality or mental illness, but from a “crippled epistemology” due to a “sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources.”⁵⁶ Theorists are also often categorized as conservative and holding fundamentalist beliefs.⁵⁷ Husting and Orr argue the label *conspiracy theorist* functions symbolically, “protecting certain decisions and people from question in arenas of political, cultural, and scholarly knowledge construction.”⁵⁸ The authors conclude the phrase *conspiracy theorist* acts a “transpersonal strategy of exclusion.”⁵⁹

The seeds of popular and scholarly framing of CTs can be traced to Karl Popper’s “conspiracy theory of society” and Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style,” often used as boilerplates in the framing of conspiracy theory building by certain individuals and groups.⁶⁰ It is the paranoid style, representative of a “conspiratorial mind,” which Hofstadter describes as “manifest on the extreme right wing, among those I have called pseudoconservatives, who believe that we have lived for a generation in the grip of a vast conspiracy.”⁶¹ The paranoid style is intended by Hofstadter as “pejorative … the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good.”⁶² Hofstadter claimed

the paranoid style appears in “waves of different intensity” as “an old and recurrent mode of expression in our public life which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent and whose content remains much the same even when it is adopted by men of distinctly different purposes.”⁶³ Although Hofstadter did not expressly make the link between anti-intellectualism and the advance of conspiracy theories, in the 1950s other researchers made this connection.⁶⁴

Richard O. Curry notes that “fear of conspiracy is most intense during periods of national crisis,” especially “when traditional social and moral values are undergoing change.”⁶⁵ CTs are linked to political extremism and viewed as instrumental in planting the seeds of terrorism, although this connection is inconclusive.⁶⁶ The 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, for example, links terrorism with CTs, stating that “terrorists recruit more effectively from populations whose information about the world is contaminated by falsehoods and corrupted by conspiracy theories.”⁶⁷ Conspiracy theorists are further organized into left- and right-wing ideologies as reported in the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) withdrawn, controversial *Domestic Extremism Lexicon*.⁶⁸ DHS marks left-wing extremists as “a movement of groups or individuals that embraces anticapitalist, Communist, or Socialist doctrines and seeks to bring about change through violent revolution rather than through established political processes,” while right-wing extremists are defined as a movement or individuals “who can be broadly divided into those who are primarily hate-oriented, and those who are mainly antigovernment and reject federal authority in favor of state or local authority.”⁶⁹ DHS’s attempt at defining extremism is thorny at best, as there exists no one accepted definition of extremism across law, international agreement, and the scholarly literature.

Perhaps there is another way to consider conspiracy theorists and their theories. Former director of the Information Security Oversight Office (ISO) William J. Leonard offers a compelling view, one that raises questions regarding democratic values and the rise of extremism:

Our continuing failure to isolate the extremists is due, in part, to the worldwide perception that we continue to vio-

late our own values and ideals, especially as they relate to human dignity and the rule of law. This perception was fostered by some of our own government officials when they refused during the Bush years to plainly state that physically restraining an individual and forcing his lungs to slowly fill up with water constitutes torture. They did this, in part, by hiding behind the classification system—by stating that to acknowledge limits to interrogation techniques used by our intelligence services (but not our military) would somehow disclose classified information—and thus harm our national security.⁷⁰

This brief review suggests that certain CTs refer to the past, some are focused on subjects in the present, and some CTs merge the past with the present; still other CTs are characterized in the research literature as having the capacity to “triumph in the future if they are not disturbed in their plans by those with information about their sinister doings.”⁷¹ Thus historical context plays “a decisive role in the genesis and elaboration” of CTs,⁷² although some researchers have gone so far as to speculate that CTs may constitute a “necessary part of capitalism and democracy.”⁷³ Finally, while it is productive to think of CTs like “doorways into major social and political issues defining U.S. (and global) political culture since the end of the cold war,” CTs are doorways, *period*.⁷⁴

WHAT IS A CONSPIRACY THEORY?

