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Producing panic: an analysis of conspiracy theory rhetoric during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020

Aaron Andrews

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PRODUCING PANIC: AN ANALYSIS OF CONSPIRACY THEORY RHETORIC
DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC OF 2020

By

AARON ANDREWS

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in
The Department of English
to
The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

2021
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Submitted by Aaron Andrews in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work described in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

_________________________________________  6/26/21  Committee Chair (Date)
Gaines Hubbell

_________________________________________  6/27/21
Joseph Conway

     John Saunders  6/27/21

_________________________________________  6/27/21
Alanna Frost

_________________________________________  7/1/2021  College Dean
Andrew D. Cling

_________________________________________  7/1/2021  Graduate Dean
Yeqing Bao
ABSTRACT
The School of Graduate Studies
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Degree: Master of Arts College/Dept: English

Name of Candidate: Aaron Andrews

Title: Producing Panic: An Analysis of Conspiracy Theory Rhetoric During the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020

In 1938, Orson Welles and his theatre group broadcasted an adaptation of War of the Worlds in the style of a breaking newsflash. The result produced a panic across America as millions believed they were under attack by an alien army. In 2020 during a global pandemic, millions of Americans turned to social media for news and updates, only to be the victims of conspiratorial posts that suggest the virus is part of a nefarious plot for world domination or to steal the Presidential election. In this thesis I will argue that the COVID-19 conspiracy theories share aspects of imagination, manipulation of authenticity, and I will demonstrate how each play on real epistemic ideas in order to create a false narrative. I will exhibit how these shared elements create a necessity for regulation of mass communication based on Benjamin Franklin’s own principles on free speech and censorship.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

War of the Worlds Model Conspiracy

The year was 1938, and America was emerging from the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, otherwise known as The Great Depression. Abroad, Adolph Hitler seized control of Germany’s armed forces, placing his loyal Nazi party members in key posts. Hitler then began invading and occupying Germany’s European neighbors, starting with Austria and then later in the year the Sudetenland. In the entertainment world, Northwestern University’s dean of the School of Speech, Ralph Dennis, appeared on radio with comedian Edgar Bergen and his wooden partner Charlie McCarthy to present McCarthy with the honorary degree of “Master of Innuendo and Snappy Comeback,” – the first degree ever given to a ventriloquist’s dummy. And on Sunday, October 30, Orson Welles and his troupe of radio actors panicked millions of Americans with their production of H.G. Wells’s War of the Worlds. How could a radio drama meant to entertain its listeners instead cause millions of them to take this science fiction as reality? The answer is a combination of timing, technology, and according to some, a carefully devised plot against the American

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people. One conspiracy theorist suggests that “the broadcast was a psychological warfare experiment conducted by The Princeton Radio Project” and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to “study the effects of the broadcast” on the American public listening to the radio that night. I argue that some of the same ingredients that motivated six million Americans to subscribe to an alien invasion in 1938 also appear in 2020 to propagate conspiracy theories concerning the coronavirus pandemic among the populace of America today.

For my thesis, I want to discuss the timing of conspiracy theories as an avenue for some to cope with reality. I will demonstrate how conspiracy theorists play on the fears of the American people by using the rhetoric of news media in order to produce panic and a distrust of the government’s ability to protect the citizens of this country and a distrust of the medical community to handle the pandemic and the ensuing crisis. I also want to compare the “modern” technology of radio as the medium by which mainstream America bought into the theatrical production as reality (that is, without it, if someone ran up and down the streets yelling about aliens landing, the public would not take such a one seriously) to the medium of social media today, where many rely upon to stay informed on world events. I argue that it is the medium of social media that has brought conspiracy theory into the mainstream.

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4 The distrust of the government to handle the pandemic goes beyond typical partisan politics where there is a dislike and bias against those who are on the other side of the political aisle. The distrust that I will address in this thesis is that of the bureaucratic system itself despite political party affiliation (or lack thereof). For the purposes of my analysis, I am centering this thesis on the distrust of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and on a more global scale with World Health Organization (WHO).
In this thesis I will argue that the COVID-19 conspiracy theories share aspects of imagination by how the “story” is presented to the audience, the manipulation of authenticity as a form of persuasion, and how each play on real epistemic ideas in order to create a false narrative. I will also demonstrate that the genuine response of panic by both audiences are similar and harmful. I will exhibit how these shared elements create a necessity for regulation of the medium of mass communication based on Benjamin Franklin’s own principles that allow for free speech to be conditional on the caveat that such speech not be permissive in causing harm. While Franklin’s concerns centered on the press, the modern technologies of radio and internet create a space that left unchecked by those who control such platforms can generate harm in the form of panic.

In this thesis, I will describe the War of the Worlds radio broadcast and the resulting panic with an analysis on how that broadcast generated panic. I will also set the stage of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic with a timeline of events exemplified in social media posts and memes as they occurred. I will show how the fluidity of the pandemic and the appearance of conflict and confusion by health and government officials and the President created an opportunity for conspiracy theorists to publish their own version of the causes and reasons for the pandemic. I will show how the message of the conspiracy theorists moved from the fringes of society to the mainstream with the help of Donald Trump and the 2020 Presidential election. Besides the conspiracy theories surrounding the election, I will also discuss theories that argue that the pandemic was generated as a

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5 Within the research that I conducted I acknowledge that there is room for discussion on intent. Whether these false narratives were produced for knowledge or entertainment purposes or alternatively for the sake of generating a certain action can be debated. For the purposes of my thesis, I believe the rhetoric is the same in either case and therefore there is a certain amount of liability on the part of the producers of such rhetoric no matter the authorial intent.
Deep State attempt at world domination. My analysis of the COVID-19 conspiracy theories will show how such theorists and those persuaded by their message believe that everything is connected in the hopes that this belief will help them make sense of the world. I will conclude with a discussion on the regulations that resulted in the wake of the War of the Worlds broadcast and the conspiratorial posts on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will demonstrate that this regulation aligns with Franklin’s call for speech that will not cause harm.

Looking at what kinds of things grab the attention of conspiracy theorists, Richard Hofstadter argues that it is “bad causes” rather than good ones that get propagated.6 Never has there been a conspiracy theory based on something that would be good or positive for the general public; rather, conspiracies embellish the worst of our fears, the expectation of a dystopian future, evil government bureaucracies, or prospective anarchists. Hofstadter also argues that conspiracy theorists must present the proposed conspiracy artfully if it is to go viral, claiming that “style has to do with the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content.”7 Conspiracy theories cannot be boring or portrayed uninterestingly, or the public will not find them believable, engaging, and entertaining.

Even though conspiracy theories need to be exciting and dole out a bleak outlook on life, these conspiracies are easily defeated in terms of proof and sound reasoning because of the weaknesses of the arguments provided by the conspiracy theorists. Conspiracy theorists are extremely good with “window dressing” their theories but are

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7 Ibid.
short on facts and evidence. Shane Miller observed that scholars in the last sixty years have concluded that “poor evidence or lack of evidence, circular reasoning, repetition of unproven premises, and false dilemmas are all standard characteristics of conspiratorial arguments.”

As a result of these weaknesses, conspiracy theorists must rely on style and the general public’s desire to believe in these theories rather than truth or factual evidence. Miller explains that conspiracy theories are “an important and integral part of mainstream political argument” despite the weaknesses. One does not need to look any further than the presidential election of 2020 to see how vital conspiracy theory is to the political process.

During his reelection campaign, Donald Trump did not separate himself or his administration from conspiracy theorists like QAnon; instead, he embraced followers of the QAnon conspiracy movement, stating (during a news conference about the coronavirus) that these conspirators are people who “love our country...[and] supposedly like me.” Later in the press conference, a reporter questions Trump about the movement's validity and whether he would challenge the truth of QAnon conspiracy claims. The President responded by stating, “Is that supposed to be a bad thing or a good thing?” President Trump’s vague response only fueled the legitimacy of the conspiracy

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9 Ibid.


11 Ibid.
movement. A move that would later contribute to a riot on the Capital during the hearings regarding the 2020 Presidential election:

Several rioters wielded fire extinguishers. One stood on a balcony on the Capitol building’s west side, spraying down on police officers trying to fend off the crowd. Others carried them into the building itself, one into Statuary Hall and another onto the steps outside the Senate Chamber, spraying in the direction of journalists and police officers. …“Our president wants us here,” a man can be heard saying during a livestream video that showed him standing within the Capitol building. “We wait and take orders from our president.”

While Trump later called for “peace” and told the crowds to go home, his embrace of the conspiracy theorists during the election persuaded many Americans to believe that a group of malicious activists stole the election by utilizing the coronavirus pandemic. How did this idea get into the mainstream and cause a failed insurrection at the Capitol building? To understand how many Americans crossed this bridge, we need to see how the coronavirus pandemic became a political issue during the 2020 presidential race.