There is no single agreed-on definition of conspiracy theory. Definitions and descriptions of CTs are abundant, ranging from “the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy where other explanations are more probable,” to the “belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end,” and a “hypothesis that some events were caused by the intractable secret machinations of undemocratic individuals.”⁷⁵ Under the former George W. Bush administration, the US State Department’s Bureau of International Information characterized CTs as “vast, powerful, evil forces,” that are “secretly manipulating events . . . this fits

the profile of a conspiracy theory, which is rarely true, even though such theories have great appeal and are often widely believed. In reality, events usually have much less exciting explanations.”⁷⁶ CTs are portrayed as “poisoned discourse,” which “encourages a vortex of illusion and superstition,” and framed as explanations of “important events that hypothesize . . . the intentional deception and manipulation of those involved in, affected by, or witnessing these events.”⁷⁷ CTs have also been defined as a:

Proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain . . . the proposed explanation must conflict with an “official” explanation of the same historical event.⁷⁸

CTs concern “specific people or groups of people, acting with purposes that are undisclosed or outside accountability or even examination by others,” and/or an “effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished).”⁷⁹ This latter definition, crafted by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, is contested by David Ray Griffin. Griffin suggests that a “generic” definition pulled from a common dictionary might better serve as a basis for understanding CTs. Griffin proposes that “to hold a conspiracy theory about some event is, therefore, simply to believe that this event resulted from, or involved, such an agreement. This, we can say, is the generic meaning of the term.”⁸⁰ Another flexible definition is suggested by Olmsted, who notes the statutory/legal roots of conspiracy: conspiracies “occur when two people collude to abuse power or break the law. A conspiracy theory is a proposal about a conspiracy that may or may not be true; it has not yet been proven.”⁸¹

Conspiracy theories are also framed as “countertheories: that is, they are always posed in opposition to official accounts of suspicious events.”⁸² CTs are depicted as “knowledge-producing discourse characterized by a collection of statements and texts shaped within and

by different (para) institutional contexts which promote a particular knowledge about the world.”⁸³ The “prototypical” CT, according to Rob Brotherton, is an “unanswered question,” for a CT “assumes nothing [is] as it seems . . . it portrays the conspirators as preternaturally competent and as unusually evil; it is founded on anomaly hunting, and is ultimately irrefutable.”⁸⁴ CTs function both as a part of suppressed knowledge and as a basis for stigmatization, involving stigmatized knowledge, or “claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error—universities, communities of scientific researchers and the like.”⁸⁵ The use of “conspiracy theory” is often used as a “reframing device that neutralizes questions about power and motive while turning the force of challenges back onto their speakers, rendering them unfit public interlocutors.”⁸⁶ These and other definitions aside, Steve Clarke identifies several benefits of CTs, for the conspiracy theorist “challenges us to improve our social explanations,” while also helping to “maintain openness in society.”⁸⁷

This brief tour of the CT research literature identifies certain themes such as suspicion, paranoia, distrust, insecurity, uncertainty, secrecy, and power over information. These definitions also suggest *asymmetries in information* between “conspirators” and outsiders that occur under regimes of imperfect information flows. One further characterization of CTs by philosopher Charles Pigden offers an additional consideration of how we might respond to conspiracy theories as narratives that “couldn’t possibly happen in free societies that have an open media and freedom of information laws.” That is, are “transparent” and democratically elected governments capable of hatching loathsome, rights-infringing secret schemes? We know from historians, journalists, whistleblowers, and human rights workers the answer is yes. Pigden demands that we consider the possibility that conspiracy theories reflect a failure of the democratic process, specifically a collapse of the checks and balances that are derived from public participation:⁸⁸

The concept of a conspiracy theory as it is commonly employed is a chauvinist construct. It is not to be understood

in terms of governments generally, but in terms of Western governments, and recent Western governments at that. When people say or imply that conspiracy theories ought not to be believed, what they actually mean (in so far as they have a coherent idea) is that we should not believe theories that postulate evil schemes on the part of recent or contemporary Western governments (or government agencies) and that run counter to the current orthodoxy in the relevant Western countries.⁸⁹

THE PATTERNS THAT CONNECT⁹⁰

Discussed below are patterns that appear in the research literature and in CTs as socially-produced artifacts. These nine patterns identify recurring themes and underlying processes in the scholarly literature and within conspiracy communities as knowledge communities that gather, interpret, produce, and disseminate knowledge:⁹¹

PATTERN 1: We require better definitions of what constitutes a conspiracy theory. The very notion of conspiracy theory brings to mind sociologist Ulrich Beck’s “zombie categories,” wherein an idea lives on even after it is long dead.⁹² It is time to throw off the dead weight of Popper and Hofstadter. As we’ve witnessed from our brief exploration of CTs, “conspiracy theory” is a cup too full with countless definitions and theories. There is a desperate need to differentiate CTs that involve institutional failures and malfeasance from those that arise in other environments, such as accounts that are racist, sexist, homophobic, or promote violence. Critical differentiations will lead to better tracing of information flows and targeted use of research methods.

PATTERN 2: Building on Pattern 1, scholarly analyses that lump together CTs as if they are “like” narratives perpetuate ignorance and misunderstanding. For example, many works cited in this chapter discuss the moon landing, Elvis sightings, Heaven’s Gate suicides, alien abductions, the death of Princess Diana, climate denial, state

crimes, and various politically-motivated assassinations as if all of these conspiracy theories are similar. To treat all CTs as identical in origin and scope is to contaminate the sample. CTs involving “alien technology,” for example, might belong in critiques of government secrecy if they concern secret weapons research and development, or unexplained phenomena found in declassified records.⁹³ Alien abduction narratives are usually not CTs, nor are paranormal or Fortean phenomena (unexplained naturally occurring phenomena). All of these subjects, however, suggest that “the question of how one knows what one knows cannot be ignored.”⁹⁴

Select CTs that intersect with conditions of information and cases of “administrative evil,”⁹⁵ political and state crimes (e.g., State Crimes Against Democracy or SCADs⁹⁶), and institutional failures variously outlined in the social science literature as atrophy of vigilance, bureaucratic slippage, and recreancy, should be considered in a different way.⁹⁷ These CTs, which range from political assassinations, experiments on unwitting subjects, and destabilization of governments, to 9/11 as a “controversial possible SCAD,” point to power relations at work in society, and how decisions are made in closed, powerful, secretive groups that may be guilty of corruption.⁹⁸ Some of these groups may indeed constitute secret societies (e.g., CFR, Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg Group, Seldes’s 1000 Americans, Mills’s power elite, Domhoff’s “who rules,” the military industrial complex, or the surveillance industrial complex).⁹⁹

PATTERN 3: Lack of research and follow-through to fully characterize and frame specific CTs undermines confidence in findings among researchers and the public. One glaring example involves the JFK assassination, often portrayed in the scholarly literature as the gold standard of CTs. Below I use the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) conspiracy conclusion to chart the failure of the scholarly community to fully trace the trajectory of CTs and to examine its own approaches.

Measurement studies cited as “proof” that JFK conspiracy theorists suffer from “biased assimilation” leading to “attitude polarization” are only slightly more puzzling than the widespread ignorance of the HSCA’s findings.¹⁰⁰ The HSCA was organized out of the Senate

Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee) investigation of CIA covert assassination programs. The HSCA’s extensive investigation began in 1976 and concluded in 1979, resulting in twelve volumes of testimony, research, and exhibits. A review of the scholarly sources cited in this chapter found that *no* researchers concerned with CTs, either their ideation or disputing them, cited the HSCA’s highly significant findings that President John F. Kennedy was “probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.” According to its report, the HSCA was “unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy.”¹⁰¹

HSCA determined, among other matters, that the Secret Service “was deficient in the performance of its duties;” it also concluded that the Department of Justice “failed to exercise initiative in supervising and directing the investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the assassination.”¹⁰² Although the HSCA’s conclusions regarding the acoustical evidence from the Dallas police Dictabelt recordings remain a matter of contention, the Commission raised significant questions that go unanswered today. Eyewitness testimony, the Harper fragment, bystander James Tague’s cheek injury, discrepancies in matching rifles, the Warren Commission’s Exhibit 399, analysis of photographs taken by witnesses, and the three films taken by bystanders, including Abraham Zapruder, are only some of the unresolved issues among scholars, journalists, and citizen researchers. This pattern suggests that outright debunking is never scholarship; it is a step beyond the necessary skepticism that any critical inquiry must include.