One of the significant issues in the election of 2020 was the global COVID-19 pandemic and the response of the government under Donald Trump to combat the spread of the virus and develop a vaccine. In the wake of the debate over how to handle the pandemic, conspiracy theorists have moved from the dark places on the internet to the mainstream. This move, by and large, occurred because of the medium of social media, politics, and the disconnect between experts in science and the general populous. This disconnect is not a new development; only the medium is. John Lyne suggests that “we contemplate how specialist and non-specialist discourse interact, or how they fail to

interact, due to factors such as compartmentalization, mystification, or political manipulation.”

Fear, a lack of knowledge, and political initiatives have created a space that has allowed conspiracy theorists to spread their messages of doom and gloom without the need for scientific evidence, all the while claiming such evidence as proof for their conspiracy theory. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have become overwhelmed with the conspiracy theorists’ various messages to the point that these platforms have begun trying to filter out these messages with fact-checking algorithms. While the pandemic alone is sufficient to cause worry, the conspiracy theorists have elevated the problem to one of malicious intent. Even with these efforts, the lines blur between what is actually happening, what has been verified by the scientific community, and what has become politically motivated.

One of the difficulties for the general public is the use of social media as a source of news. While news media sources such as the Associated Press have to follow specific standards to verify the factual nature of their content, posts on social media have no such standards.

Another problem that has arisen with the popularity of social media deals with the ability of social media users to distinguish between scientific fact and the opinion presented by conspiracy theorists. Much like the way Orson Welles used the rhetoric of radio news media for his radio production, popular conspiracy theorists mimic the style of medical science to artfully persuade viewers to believe and spread the coronavirus conspiracy theories. Lyne sees this as the understanding of the “appearance-reality

split.” The attractiveness of the conspiracy theory thwarts reality. Proof then because what is aesthetically pleasing to the public even if the idea plays on our worst fears.

My interest in coronavirus conspiracy theories is not whether there is actual proof in order to justify the conspiracy theories, nor am I interested in silencing the conspiracy theorist. Instead, I am interested in their use of rhetoric and the mediums they use to attract the populous to engage with their theories. Somebody could argue that the conspiracy theorists are justified in their claims of conspiracy; likewise, someone could also say that most conspiracy theories belong in the realm of science fiction fantasy. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule state, “A true belief may be unjustified, and a justified belief may be untrue.” The distinction between the two is not the intent of this thesis. I am not interested in proving or disproving the conspiracy theories, but how they spread and why they have become firmly established in our mainstream culture. Examples of this include the QAnon question at NBC town hall with President Trump, which was spoofed by Saturday Night Live later in the week, the popularity of the Netflix documentary Behind the Curve concerning the flat Earth believers in the United States, and the rise in news stories about various conspiracy theories by mainstream media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, and Fox News or the birth of online news outlets such as Newsmax that deals with conspiracy theory in a tabloid fashion. In this thesis, I want to use the coronavirus conspiracy theories as an example of the type and style of the conspiracy theorists’ message and provide an analysis of their various “texts” within the popular mediums available today and the efforts to silence those messages.

14 Ibid.
Mainly, I intend to compare the *War of the Worlds* model (world events, technology, theatrical performance, government involvement) to the similar model for COVID-19 conspiracy theories. I believe that the comparison of this model to the coronavirus conspiracy theories demonstrates how modern conspiracy theories (beyond even the coronavirus and the election) are popularized and mainstreamed today.

**War of the Worlds Model**

To understand the significance of the War of the Worlds broadcast and how it contributed to the ensuing panic of the Sunday evening of October 30, 1938, that led millions of Americans to believe that aliens were invading, we need to understand the timing of the broadcast in relation to world events that were taking place at the time. In 1938, the world was on the brink of another terrible war. While many Americans were hoping to stay out of this one, the tension in the air was palatable. Many felt that it would not be long before Hitler and his Nazis troops would attempt to invade our own sacred soil. Daily newspapers reported the progress of these alien invaders from across the globe. When Americans opened up their newspapers on Sunday, October 30, they read the following headlines: “7,000 Driven Into Poland Stay There Awaiting Outcome...10,000 Being Sent Home...8,000 Reach the Frontier...Germany Demands ‘All’ Lost Colonies.” In the weeks and months preceding this headline about illegal aliens, news media outlets increasingly reported on the activities of Hitler and German forces as they began invading their neighboring European countries. Americans were reading the following reports:

So alien is the German system to our own...that Germany today is on our official “Black List”; -- the only nation on the list--denied even the incidental benefits of such reciprocal agreements as we make with other countries.\(^{17}\)

Germans with bayonets and rifles began mercilessly driving into Poland the mass of crying children, helpless women and exasperated men. German machine guns were placed in a row along the station as if to impress the refugees that none of them would remain in Reich territory alive.\(^{18}\)

From frontier districts it is reported that the second stage of German occupation was completed today with the entry of German troops into Bodenbach. The last train run by the Czechoslovak State Railways left Bodenback last midnight, conveying State employees. Outside the station it was fired on by Henleinist Storm Troopers. Two soldiers were reported killed and one seriously wounded. It is reported that when German troops marched into Oberplan they ran against a Czechoslovak rear guard.\(^{19}\)

Germany was invading their neighbors, and Jews were fleeing the occupation in massive numbers. Daily the news reports from Europe indicated that another world war was just over the horizon. The American people were anxiously watching closely the events that were taking place in Europe. Words such as invasion, aliens, war, occupation, fighting, and disaster were already in the minds of most Americans because of Germany’s actions.

During this era of news media, only four mediums were available that Americans could choose from to get their information about what was happening in the world around them: newspapers, magazines, motion pictures, and radio. Radio was the new medium on


the market, but it soon became one of the most popular. Just a decade before, there were only a handful of radio stations broadcasting in the United States, but rapidly the radio-news industry grew into a dominant force, becoming the first electronic mass medium and defining “an entire generation of mass culture.” Each evening, millions of Americans would sit down with their families, all gathered around the radio to listen to the news, sports, or some type of entertainment broadcast.

No matter the public’s choice of radio show, all the content coming into the homes of the American people through the radio were live broadcasts; the news, music, comedy, variety shows, and radio theatre were all presented live. There were no pre-recorded broadcasts at this moment in early radio history due to the poor quality of recording equipment available. Actor, entertainer, and producer Orson Welles looked at

Fig. 1


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this landscape and this new medium and decided to try something new and ground-breaking in the realm of radio entertainment. He would produce and direct an apocalyptic radio drama about an attack from Mars in the style of a network news studio broadcasting the “breaking news” story live for the American listening audience.

Orson Welles adapted his radio drama from H.G. Wells War of the Worlds, which was first published in 1897. While Well’s story depicts a Martian attack on England told in first-person narration, Welles modified the story, making it into a newsflash, told from the perspective of newscasters and eyewitnesses in a real-time narration. Welles also changed the location of the attack from England to Grover’s Mill, New Jersey. Welles and his Mercury Theatre broadcasting troupe studied the methods of live, breaking news journalism and used the same techniques in their performance of War of the Worlds on Sunday, October 30, 1938.

The Radio Drama

For the millions tuning into the WABC radio station and affiliates on the evening of October 30, 1938, the broadcast began with what seemed like a mundane talk show by a host discussing the weather and a teaser about a “live”21 performance of “Ramon Raquello and his orchestra” from “the Meridian Room in the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York.”22 After a few minutes, Raquello’s performance is interrupted by a

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21 While all broadcasts were live during this era in the broadcasting, the part of the orchestra was performed by Orson Welles’ theatre troupe. So, in a sense, the performance was live by musicians “acting” out the part of Raquello and his orchestra. The musicians had to perform as if they radio station was “breaking” into their live performance for the listening audience.

22 Cantril, Hadley. The Invasion from Mars a Study in the Psychology of Panic; with the Complete Script of the Famous Orson Welles Broadcast. Princeton Univ. Press, 2014. Pg. 5
“special bulletin” regarding late-breaking news about some observed gas explosions from Mars:

At twenty minutes before eight, central time, Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory, Chicago, Illinois, reports observing several explosions of incandescent gas, occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars. The spectroscope indicates the gas to be hydrogen and moving towards the earth with enormous velocity.23

Welles sets the scene with this news bulletin about Mars that appears to be an exciting movement for the scientific community but not yet spelling disaster and drama for the radio audience. This breaking story may have sounded innocuous to the listening audience. Yet, Welles is preparing the audience with a plausible scenario for an alien attack, at least one that would become persuasive in nature. Much more convincing than if he just led with the breaking news of an alien invasion. Like any good story, the drama needs to build toward a climactic event.