PATTERN 4: The creation of conspiracy theory is tied to sense-making. Sense-making, a concept developed by Brenda Dervin in 1972, starts from an assumption that “reality is neither complete nor constant but rather filled with fundamental and pervasive discontinuities or gaps.”¹⁰³ Sense making involves the inference that, while individuals interact with time and space, their “information seeking and using behaviors (both internal and external) can remain static, can change responsively, and can even change chaotically.”¹⁰⁴ Dervin’s sense-making is critical to further understanding of CTs

in terms of how individuals use factizing to “make their worlds” through what Dervin terms “proceduring, a designing called making facts.”¹⁰⁵ Sense-making challenges the notion that there is “one right way to produce knowledge.”¹⁰⁶ As it relates to the formation of CTs, sense-making suggests the “forces of power in society and in organizations . . . prescribe acceptable answers and make disagreeing with them, even in the face of the evidence of one’s own experience, a scary and risky thing to do. Even more difficult is when the forces of power flow through an organization or system hidden and undisclosed.”¹⁰⁷

PATTERN 5: Building on Pattern 4 and my discussion so far, government secrecy propels individuals to utilize mosaic building in order to construct theories about events and actions. Mosaic building advances sense-making in the piecing together of “disparate items of information, though individually of limited or no utility” that, nonetheless, “take on added significance when combined with other items of information.”¹⁰⁸ My use of mosaic building to understand CTs draws on Paul Solomon’s concept of information mosaics, but adapts his idea of “indicated patterns of actions” on the basis of *CIA v. Sims*.¹⁰⁹ In this case, the Supreme Court held that the CIA had authority to withhold information requested through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) concerning researchers and institutions contracted by the Agency in its MKULTRA projects. The Court argued that “an observer who is knowledgeable about a particular intelligence research project, such as MKULTRA, could, upon learning that the research was performed at a certain institution, deduce the identities of the protected individual researchers.”¹¹⁰ After consulting with institutions and researchers contracted to work on MKULTRA, the CIA disclosed the names of fifty-nine institutions that agreed to disclosure, but the Agency did not reveal any individual researchers’ names. The CIA then refused to disclose the remaining information, claiming that researchers and affiliated institutions were “intelligence sources” as intended by the National Security Act of 1947, and therefore that the Agency could withhold the information pursuant to FOIA Exemption 3.¹¹¹

Conspiracy theorists flip the switch in taking disparate pieces of information from a wide variety of sources, including public (open

source) information and declassified, redacted documents. Using the mosaic concept allows for speculation that, in some cases, takes hold as a counter-narrative. Out of disparate pieces of information, working histories reconstruct past events and actions to create new history. This follows Brian Keeley’s observation that individuals engaged in producing CTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.¹¹² The potential knowledge-producing ability of the mosaic identified in *CIA v. Sims* is an essential part of conspiracy theory building, a process that also includes the risk of adopting faulty beliefs as well as far-reaching assumptions and conclusions.

PATTERN 6: Building on Giddens’s observation that “all human beings are knowledgeable agents,” conspiracy theorists are fundamentally researchers and archivists.¹¹³ Byford writes that “conspiracy theorists do not see themselves as raconteurs of alluring stories, but as investigators and researchers. That is why the conspiracy thesis will usually be embedded within a detailed exposition of plausible and verifiable historical facts.”¹¹⁴ Depending on the CT, those individuals or knowledge communities that investigate CTs are citizen-scientists, citizen-journalists, and “barefoot” researchers.¹¹⁵ For example, JFK assassination researchers created vast libraries through the Assassination Archives and Research Center, Black Op Radio, and the Mary Ferrell Foundation.¹¹⁶ Citizens for Truth about the Kennedy Assassination (CTKA) published one of the only accounts of the three-and-a-half-week Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. civil suit, *Coretta Scott King, et al v. Loyd Jowers, et al*, conducted in 1999 in Memphis. Jim Douglass reported on the trial for *Probe Magazine*, which is published by CTKA. Neither the civil case nor the jury’s decision as quoted below were widely reported in the (corporate) mainstream media:

In answer to the question did Loyd Jowers participate in a conspiracy to do harm to Dr. Martin Luther King, your answer is yes. Do you also find that others, including governmental agencies, were parties to this conspiracy as alleged by the defendant? Your answer to that one is also yes. And the total amount of damages you find for the plaintiffs entitled to [sic] is one hundred dollars. Is that your verdict?

THE JURY: Yes (In unison)¹¹⁷

Still other citizens have created Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) archives to monitor US government information policies.¹¹⁸ The *Corbett Report*, hosted by alternative media researcher James Corbett, and former FBI translator Sibel Edmonds's *Boiling Frogs Post* both investigate off-grid news stories and produce a weekly podcast. The controversial Alex Jones and his Infowars team produce films, books, and a podcast. Jones, who we might describe as sometimes suffering from Hofstadter's "curious leap in imagination," nevertheless conducts research and produces knowledge.¹¹⁹ Various UFO groups, including the former ParaNet¹²⁰ and the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), founded by astronomer J. Allen Hynek, employ the Hynek Classification System, which rates the visibility or proximity of unidentified aerial objects. Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) utilizes the Vallee Classification System developed by astronomer Dr. Jacques Vallee.¹²¹

PATTERN 7: Conspiracy theories involve a certain level of syncretism, or the combination or fusion of beliefs, culture, and language to form new meanings. For example, Michael A. Hoffman II and Loren Coleman employ the concept of *twilight language* to identify hidden meanings, symbolic connections, and "cues" behind certain events such as mass shootings.¹²² Twilight language, borrowed from Tantric Buddhism, is "written in a highly oblique and obscure literary form . . . designed to conceal its contents from non-practitioners."¹²³ Other examples of syncretism are the use of the Trivium Method of Critical Thinking.¹²⁴ The notion of *New World Order*, a term borrowed from H.G. Wells, was popularized in George H.W. Bush's 1991 State of the Union address, and then morphed into CT usage.¹²⁵ The use of *false flag*, a term from military strategy, has consistently been part of CT discourse since the 9/11 attacks. The mash-up of Hegel's *thesis, antithesis, and synthesis* evolved into CT usage as "problem-reaction-solution." Conspiracy theorists understand this characterization as a way that regimes manufacture a problem, encourage a targeted reaction, and propose a specific explanation, action, or (orchestrated) solution, often without democratic participation.

PATTERN 8: Following Pattern 7, a hallmark of CTs is the development of specialized language or discourse in describing complex social phenomena. Language is often borrowed from other contexts (Pattern 7), but can also arise spontaneously in response to events and actions. Terms such as the *mental health national spy complex*, *spyporn*, and *suicided* (a possible state-sanctioned murder of a person who is officially reported as committing suicide) represent specific worldviews on the nature of authority and distrust in official accounts.

PATTERN 9: Like a Russian nesting doll, or *matryoshka*, CTs often consist of theories within theories. For instance, theories about the 9/11 attacks often comprise multiple, originally independent CTs, including controlled demolition, Building 7 and real estate mogul Larry Silverstein, an "inside job" by the Bush administration, the role of the "dancing Israelis," North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD)'s delayed scrambling of F-15 fighters, an alleged Dick Cheney stand-down order, an alleged order to shoot down Flight 93 made by Cheney, letters containing anthrax sent to Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy and Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, and Operation Northwoods's false flag. The 9/11 case is but one example of how one theory morphs into multiple, connected theories—thus suggesting Lombardi's narrative structures—each with its own distinct dynamics and information flow. CTs, then, are a *web of relations*. This pattern, like many of the patterns outlined here, illustrate that to fully grasp the nature of CTs we must follow the trail from beginning to end. We must painstakingly chart the forensics of conspiracy theories from their origins through to their manifestation on whatever medium or platform they occur.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This chapter discussed conditions of information and their role in conspiracy theory making. I reviewed the research literature on conspiracies, conspiracy theorists, and conspiracy theories, and introduced nine patterns that lay a conceptual groundwork for thinking about conspiracy theories. As I have argued here, the research com-

munity desperately needs not only new definitions and models of CTs, but also a framework within which to critically examine state apparatuses that may be responsible for fostering conspiracy theories. We need to trace the sources and the roles of potentially corrupted and missing information, whether from governments, corporations, media, groups, or individuals, that lead to the production of CTs. We can take from Ulrich Beck the need for an “integrative” cognitive sociology as it relates to the study of CTs, for this kind of sociology consists of “all the admixtures, amalgams and agents of knowledge in their combination and opposition, their foundations, their claims, their mistakes, their irrationalities, their truth and, in the impossibility of their knowing, the knowledge they lay claim to.”¹²⁶ My discussion also suggests the need for the scholarly community to reassess CTs as they “arise in exclusion and proceed as information-seeking on the part of the outs about the ins.”¹²⁷