Ramon Raquello and his orchestra are believable because this was the kind of “normal” broadcast that is typical for a Sunday evening in 1938.24 The New York Times (and similar other newspaper outlets) regularly published a schedule of radio shows and performances for the day. On October 30, in the same 8:00 PM time slot as Orson Welles’ War of the Worlds broadcast, there were similar entertainment choices as the fake Raquello concert:

WEAF - Don Ameche, Director; Nelson Eddy, Baritone; Edgar Bergen, Ventriloquist; Judy Annie and Zeke, Comedy; Dorothy Lamour, songs; Madeleine Carroll, Actress.
WOR - Bach Cantata Series; Alfred Wallenstein, Conductor; Soloists.
WJZ - Gill Orchestra; Soloists.

23 Ibid. pg 6
24 The beginning of the War of the Worlds broadcast joins the standard type of radio broadcast with a science fiction element to make the “play” come off as real-to-life. This speaks to the believability of certain conspiracy texts because they look and act like comparable real-world texts.
WEVD - Symphonic Music.
WQXR - Modern Music Hour²⁵

On the schedule, that evening was a top-rated variety show and several live performances of orchestras that would have been similar in sound to what the WABC audience heard from this “fake” Raquello performance.

One such broadcast was the WEAF broadcast (noted above) that took place simultaneously as the *War of the Worlds* broadcast. WEAF was airing a variety show that featured comedian and ventriloquist Edgar Bergen. Bergen was so popular that many of those who panicked after hearing Orson Welles's radio theatre performance did so because they first tuned to WEAF for Bergen's act and then tuned into WABC afterward "channel surfing" for their next choice of radio entertainment on that Sunday evening. These late-comers to the War of the Worlds broadcast missed the opening introduction that announced: "The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells. ...Ladies and gentlemen: the director of the Mercury Theatre and star of these broadcasts, Orson Welles."²⁶ Missing this message (and the subsequent radio list published in the papers) furthered the believability that the Orson Welles theatrical production was real despite the fantastic nature of the action and content.

The broadcast returns briefly to the Raquello performance until it is interrupted by a follow-up to the previous newsflash stating that “the Government Meteorological Bureau has requested the large observatories of the country to keep an astronomical watch on any further disturbances occurring on the planet Mars.”²⁷ After the

²⁵ "Sunday October 30, 1938."
²⁶ Cantril. pg 4
²⁷ Ibid. pg 6
announcement about the curious finding on Mars, the host introduces the audience to an expert on such astronomical anomalies, Professor Pierson. Commentator and host Carl Phillips tells the audience that this is possible because of modern radio technology. The Raquello performance is called upon one last time as the studio prepares for the live feed from Princeton Observatory. The return to the “regular” broadcast of the Raquello concert will be the last time the audience hears the “normal” broadcast as Welles’ science fiction takes shape on the airways and normal transforms into horror for those listening to the radio on the eve of Halloween.

What transpires next is several pseudo-technobabble minutes that set up the rational explanation (or justification) for how Martians could invade the earth. Once the ten-minute conversation with Professor Peirson concludes, the audience is sent back to the studio for “the latest bulletin from Intercontinental Radio News, Toronto, Canada.” Carl Phillips informs the audience that during the conversation with Peirson, the station sent a “special mobile unit” to Grovers Mill, New Jersey, because “eyewitnesses” suspect that a meteorite fell on a farm near the sleepy little town. The correspondent gives elaborate details of the meteor that sounds more like a spacecraft than pieces of rock. The farmer, Mr. Wilmuth, is interviewed who tells the correspondent that he was listening to the radio when the meteor fell on his farm:

Wilmuth
I was listenin’ to the radio.
Phillips
Closer and louder, please.
Wilmuth
Pardon me!
Phillips
Louder, please, and closer.

28 Ibid. pg 10
29 Ibid. pg 11
WILMUTH
Yes, sir--while I was listening to the radio and kinda drowsin’, that
Professor fellow was talkin’ about Mars, so I was half dozin’ and half…

PHILLIPS
Yes, Mr. Wilmuth. Then what happened?

WILMUTH
As I was sayin’, I was listenin’ to the radio kinda halfways…

PHILLIPS
Yes, Mr. Wilmuth, and then you saw something?

WILMUTH
Not first off. I heard something.

PHILLIPS
And what did you hear?

WILMUTH
A hissing sound. Like this: sssss...kind like a fourt’ of July rocket.

PHILLIPS
Then what?

WILMUTH
Turned my head out the window and would have swore I was to sleep and
dreamin’.

...I seem a kinda greenish streak and then zingo! Some thin’ smacked the
ground. Knocked me clear out of my chair.\(^30\)

The interview with the farmer gives the sense that this was an actual interview about a
real farmer in Grovers Mill, New Jersey.

As with most radio and television dramas, time is a fluid commodity. Time (and
physics) bend from reality so the performance can fit into the predetermined timeslot,
helping the storyline move forward. There is not enough time for the “special mobile
unit” members to assemble, plan, and travel to their given destination during a one-hour
radio broadcast. Instead, the “special mobile unit” arrives at the farm at just the right
moment in the play\(^31\). But then the audience hears this back and forth between the farmer
and the correspondent. It sounds like the farmer has never been on the radio before,

\(^30\) Ibid. pp. 12-14
\(^31\) Apparently the “special mobile unit” could travel nearly as fast as Martians in their spacecrafts
if the events were real.
giving the illusion that this was not an actor playing a part but a real-life scenario occurring on the radio.

After the correspondent finishes the interview, he describes a scene that is horrific and straight out of a science fiction fantasy:

Hundreds of cars are parked in a field in back of us. Police are trying to rope off the roadway leading into the farm. But it’s no use. They’re breaking right through. Their headlights throw an enormous spot on the pit where the object’s half-buried. Some of the more daring souls are venturing near the edge. Their silhouettes stand out against the metal sheen. ...One man wants to touch the thing...he’s having an argument with a policeman. The policeman wins.32

The correspondent has given the audience the perception that a mob has formed at the farm that becomes unruly in their behavior, breaking through the police barricades33.

Then the correspondent forgets about the mob because the object begins to move and take shape, appearing serpent-like with tentacles and a V-shaped mouth with saliva dripping down their metallic bodies34. The correspondent labels this creature as some kind of “monster.”35

Things take a turn for the worst when the captain of the state police tries to communicate with the aliens by presenting them with “a white handkerchief tied to a pole...a flag of truce.”36 The aliens respond by attacking the crowd of onlookers, and the radio audience hears these last words from Phillips before the radio feed turns to static, an indication that Phillips has not survived the ordeal:

32 Ibid. pp. 12-14
33 Could I possibly make a connection with this and the mob in January in D.C? The fake mob that begets a panicked mob in 1938 and a real mob of conspiracy theorists who panic the public in America in 2021? Just a thought.
34 Ibid. pp. 16
35 Ibid. pp. 16
36 Ibid. pp. 17
A humped shape is rising out of the pit. I can make out a small beam of light against a mirror. What’s that? There’s a jet of flame springing from that mirror, and it leaps right at the advancing men. It strikes them head on! Good Lord, they’re turning into flame! ...Now the whole field’s caught fire...the woods...the barns...the gas tanks of automobiles...it’s spreading everywhere. It’s coming this way. About twenty yards to my right.37

The radio drama gives the impression that the attack by this invading foreign force is beyond American’s ability to defeat. The enemy is unreasonable, not obeying the rules of war. The correspondent who is a member of the media and therefore “untouchable” is torched with the rest of those in Grovers Mill. The audience then hears the crash of the microphone and then dead air before being returned to the studio with the announcement, “Ladies, and gentlemen, due to circumstances beyond our control, we are unable to continue the broadcast from Grovers Mill.”38 This announcement is a familiar one in live broadcasting. Sometimes the signal is lost due to faulty equipment, and inadequate power source, etc. But the suddenness of this attack allows the audience to be on the “in,” realizing that the studio wouldn’t tell you if it was a real attack and they lost a correspondent in the process. For the radio drama, this attack sets the stage for a war with Mars that would last approximately forty-five minutes.39

Analysis

Orson Welles keenly understood the ironic timing of his innovative radio drama because the medium of radio inculcated the American public to expect their entertainment to sound one way and their news to sound a different way entirely. Radio

37 Ibid. pp. 18
38 Ibid. pp. 18
39 Those who bought into the idea that this was real didn't really think through the logistics. The same is true today.
dramas followed a specific archetype in the manner they are performed. The typical radio drama consisted of a narrator who gave descriptive details that the medium could not convey visually. The “news” was very official sounding. The news broadcaster provided the information in a professional manner that gives credibility to the host and the station as the source of information the American public needed. While the correspondent “on the ground” could reflect emotion as one seeing the action take place in front of them or as one interviewing those who are eyewitnesses of the events in question (in fact, it is very believable for the correspondent to become the eyewitness at the scene), the radio audience accepts at face value the information provided to them from the radio station. The idea of “fake news” was an alien concept to the American radio audience prior to October 30, 1938. This was a trusted and credible medium that was relied upon to present accurate, relevant, and timely news to the listening audience. Welles took advantage of the rhetorical situation and twisted the expectations and norms of traditional news for his radio drama in the name of entertainment.

There are many examples of how Welles manipulates traditional radio news genre conventions to build his radio drama. One way that Welles did this was with the “break-in” style of news broadcasting. “In September 1938 … the networks had frequently interrupted their programming with updates from the Munich talks between Adolf Hitler and Neville Chamberlain.” Through the War of the Worlds broadcast, the “show” would be interrupted by breaking news; however, this fake news was part of the radio drama and not actual and authentic news. These newsflashes and the subsequent “round-

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“up” discussions between correspondents on the ground, in the studio, and from various other sources was an accurate mimic of broadcasting rhetoric for 1930’s radio news.

Even the “show” that was taking place during the broadcast was fake. This was a concert by the “Ramon Raquello Band,” but it too was part of the act, with musicians on the sound stage performing the “concert” as if being broadcast from a concert hall instead of a radio theatre workspace. The results of this concert and the breaking news created a style and tone that was both familiar and comfortable for the radio audience. At least at first, this broadcast appeared to be like everything else being broadcasted that night by radio stations across the country.

While the “Ramon Raquello Band” performance gives the broadcast an air of authenticity, typical of the kind of broadcasts that the listening audience was accustomed to, the breaking-news alerts also provided listeners with the opportunity to make the connection to what they were familiar with. They were used to hearing breaking news and understood what that sounded like.

While it may be far-fetched to consider aliens invading the earth, what sounds like an interesting scientific discovery is given credibility with the name “Professor Farrell” attached to it as if this is coming from an institute of higher learning. Welles furthers this attempt at making the bulletin sound credible by adding “Professor Pierson of the observatory at Princeton” to verify and confirm Farrell’s observations, including information that foreshadows the attack to come with a “quote” from Pierson that the phenomenon looked like a “jet of blue flame shot from a gun.”

41 With the Pentagon releasing footage of military encounters with UFOs, the idea of aliens may not be as far-fetched today as it was in 1938.
42 Cantril. pg. 6
alludes to the violence to come, he jerks his audience back into their “regularly scheduled programming.” With this move, Welles draws the unusual back and replaces it with the normal that radio audiences expect to hear on a Sunday evening in 1938.

Another example is in the tone of voice of the correspondent during the broadcast, even the panic in his voice during the attack. Welles takes advantage of the American public's familiarity with what tragedy and terror sound like on the radio. An expectation of how this sounds is due to the most famous live radio tragedy in the 1930s—The Hindenburg disaster.

Nearly a year and a half before The War of the Worlds broadcast, the nation listened live on their radios to the tragedy of the Hindenburg disaster. On May 6, 1937, the largest rigid airship ever constructed, the German dirigible named the Hindenburg exploded while trying to land at the Naval Air Station in Lakehurst, New Jersey, killing 35 of the 97 passengers and one ground crew member. The correspondent, Herb Morrison, on the scene at the Hindenburg disaster continued to provide play-by-play descriptions of the horrific scene in front of him:

> It’s fire and it crashing! . . . This is the worst of the worst catastrophes in the world! Oh, it’s crashing . . . oh, four or five hundred feet into the sky, and it’s a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen. There’s smoke, and there’s flames, now, and the frame is crashing to the ground, not quite to the mooring mast. Oh, the humanity, and all the passengers screaming around here! . . . I can’t talk, ladies and gentlemen. Honest, it’s just laying there, a mass of smoking wreckage, and everybody can hardly breathe and talk . . .

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43 The Hindenburg was a featured part of a political relations campaign orchestrated by Adolph Hitler. It was scheduled to fly between the United States and Germany ten times. The tragedy occurred during the first scheduled landing. The Hindenburg was filled with highly flammable hydrogen because helium gas was unavailable in Nazi Germany due to the export restrictions placed on them by the United States. In this round-about way, the US was culpable in the disaster. This led conspiracy theorists to claim that the Hindenburg was sabotaged. Hitler also claimed that the American government was maliciously responsible for the tragedy.

Honest, I can hardly breathe. I’m going to step inside where I cannot see it.45

Many remember hearing that broadcast, and one phrase in particular lives on in perpetuity, as Morrison listened to the screaming of those aboard the Hindenburg as it crashed to the earth, he uttered the words, “Oh, the humanity.”46 That phrase and Morrison’s style became for Welles’ *The War of the Worlds* broadcast a model and a typeset. Gail Jarrow states that Frank Readick, the actor playing the role of the Carl Philips (the correspondent on the ground during the Martian attacks), provided “live” play-by-play descriptions of the attack:

[Readick] did extra homework for his role. ...He listened to the radio commentator’s horrified voice as he watches the passenger airship explode into flames. The man continues to record even as he is overcome with emotion and can barely speak. Readick played and replayed the recording until he was able to imitate the same reaction when his character sees the extraterrestrials emerge from their spaceship.47

With the Hindenburg report being the first of its kind and being such a shocking and tragic event, many Americans would pick up on the tone of Readick’s voice as he imitates Morrison’s broadcast and make the connection between the real-life disaster and the mock disaster of the alien invasion, giving the War of the Worlds an air of authenticity.

The stylistic move to recreate the sounds of the Hindenburg disaster in *War of the Worlds* demonstrates Welles’ manipulation of what Carolyn Miller calls “genre


46 Ibid.

conventions of form and content.” Regardless of whether Welles intended to deceive his audience or rather expected his audience to make the Hindenburg connection on their own and view it as a play on genre, there does exist a distinct and definable difference between the expectations of Welles and the Mercury broadcasting group and the audience listening on the radio. Miller describes this as a disparity between private purposes and public exigence:

The rhetorical situation will be differently construed by rhetor and audience. The discourse constitutes an adaptation of form and substance to a private purpose, not a public exigence; the particular fusion achieved is based not on all the recurrent aspects of situation but on the unique ones.

While Welles did provide keys to his audience to allow them the opportunity to comprehend the fact that the broadcast was merely a radio drama and not an actual event by stating his intentions at the beginning of the broadcast to present a piece of radio theatre that public acknowledgment did not guarantee that everyone in the audience would understand the fictitious nature of the broadcast, nor could Welles know what each listener would need (what method of keys would be required for every single listener to realize it wasn’t real) because of the disconnect between public and private knowledge.

The disconnect between public and private knowledge (and purpose) comes because of expectations contained within context. In other words, how each person contextually situated what they heard from the broadcast that night. Miller argues that “human action, whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of

49 Whether or not Welles intended to deceive the audience into believing that a real tragedy was occurring, and thus is responsible for the ensuing panic, was the topic of a congressional hearing not long after the War of the Worlds broadcast.
50 Ibid. pg. 163
situation and through the attributing of motives.” For Welles’ audience to make the connection between the Hindenburg disaster broadcast and the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, there must be the assumption on the part of Welles that his audience would have heard the former broadcast and make the connection that Welles is creating a type of genre out of the Hindenburg broadcast for his own artistic design. Then the audience would need to recognize that and not make a parallel connection between what they were hearing and associate that with the Hindenburg as a contextual truth: *Hindenburg was real; therefore, what I hear now about aliens must be real because it sounds the same within the context of the sounds of panic*. The audience would also need to interpret Welles’ motivation to make an authentic-sounding broadcast that was also a radio drama and not meant to be viewed as a real-life situation but appreciated as reflecting a real-life event.

The problem for the audience’s interpretation of what they heard during the *War of the Worlds* broadcast comes down to whether they recognized it the speaker’s attempt at a Hindenburg-style broadcast or if they believed it was a genuine impromptu reaction to an alien attack. Miller discusses the issue at hand by suggesting that the problem with identifying what kind of situation is taking place at a given time comes not because of some organic perception of the events, but that of definition:

Alfred Schutz has argued, our ‘stock of knowledge’ is based upon types… Our stock knowledge is useful only insofar as it can be brought to bear upon new experience: the new is made familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities; those similarities become constituted as a type. A new type is formed from typifications already on hand when they are not adequate to determine a new situation. If a new typification proves continually useful for mastering states of affairs, it enters the stock of knowledge and its application becomes routine.  