We can accomplish these directions in a few ways: first, by applying theories across disciplinary boundaries,¹²⁸ and second, by utilizing methods that place researchers in dialogue with conspiracy theorists and the direct knowledge they produce. The point is that we researchers “can find out, not with perfect accuracy, but better than zero, what people think they are doing, what meanings they give to the objects and events and people in their lives and experience. We do that by talking to them, in formal or informal interviews, in quick exchanges while we participate in and observe their ordinary activities, and by watching and listening.”¹²⁹ In the post-9/11 universe, these approaches form the basis for a more holistic understanding of the ways conspiracy theories propagate and memetically crawl through social systems in response to imperfect publicity and transparency.

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²² That is, deception involving information planted outside the US by a government source or intelligence agency. The information then "blows back" to that agency or within government, having the potential to mislead officials and the public. See US House of Representatives, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *The CIA and the Media: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Oversight of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, House of Representatives, Ninety-Fifth Congress, First and Second Sessions, December 27, 28, 29, 1977, January 4, 5, and April 20, 1978* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978) and Loch K. Johnson, "The CIA and the Media," *Intelligence and National Security* 1, no. 2 (1986), 143-69.

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³¹ Jefferson Morley, "How the CIA Writes History," *Intercept*, April 25, 2016, accessed May 11, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/04/25/how-the-cia-writes-history/>.

³² See Ivan Greenberg, *Surveillance in America: Critical Analysis of the FBI, 1920 to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012) and Laura Poitras, director, *Citizenfour* (documentary film), New York: Radius-TWC, 2014.

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85 Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 27, 26.

86 Gina Hustling and Martin Orr, "Dangerous Machinery," 146.

87 Steve Clarke, "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing," 148.

88 See Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

89 Charles R. Pigden, "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom," *Episteme* 4, no. 2 (2007), 219–32, doi: 10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.219.

90 The idea of pattern is liberally taken from Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1979). In this work, Bateson discusses patterns as communication in providing context and meaning; pattern making—and order—both occur through information.

91 Taken from Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992), 1–35.

92 Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2002), 202–12.

93 See for example, puzzlement by government authorities as to the nature of "UFOs" as reported in documents in the *Declassified Documents Reference System* (DDRS). One document I received under FOIA (I wanted to verify the provenance of the memo) from the CIA in 2015 is a memo written in 1952 by Gen. Walter B. (Bedell) Smith to members of the Psychological Strategy Board on the subject of unidentified flying objects. The sixteen-page memo, which can be found on the Web, discusses among other matters, the National Security Council's recognition "as a national security problem our present limited capabilities in making prompt positive visual or mechanical identification of flying objects." The memo discusses the objects as "having possible implications for psychological warfare" and raises questions as to the Soviet Union's "present level of knowledge regarding these phenomena." See Walter B. Smith to Director, Psychological Strategy Board, 1952, Director of Central Intelligence, Memorandum Subject: "Flying Saucers," CIA -RDP81R00560R000100020017-2, approved for release April 4, 2001, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000015338.pdf.

94 Ron Westrum, "Social Intelligence about Anomalies: The Case of UFOs," *Social Studies of Science* 7, no. 3 (August 1977), 271–302, doi: 10.1177/030631277700700302.

95 Adams and Balfour write that "the masking of administrative evil suggests that evil also occurs along another continuum: from acts committed in relative ignorance to those committed knowingly and deliberately, or what we would characterize as masked and unmasked evil." See Guy B. Adams and Danny L. Balfour, *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2015), 12.

96 See for example Morton H. Halperin, Robert L. Borosage, Jerry J. Berman, and Christine M. Marwick, *The Lawless State: The Crimes of the US Intelligence Agencies* (Penguin Books, 1976) and Lance deHaven-Smith, "When Political Crimes are Inside Jobs: Detecting State Crimes Against Democracy," *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 28, no. 3 (September 2006), 330–55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25610803>, who offer cases of such crimes. DeHaven-Smith outlines SCADs as "concerted actions or inactions by public officials that are intended to weaken or subvert popular control of their government ... SCADs include not only election tampering, vote fraud, government graft, political assassinations, and similar crimes when they are initiated by public officials, but also subtle violations of democratic processes and prerequisites" (333). SCADs also entail "political assassination, false-flag terrorism, election theft, military provocation, and contrived crises in industry, finance, energy, and public health" (Lance deHaven-Smith, Alexander Kouzmin, Kym Thorne, and Matthew T. Witt, "The Limits of Permissible Change in U.S. Politics and Policy: Learning from the Obama Presidency," *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 32, no. 1 (2010), 134–40, doi: 10.2753/ATP1084-1806320110). Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013) also discusses SCADs and their relationship with CTs.

97 *Atrophy of vigilance* is the decline over time in regulatory surveillance; in *bureaucratic slippage*, there is a "tendency for broad policies to be altered through successive reinterpretation, such that the ultimate implementation may bear little resemblance to legislated or other broad statements of policy intent"; and *recreancy*, where "persons entrusted with the operation of systems may have failed to carry out their responsibilities with the necessary vigor." Atrophy of vigilance and recreancy are concepts devised by sociologist William R. Freudenburg; bureaucratic slippage was conceptualized by Bill Freudenburg and Robert Gramling. For an overview, see Susan Maret, "Freudenburg Beyond Borders: Recreancy, Atrophy of Vigilance, Bureaucratic Slippage, and the Tragedy of 9/11," *William R. Freudenburg, A Life in Social Research: Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* 21, ed. Susan Maret (Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011), 201–23.

98 Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 149.

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100 John W. McHoskey, "Case Closed? On the John F. Kennedy Assassination: Biased Assimilation of Evidence and Attitude Polarization," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 17, no. 3 (1995), 395–409, doi: 10.1207/s15324834baspi703_7.

101 The HSCA's conspiracy finding was perhaps in part riding a wave that began with Mark Lane's influential 1966 book *Rush to Judgment* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), which suggested the assassination was the result of a conspiracy. Lane's book is cited in the HSCA's volume 6: US House of Representatives, Select Committee on Assassinations, *Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Appendix to Hearings before the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety-fifth Congress, Second Session: Volume VI, Photographic Evidence* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1979).

102 US House of Representatives, Select Committee on Assassinations, *Final Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations, U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety-fifth Congress, Second Session: Summary of Findings and Recommendations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1979), 194.

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115 As I intend it here, barefoot research is a form of action research. Barefoot is derived from the barefoot medicine tradition in China, where rural communities included a lay person with basic medical knowledge. These practitioners were not trained physicians, but had knowledge of alternative forms of healing and disease prevention.

116 At <http://aarlibrary.org/about-the-aarc/>, <http://blackopradio.com>, and <https://www.maryferrell.org/pages/Documents.html>, respectively.

117 See *Probe Magazine*, <http://www.ctka.net/probeframes.html>; *Coretta Scott King, et al v. Loyd Jowers, et al.*, Case No. 97242, Circuit Court of Shelby County, Tennessee for the 13th Judicial District at Memphis, December 9, 1999. A transcript of the proceedings is available at the King Center's site, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/civil-case-king-family-versus-jowers>.

118 Such as Black Vault (<http://www.theblackvault.com/>), Government Attic (<http://www.governmentattic.org>), Memory Hole (<http://theremoryhole2.org/>), and MuckRock (<https://www.muckrock.com/>).

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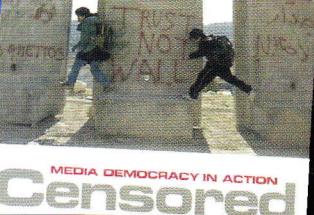
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128 Such as securitization, "which predominantly examines how security problems emerge, evolve and dissolve." Thierry Balzacq, "Constructivism and Securitization Studies," in *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, eds. Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Victor Mauer (Abingdon, UK/New York: Routledge, 2010), 56–72.