51 Ibid. pg. 152
52 Ibid. pp. 156-157
The “stock of knowledge” that we pull from to interpret the world around us is based on our own experiences and the connections that we make between those past experiences and what is actively happening around us. If we make the connection that something is authentic based on what we know as genuine, then that “knowledge” suggests that we are experiencing a type. Those who listened to the broadcast of War of the Worlds who also had prior experience hearing the Hindenburg disaster (without receiving or interpreting any of the previously mentioned keys that point to theatre and not real-life) pulled from the stock of knowledge that they had created to discern that what they were listening to was of the same type and therefore authentic. Again, whether Welles intended the audience to make that connection to generate a panic cannot be known; each person will interpret for themselves the information at hand and make a conclusion that fits within their own narrative what they view as truth in their own unique worldview.

The Hindenburg style of broadcast was not the only “typification” Welles used to make his broadcast sound authentic; he also mimics the stylistic form of interruptive broadcasting that Americans were familiar with in the genre of radio news broadcasting. Jesson observes that:

In September 1938 … the networks had frequently interrupted their programming with updates from the Munich talks between Adolf Hitler and Neville Chamberlain. Orson Welles’s The War of the Worlds would also effectively mimic both the newsflash and the multi-correspondent ‘roundup.’

These conventions of radio programming incorporated into Welles’ radio drama gave the broadcast an authenticity that was intended to provide a sense of realism. Still, those who panicked that evening did so because they recognized that type, not as a historical style

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53 Jesson. Pg 546
but as the real thing. I would argue that the reason many panicked was two-fold because the panicked audience failed to pick up on the keys available to interrupt the radio drama as theatre and because the Mercury troupe performed the stylistic genre of radio news well. Welles’s radio company took advantage of the technological affordances of radio broadcasting. It exploited the genre of radio journalism because they were striving for a genuine sound within the convention without going into the realm of satire.

The panicked effect of missing the keys to this authentic-sounding crisis on the radio is demonstrated in the archive of letters that Orson Welles received throughout his career. Brad Schwartz reviewed the catalog of these letters, focusing on the letters received regarding the reaction of Americans on the night of the War of the Worlds premiere broadcast. These letters demonstrated the fear that overwhelmed many Americans that night:

“I could not stop crying,” wrote a listener in Ohio the day after the broadcast. “Every muscle in my body became tense and today I am unable to go to my work, because I feel like I had been beaten all over. My head aches all over, too.” A New Yorker wrote to Welles, “A few years ago I nearly drowned but God only knows those few minute[s] were nothing at all compared with the torture I went through last night.” And a Pennsylvania man, describing his family’s experience, captured the feelings of many when he wrote: “We all suffered a thousand deaths.”

Failing to pick up on the keys that indicated this was a piece of science fiction storytelling led these listeners to believe that they were doomed; their world was coming to an end. They became physically sick because of what they mentally perceived as the truth. These people believed what they were hearing was the truth, and their bodies

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reacted physically to this audible crisis. This perception produced the panic that was experienced that night. A panic brought on by a well-articulated and scripted play.

Another key to the fictitious nature of the War of the Worlds broadcast was the timing of the broadcast. A radio drama about an invasion of aliens from Mars fits well with taking place on the eve of Halloween. Schwartz points to this timing in the Welles letters:

And, of course, the broadcast was a Halloween prank, something many children knew very much about. “Didn’t any of our so called adults realize that Sunday night was Halloween and that is the night for scary things?” wrote a fourteen-year-old girl from New York City.”

Because some realized the timing as a key to understanding the truth about what they were hearing on the radio, the date of October 30 become what I would describe as a type of red herring. The date ministered to the pervasive nature of the radio show for some, putting them in the frame of mind to think about elements belonging to Halloween, however for others, the persuasion that existed within the date and timing served to remind those who did not panic that aliens from Mars belong in the category of the supernatural and fantasy. Therefore, as a type of red herring, the date served as a defense against a false assumption regarding the radio broadcast.

For some of the listeners to the radio broadcast that evening, the panic resulted in not only paralysis and physical sickness, but also caused them to alert others and thus adding to the rhetorical nature of the broadcast. Persuasion caused by the incorrect analysis of the broadcast, yet not necessarily involving Welles or his broadcasting group. Stephanie Bluestein reports that:

Others recounted their actions: bursting into a church service to warn worshippers of impending doom, getting drunk at a neighborhood bar,

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55 Ibid. pg. 153
placing a long-distance farewell call to their mother, and using all of their spare money to escape New York City via a train bound for Hartford, Connecticut.56

Letters that Orson Welles received after the *War of the Worlds* broadcast demonstrate the range of audience responses that many Americans had that night. Some letters testify to the success of the appeals to fear. Some levy counterarguments to the widespread complaint that Welles or the radio network are culpable for the panic and collective fear. Others demonstrate how thoroughly the medium of radio could establish belief in something rather intended or not. The panic produced in these listeners to the broadcast occurred because of a misinterpretation of the information given. They used their own context for meaning, and the result was a panic that spread throughout the Eastern seaboard on the night of October 30, 1938.

Shortly after the broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, there developed several conspiracy theories regarding the broadcast. One conspiracy theory suggested that the government used the War of the Worlds broadcast as a type of social experiment. Daniel Hopsicker in his documentary on the birth of the Federal Reserve bank, claims that the Rockefeller Foundation secretly sponsored Orson Welles with the intent on seeing the effect of panic on the American public to better understand how to manipulate the panic for the purposes of controlling the government and financial institutions:

*Orson Welles’s broadcast was no mere show business stunt. It was an experiment in fear. A psychological warfare test conducted for the Rockefeller Foundation and when the results were published two years later, they were available to only a few well-chosen people. An elite whose very existence is denied in our mainstream media. Who, safely hidden behind the curtain of history may be pulling the strings of our*

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government, our press, and even our Federal Reserve. This conspiracy theory attempts to draw attention away from Orson Welles and his broadcast group to the “secret” powers to be in the government, making them responsible for the panic on the night of the broadcast. Interestingly, one of the major tropes of the conspiracy theory genre is the idea of a secret group of the rich and powerful who are bent on world domination and will strive to achieve this domination by any means necessary from generating a panic or (as we will discuss with the COVID-19 conspiracy theories) generate a virus and vaccine for the purposes of mass genocide.

In contrast to the Rockefeller/government-controlled conspiracy, another conspiracy theory suggests that the blame for the panic induced by the War of the Worlds broadcast does belong squarely on the shoulders of Orson Welles: that he intended for the panic that occurred. As evidence for this conspiracy is the fact that Orson Welles acted contrary to the direction of the network when told that a panic was beginning to develop due to the sounds being broadcasted on the airways during that 60-minute span of time. 

This conspiracy makes two predominate claims about Welles’s adaptation of H.G. Wells’s War of the Worlds novel.

The first claim deals with when the radio drama would break from the storyline to do regular station identification announcements. Welles (who was acting as the narrator for the radio drama) was in control of when the Mercury troupe would pause the radio drama for these station announcements. Typically, these breaks occurred at 30-minute increments (on the hour and half-hour) with advertisements for sponsors taking place.

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with these station breaks. However, during the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, there were no commercial advertisements, and the station break did not take place at the half-hour mark. These abnormalities become contextualized as evidence of real, late-breaking news. Schwartz states:

Listeners expected that fictional programs would be interrupted on the half-hour for station identifications and advertisements. Breaking news, on the other hand, failed to follow those rules. People who believed the broadcast to be real would be even more convinced when the station break failed to come at 8:30 p.m.\(^{58}\)

The station break that listeners were expecting to happen came, not at the half-hour mark, but a full 40 minutes after the radio drama began. It was not an accident that the station break was 10 minutes late, according to conspiracy theorists, but intentional on the part of Welles to enhance the believability of the breaking news that aliens from Mars were attacking New Jersey. One listener reported, “Then, out of the clear blue sky, we hear, ‘You are listening to the Mercury Theater’s presentation,’ …what a downslide my heart took! What a load off our minds!”\(^{59}\)

This announcement was a much-needed key for many to understand that what they were listening to was a radio drama and not a real-life crises. Hearing those words from the station break brought the listener back to reality and calmed their panic.