129 Based on Herbert Blumer. See Howard S. Becker, "The Epistemology of Qualitative Research," in *Essays on Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry*, eds. Richard Jessor, Anne Colby, and Richard Schweder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 53–71.

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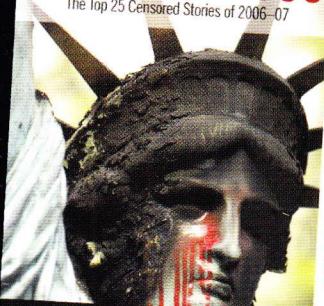
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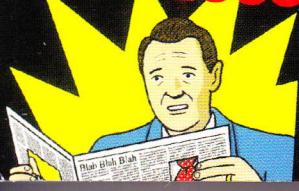
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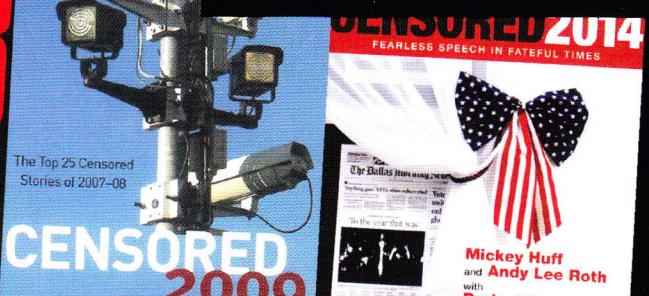
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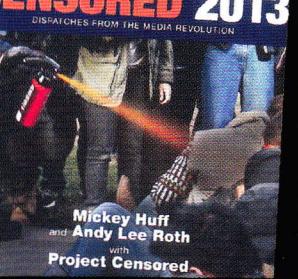
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with
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FEARLESS SPEECH IN FATEFUL TIMES



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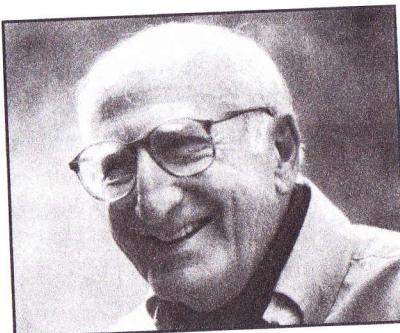
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DEDICATION



*Ben H. Bagdikian
(1920–2016)*

Journalist of conscience,
pioneering critic of corporate media consolidation, and
champion of the public's right to know

Media power is political power . . . To give citizens a choice in ideas and information is to give them a choice in politics: If a nation has narrowly controlled information, it will soon have narrowly controlled politics.

from *The Media Monopoly*, by Ben H. Bagdikian

Bagdikian served as a Project Censored judge
from 1976–2000

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

That Project Censored has survived and thrived for forty years is a testament to this incredible team of people and also to the enduring power of the idea that monitoring news censorship can keep our democracy going. Real democracy in America is constantly under assault, but the simple fact that Project Censored exists means that the kind of investigative reporting the Project celebrates, and the publications that support investigative reporting, have a forum and even a reward for their efforts and talent and sacrifice.

I remember meeting intrepid reporters like Gary Webb and Sidney Wolfe and so many others through Project Censored, including young journalists who were being celebrated for a story they'd written and it may have been the first time a story they'd written had a life beyond initial publication. And it felt great, like we were on the winning team.

So much of this kind of research and nonfiction writing happens in isolation, even extending to and including publication. I remember that, often, it was at the Project Censored Awards that writer and publisher met in person for the first time.

For four decades Project Censored has also initiated thousands of college students into the world of censorship and investigative reporting, not only at Sonoma State University where the Project was founded in 1976, but also at dozens of colleges and universities around the country.

Under successive directors, founder Carl Jensen, then Peter Phillips, and now Mickey Huff with Andy Lee Roth, the Project has continued its work as one of America's strongest alternative media institutions.

As Project Censored's publisher through all but one of the years that they have produced an annual volume of censored stories, *Censored*, I've been amazed at the resilience and joyfulness this organization has shown, year after year. Forever young, and ever more important, Project Censored makes us all better-informed and more empowered as citizens.

—Dan Simon, Publisher, Seven Stories Press

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