Many of those who panicked on the evening of the War of the Worlds broadcast put the blame on Welles for using the style of broadcast journalism that they had become accustomed too. In fact, so accustomed to this style of broadcasting that some of the panicked felt it was a violation on the part of Welles and his broadcast group to use this style for their own methods of providing radio entertainment:

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58 Schwartz. pg. 120
59 Ibid. pg. 184
“You may question my sanity, you may wonder what was the matter with me, a man supposed to be educated and experienced, that I did not realize that such could not possibly be true,” wrote a Long Island listener to the FCC; “My only answer is that I am, or was, a person who believed in the integrity of the basic honesty of a Press Radio News bulletin, and that I know that navel in God’s world would any high government official, sane or insane, drunk or sober, ever play such a practical joke.”60

Those who complained about the use of this style of journalism believed that it was immoral on the part of Welles to use it. It became sacred to them, and Welles’s innovated storytelling was sacrilegious to what they believed was this method should only be used to report serious threats and real breaking journalism. Some of these listeners were angry with Welles’ storytelling. Schwartz reports:

Some listeners felt the need to lash out. “To you the assholes of the earth and Mars,” wrote an anonymous lister from Pennsylvania, “We the people in the Western part of Penna. Think that you are a pisspot bastard and all the rest of the words we can’t think of saying.” … “I would not insult a female dog by calling you a son of such an animal,” wrote one South Carolinian to Welles. “You conduct was beneath the social standing of and would be unbecoming and below the moral perception of a bastard son of a fatherless whore.”61

Again, this outrage came, not because of the drama itself (the adaptation of the H.G. Wells’s novel) but of the method that was being used. The key to creating the panic was the style of journalism that many believed was the only real method of conveying news being used for other purposes, particularly that of a broadcast meant for entertainment.

Another conspiratorial claim from the War of the Worlds panic involved Welles’s use of timing within the radio drama. It has been well documented that Welles was a perfectionist when it came to his productions. Before the broadcast on the evening of October 30, Welles had a disagreement with his staff regarding the pacing of the radio

60 Ibid. pg. 161
61 Ibid. pp. 185-186
drama. He felt that the accelerated pace of the action within the play would become a turn-off for the listeners:

Welles drastically slowed down the opening scenes by adding dialogue and drawing out the music to the point of tedium. ... He believed that listeners would only accept the unrealistic speed of the invasion if they broadcast started slowly, the gradually sped up.62

A source of debate comes within the idea of “accept.” Did Welles want his listeners to accept the broadcast as authentic or simply as a realistic drama? Conspiracy theories believe that the acceptance that Welles was looking for was a type of “April Fools” kind of joke. In other words, Welles wanted his listeners to believe what they were hearing was real so that he could jump in at the end and exclaim “fooled you!” On the morning after the broadcast, Welles was interviewed about the panic and the realistic nature of the broadcast. He responded:

"We've been putting on all sorts of things from the most realistic situations to the wildest fantasy," Welles said, "but nobody ever bothered to get serious about them before. We just can't understand why this should have such an amazing reaction." "It's too bad that so many people got excited, but after all, we kept reminding them, that is wasn't really true."63

From Welles’s own words, he denies trying to make people panic instead, he was attempting to entertain in the same way that viewers find a horror film entertaining. Yet, viewers of a horror film know that they are watching a film and not real-life events. Schwartz reports that Welles nearly admits to being delighted that many of the listeners panicked on the night of the broadcast:

62 Ibid. pg. 127
...he really was feigning innocence, hiding his delight in order to dodge twelve million dollars in lawsuits. On the *Today* show in 1978, he claimed to have gotten “a huge laugh” out of the whole incident, and said he “never thought it was anything but funny.”

Orson Welles’s comments could be viewed as an “innocent” commentary on the events, exclaiming to have no idea what the backlash and fallout would be from the panic driven mob who failed to pick-up on the keys that indicated the fictious nature of the broadcast. While many blamed Welles for inciting panic and conspiracy theorists scapegoat Welles as being part of a bigger conspiracy against the American people, the panic produced on that night was real to those who experienced it. What is also certain about the events of that night, is the fact that those who panicked (and who would later play the blame game) did not verify the information they were hearing by checking with the authorities or calling the radio station.

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64 Schwartz. pg. 240
CHAPTER TWO

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

On the last day of 2019, officials within the government of Wuhan, China confirmed that healthcare workers were treating dozens of patients who had been infected by a new coronavirus.\textsuperscript{65} That new coronavirus soon became known as COVID-19.\textsuperscript{66} Less than two weeks later, on January 11, China reported the first death from COVID-19. While the region was on alert for further outbreaks, researchers were still reporting that there was no evidence that the virus could be spread among humans.\textsuperscript{67,68} Twelve days later, China officially quarantined the city of Wuhan, cutting off the city of more than eleven million people from all modes of transportation because at this point, seventeen people were dead and hundreds more were infected with the virus.\textsuperscript{69,70} Within a week, the World Health Organization issued a “global health emergency” due to the fact that the


\textsuperscript{66} Coronavirus is a generic term for a large family of viruses that infect animals and people with symptoms that are typical for the common cold, ranging from mild to lethal in potency. Many of the sources that I used for this thesis were published during the 2020 pandemic. And as such, much of the discussion refer to COVID-19 as "The Coronavirus."

\textsuperscript{67} What makes this information important is that many conspiracy theorists will state that since the beginning of the virus, officials were making claims that it was not a big deal, that it couldn't be spread, that it was localized, that you didn't need to wear a mask, but soon changed the narrative because of marching orders from the deep state or in order to take advantage of this opportunity to use a virus as a scare tactic to take over the country.


\textsuperscript{69} Pop culture reference to “I am Legend”

outbreak had spread far beyond the borders of the city of Wuhan with more than ten thousand new cases being reported worldwide. The United States Government responded to W.H.O’s declaration by issuing a travel advisory:

…telling Americans not to travel to China because of the public health threat posed by the coronavirus. …Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed the travel advisory on Twitter, saying that the department had raised its advisory for China to Level 4, and to red from orange — meaning do not travel there.

One day later, on January 31, 2020, the Trump administration attempted their own quarantine of China by restricting entry into the United States for those who had been in the region. Despite all these efforts less than a month from the first report of the new virus, one hundred cases were confirmed across twenty-one countries outside of China, including the United States with seven cases reported. Even though these numbers were comparably small to what was taking place in China, many felt that we were at the beginning of a global pandemic.

In February of 2020, the fear of a global pandemic was soon realized as states began declaring states of emergency. The new coronavirus was also given an official

name by W.H.O. COVID-19. By March, the United States led the world in confirmed cases of COVID-19 with at least 81,321 testing positive for the virus. In April, nearly every state had issued stay at home orders. Major cities became ghost towns as all “nonessential” worked from home or were laid off, students were home from school, college campuses were closed, malls, movie theaters, bars and restaurants were closed, amusement parks shuttered, and concerts were canceled. Broadway in New York City went dark in March of 2020 and is not expected to return actors to the stage until the Summer of 2021. The Walt Disney Corporation shuttered all of their resorts and parks for the first time since Disneyland opened in 1955. All across the country the streets were eerily empty giving the appearance of something straight out of a dystopian movie. With the closing of business across the country, massive layoffs soon took place and in April, 6.6 million people applied for unemployment benefits. Until then the worst week for unemployment filings was in 1982 with 695,000 applying. A rise in depression and suicide with a reported with forty percent of adults struggling with mental health or

substance abuse in 2020.\textsuperscript{80} By the beginning of 2021, the outlook on the pandemic started to change. Infection rates began to decline, three new vaccines were being distributed, but by then the death toll in the United States was over 500,000.\textsuperscript{81} In February of 2021, President Biden ordered flags to fly at half-mast as a memorial to those taken by COVID-19.

Amid the pandemic and the fear, Americans were desperate for information. Unlike the War of the Worlds panic, the COVID-19 virus is a real-life threat that needed to be taken seriously. In other words, there is legitimate fear of COVID-19 and precautions needed to be taken, however, the rhetoric of the conspiracy theorists was to generate hysteria regarding information from reliable news sources and healthcare institutes. Unfortunately, any information regarding the pandemic became a politically partisan issue, causing the American people to question the credibility of the information depending upon who was saying what. Genuine and peer-reviewed scientific findings were being published daily to help inform the American people regarding the pandemic however, President Trump was undermining the credibility of these reliable news and health sources causing a space for the conspiracy theorists to add to the confusion and incite panic in the less informed citizens\textsuperscript{82}.


\textsuperscript{82} President Trump made comments on Twitter that would move contrary to what the White House task force on the coronavirus would say in their daily briefings. Generating a less than professional front to the governments lead into combating the pandemic. Trump’s own words caused many to view the government as flip-flopping on what they were reporting on the
The Trump White House was not the only entity that was spreading conflicting information that disparaged the medical community and the mainstream media. Conservative talk show host, Rush Limbaugh told his audience, “Now, I want to tell you the truth about the coronavirus. … Yeah, I’m dead right on this. The coronavirus is the common cold, folks” (Chiu). What seems to be missed in all the “conflicting” reports of the experts is the learning curve. As information became available, as new technologies were developed, as science was leading the charge against the virus, what the American people were told to do about the virus was also changing. These changes were not as a result of negligence on the part of the science and health communities, but the “daily” directives were produced to be the most helpful at the time of their release. However, conspiracy theorists focused on the appearance of conflict and double-speak (e.g., one day we were told to not to wear masks, the next day we were told differently).\footnote{Also consider directives on washing hands, wearing gloves, social distancing guidelines -- 3 feet, 6 feet, 10 feet, etc.}

**Memes as Evidence**

In the wake of all this confusion and conflicting messages from those in leadership in this country, social media became for many the main source of information regarding the virus and the pandemic. One of the things that social media became inundated with was the use of humorous memes to convey messages of doubt and irony directed at the government and health officials. Below is a sample of such memes that were published and shared on social media (mainly on Facebook) throughout 2020:
At the beginning of the outbreak, there was little talk about shutting down social interactions because of the virus. Memes like this Valentine’s one, demonstrate the desire to continue with normal activities, but with an air of caution. The author of this meme chose not to identify themselves. While the author is anonymous, there isn’t a suggestion yet in the image of any conspiratorial thinking. I believe the author generated this meme as an expression of the turn towards concern and precaution at the early onset of the pandemic. Those who shared this meme did so as an ironic response to the suggestion by government officials that Americans begin to take precautions in their everyday life to prevent the outbreak from becoming a full-on pandemic. Unfortunately, the message to take personal responsibility to enact preventive measures failed to be persuasive enough, and government directives and laws had to be established to counter the growing pandemic.
Screenshots of social media posts of government officials and those with influence were shared on social media as a meme. Usually, these screenshots include a response that countered the message that was posted in a humorous and condescending way. With this image, we are lacking the originator of the screenshot, however we are left with two identifiable subjects with the object.

Chelsea Clinton is a public figure with an extensive following on social media. While her post states her opinion as to the state of preparedness of American under the leadership of President Trump, she does so by giving the audience an opportunity to hear her appeal by way of an interview on CNN. The second speaker within the screenshot attempts to suggest that the pandemic is not a real threat by attacking the character of Clinton’s mother—Hillary Clinton, former First Lady, Senator, Secretary of State, and Presidential candidate.
Again, we are seeing an image that was submitted on social media minus authorial identification. The presence of an author is not necessary to determine the motives behind this meme. While there was much joking about the pandemic spreading throughout the internet, many people took the virus outbreak serious enough to begin hoarding up cleaning supplies. Very early in 2020, hand sanitizer became a scarce commodity. This meme humorously tells the story of that shortage. The decreasing supply of hand sanitizer and increasing demand raised prices.

A new phrase entered our vocabulary in 2020: Social Distancing. Human contact was not only discouraged, but the Centers for Disease Control recommended six feet of distance in social interactions. While there is no author identified here, I argue that the purpose of this meme above is to make light of the physical distancing guidelines recommended by the CDC, suggesting television science fiction. The conflation of scientific guidance with televised science fiction is both mockery and the suggestion that the underlying medical information is as contrived as a television episodic plot.
As with many of the memes shared regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, this one also has an anonymous author, but those who shared the meme hold to the belief that those who are taking precautions, “the people”, are not intelligent enough to determine the best course of action to take and the health officials, namely the CDC is incompetent to relay a message that is understandable. This supposedly ironic meme of an imagined conversation draws attention to the conflicting ideas that the American people were subjected to during the course of the pandemic. There was much debate about the effectiveness of masks, whether anything with the word “China” in it was safe. The satire concludes with the suggestion that anything with “corona” in the title might not be safe either. This represents the confusion that many felt during the pandemic.
This anonymous revision of a classic internet meme puns on the ability of the virus to spread. Many who believed in COVID-19 conspiracy theories suggested that the virus was no more harmful than the common cold or flu. In fact, they suggest that the flu was far more lethal. During the ramp up of COVID-19 testing, the numbers did not accurately reflect the extent of the spread of the virus, therefore opening the door to memes such as this one that lead to the false notion that you couldn’t possibly get the coronavirus. This meme is a classic internet meme where the dog’s facial expression makes clear a pun, but its ironic expression requires an audience who already “knows” the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was (inaccurately) less transmissible. As internet communication then, it has a double effect signifying the user’s political beliefs in the conspiracy theory and the audience’s presumed knowledge of the same conspiracy theory.
Just as the supply of hand sanitizer was short, the mask mandates that many states put in place resulted in a high demand of face masks. While the acclaimed N95 masks were extremely hard to come by, Dr. Fauci seemed to reverse his recommendations by claiming that any kind of cloth or double-lined mask would be an appropriate deterrent of the coronavirus, many companies begin to convert their assembly lines to making masks. In some places, by converting their manufacturing facilities to produce medical equipment and supplies necessary to fight the growing pandemic, these businesses were able to stay open. This meme pokes fun at the capitalistic aspect of the pandemic. If there is a way to make money (even in the darkest of circumstances) the capitalist will find a way to make profit. For a conspiracy theorist, this meme suggests instead that the medical community’s warnings and guidelines served ulterior purposes, instead of public health.

While many of the memes shared were meant to make light of the pandemic, exceptions exist. And in fact, not all images shared regarding the COVID-19 pandemic were memes. The next image is a demonstration of that.
The author of this post is listed at the top of the image. James Spann is a highly beloved meteorologist in the Birmingham, Alabama television market. He posted this picture as an attempt to persuade citizens in Alabama to be cautious when going to the store (not possible to social distance within a crowd that size) and to ask his audience to be
considerate when making purchases of much needed sanitation supplies. While there were stay-at-home orders in place throughout the country, the need to gather supplies and groceries became to some a moment of panic. Grocery stores and wholesale stores were flooded with people trying to buy what they thought would not be available soon. Pictures like these, not really memes, but shared on social media in the same way as memes were shared, weren’t humorous in nature, but they reflected the urgency and the panic that many felt because of the pandemic.

The prevalence of memes for framing the COVID-19 pandemic was itself an object of mockery in meme.

“In the year 2020 humanity was threatened with extinction. Panic spread across the planet like never before”

“What were you doing grandpa?”

“Just sending memes to friends and stuff”

While the author is anonymous, this image reflects the shared mindset of many on social media. By remaining anonymous, the author has allowed the audience who shared this meme to make this image represented their own frame of mind during the pandemic. This meme reflects the explosion of the meme genre on the internet and social media during the time of the pandemic. Many were sharing meme, saving meme, and talking about
meme. Before I even began to contemplate writing a thesis on the COVID-19 pandemic, I would save these memes as a reminder of the unique and strange time of 2020.

![Meme Image]

Again, the idea of panic was thoroughly on display in the memes that were shared throughout social media. The original author is listed at the top of the image, taking ownership of his observations regarding the panic that set in during 2020. I especially liked this one that incorporated the science fiction aspect into the meme. In 2021, the Pentagon released information regarding encounters with UFOs that military pilots had experienced. Would the American people panic over the idea of aliens? If the War of the Worlds broadcast had been about a peaceful encounter with aliens, would panic had ensued? What can be known is that the panic brought on because of the COVID-19 pandemic had more to do with the lack of resources than the infection rate of the virus.

One of the major conspiracy theories regarding the COVID-19 virus is the idea that the virus was made up by scientist as the means for which Bill Gates could have everyone implanted with a 5G tracking device when they were given the vaccine to the “man-made” virus. Some conspiracy
theorist go as far as to say that Bill Gates was trying to decrease the world population by committing genocide with either testing for the virus or the potential vaccine. I believe it is interesting to note that the author of this meme decided to remain anonymous. Is that because they are afraid of backlash against themselves for going after Bill Gates? This meme reflects those ideas that Bill Gates\textsuperscript{84} is at the forefront of the pandemic by criticizing his televisu
tal presence during the pandemic as a major funder of NIH research for his lack of credential in medicine. Whether or not the author believes that Bill Gates can influence the pandemic is difficult to nail down. Perhaps the author believes that Gates is attempting to, but that the author is not confident in Gates’s ability to do so. Even so, the absence of the author leaves the door open for interpretation.

\textsuperscript{84} “The next Outbreak? We're Not Ready: Bill Gates.” YouTube, 3 Apr. 2015, youtu.be/6Af6b_wyiwI.
Conspiracy theorists who claim that Bill Gates was responsible for the pandemic refer to a Ted Talk that Gates gave in 2015 were he analyzes our capabilities to withstand a pandemic.
The anonymous author of this image is attempting to convey an idea of middle ground. The author expresses the problem with extremes during the pandemic. The confusion felt by many Americans is well represented by this meme’s exaggerated spectrum. Some believed in the conspiracy theories that were being spread on the internet and on social media, while others took to heart everything they heard and the precautions that were suggested by the medical community and government agencies. I argue that those who shared this meme felt like a balance had to be achieved where one would apply their own “common sense” to the equation and decide for their own what to do. On the other hand, this meme also has within it an aspect of judgment towards those who took as many precautions as they could regarding the virus. It positions the spectrum of response as already skewed: One either follows all of the rules to a ridiculous level or is on a path to conspiracy theory.
Another conspiracy theory regarding the pandemic was the use of temperature scanners at stores. Some believed it was against their constitutional rights to be temperature screened when going to a place of business. Others felt that it was another way for “big brother” to control you or perhaps brainwash you. Temperature checks became such a divisive element during the pandemic that there were a number of occasions where people became violent, refusing to be screened. Instead of leaving the store or business, they fought their way into the business, only to be arrested by police. The anonymous author of this meme uses humor to suggest that you shouldn’t get scanned. By doing so, the author identifies with the conspiracy theorists.
This is another meme that represents the confusion felt by many. Clearly, whomever created this meme was going for the style of image that government and health organizations were using to get information out in a persuasive way to the public (we will look at some of those later in the thesis). This meme suggests that following CDC guidelines and government directives means that you are not thinking for yourself, but you are letting the government and the media think for you. This meme pressures Americans to decide that ignoring guidelines means that you are a person who can think for themselves.
Going back to the idea that the pandemic and COVID-19 was something out of science fiction, this anonymous meme uses a screenshot from *I Am Legend*, a dystopian movie about a global pandemic that turned humans into zombie like creatures. Will Smith’s character was the sole survivor in New York City along with his dog. The COVID-19 vaccines were themselves the objects of conspiratorial ridicule in internet memes.

![Image: Twitter post by Lin Wood](image)

As 2020 was ending and it was clear that Donald Trump had lost reelection to Joe Biden, many of the memes shared by some who believed in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, that the virus was real and that it did take lives, but it was manufactured by opponents of Donald Trump in a successful effort to get him removed from office. This tweet by Lin Wood, known conspiracy theorist, is an example of a running theme in internet culture that suggests that hundreds of thousands were killed in order to elect Joe Biden. Lin Wood did not share this view anonymously, rather he attached his name to it in the effort to persuade by using his own credibility as a pro-trump advocate and celebrity lawyer who specializes in liability and defamation lawsuits.

One can observe the progression of the aggressiveness of the messages of the memes. While they remained in the category of humor, they suggest a complete distrust
of the information on hand regarding the pandemic and the COVID-19 virus. This distrust created a space for the conspiracy theorist to move from the fringe to the mainstream on social media, by taking advantage of the confusion and distrust to deliver their messages of government conspiracy and the alleged attempt of world domination by a select few of elite billionaires.

The use of memes is an extremely effective tool of persuasion, not only for the conspiracy theorists, but also recognized by state and federal government entities. Below is a sampling of memes, images, and infographics used to convey positive messages regarding the government’s response to the pandemic and the virus:

![COVID-19 Incubation Timeline](image)

This image stresses the seriousness of social distances and isolation for those who have been exposed to the coronavirus or for those who have been in contact with those who had the virus. The extended incubation period for the virus made it extremely contagious, an idea the image tries to convey by personalizing it in the character, “Kate.”
Government and health images were vibrant with color and simplistic in the language used in order to help the majority of the populous the ability to discern the information given. This infographic was shared to help Alabamians determine what actions and activities were safe and which one put them at more of a risk. This image also helps us to see why stay at home orders were necessary. Many felt that these restrictions were an overreaction and they continued to participate in them, thus adding to the spread of the virus. The purpose of the stay-at-home orders were to keep people from gathering in large crowds which would grow the spread of the virus exponentially.
Because of the newly developed phrase of “social distancing” was used to direct people to avoid crowds, some agencies used infographics like this one that defined exactly what was meant by “social distancing” using a traffic light as an example. This infographic simplified what activities were safe to participate in and which ones needed to be avoided. With all the confusion on the internet and social media, this helped in reducing the panic felt by many.

Again, humor is a powerful tool of persuasion and those in charge of the government took full advantage of the effectiveness of humor to try and deliver messages of care and concern for the well-being of the populous.
The governmental use of humor in images borders on the idea of memes, but is does not play as heavily on irony as the conspiratorial memes above. This meme produces by the city of Round Rock, Texas appeals to the sense of humor of their audience in order to persuade them to take precautions during the pandemic.

With the government and conspiracy theorist both using images, even humorous ones, to wage a type of information war, how could the American people know what was real information and what was the rhetoric of the COVID-19 conspiracy theorists? What were the keys to deciphering through the discourse, filtering out what was conspiratorial ramblings and information that must be acted on? What was the agenda of the conspiracy theorists? To answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at where many Americans turned and tuned into for their information.

The above figure represents a study hosted by Yale University that investigated where Americans turned to for their sources of information. Many Americans admitted that they turned to sources that aligned with their own political views. So, a conservative Republican might rely on the information produced by Fox News over the information reported by MSNBC and vice versa for a liberal Democrat. The comparison between MSNBC and Fox News on the above graft shows an equal share of trustworthiness by the
American people, demonstrating the divide in American. One of the more interesting statistics from the above figure is the trustworthiness of the information shared by friends and family who are not medical experts or objective journalists. That means that the information shared online on social media platforms by friends and family was nearly as important to people as the information received from the CDC or other infectious disease experts. And, it emphasizes how crucial individuals sharing conspiratorial memes could be for shaping the opinions of others.

With all the confusion and political haymaking involving COVID-10, the ground was ripe for the emergence of a host of conspiracy theories. During my research I came across dozens of variants along the same theme that COVID-19 is nothing more than an elaborate power-grab scheme ranging from governmental coup to an attempt at world domination. For my analysis of the COVID-19 conspiracy theories, I will focus on the two main, most popular theories shared among conspiracy theorists: COVID-19 became an opportunity to steal the Presidential Election and COVID-19 was engendered by the Deep State to control the world.

**COVID-19 and the Election**

The COVID-19 conspiracy regarding the 2020 presidential election suggests that COVID-19 is a real virus, but only as bad as the common, typical flu, the flu kills more than COVID-19, and that the flu is actually more deadly (easier to spread). But “Never-Trumpers” saw this as an opportunity to take over the country and “steal” the election. Those that believed this conspiracy theory demonstrated their passion for this conspiracy by rioting on Capitol Hill and storming into the Capitol building.
But before the rioting occurred, those who believed this conspiracy also identified themselves as “MAGA Supporters.” These MAGA supporters largely refused to follow health guidelines and mandates claiming that they wouldn’t follow mask orders and social distance guidelines because the lethality of the virus was faked in order to produce panic and prevent Trump from being reelected. They claimed the lockdowns would stop the in-person voting process, giving opportunity for mail-in ballots to become widespread and thus giving opportunity for massive voter fraud.

The conspiracy website, infowars.com, has posted several articles and videos detailing how COVID-19 was used to steal the election from Donald Trump. One particular video that they shared to YouTube claimed to detail “The Four-Year Plan to Overthrow an Elected President”. The video states that the coronavirus conspiracy began nine days before Trump’s inauguration when Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, “There is ‘no doubt’ Donald J. Trump will be confronted with a surprise infectious disease outbreak during his presidency.” The video also claimed that two days after the inauguration of Trump that Bill Gates warned “of epidemic that could kill over 30 million people.”

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85 Infowars.com is a conspiratorial website with information that regularly violates terms of service of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. By referencing the articles on this website, I am in no way endorsing the information on these pages, but my intent is to demonstrate the extent that the conspiracy theories have entered into the mainstream as millions of Americans continue to share the conspiracy theories from this website.
Donald Trump shares a conspiracy theorist video on Twitter claiming COVID-19 was used to steal the election. The transcript of the video titled “How to steal an election,” according to Stuti Mishra, claims to layout the game plan for accomplishing this coup:

The video posted by an anonymous account called @a17time which tweets in support of President Trump showcases a string of claims starting from the origin of Covid-19 and leading to the 2020 polling and the election results.

The video opens with the title in bold “How to steal an election” and voiceover says: "Start with a virus, import it into America, talk about it nonstop, call some governors, put patients into nursing homes, kill thousands, blame the president, keep blaming, blame some more," the narrator says, while shots of crowded hospitals and cemeteries play in the background.

"Lockdown small business [sic], kill the economy, push mail-in voting, stoke a race war, call for violence pick a candidate, no, not her," says the voiceover with the shots of Tulsi Gabbard and then moves to the shots of Joe Biden saying “yes, that’s more like him [sic],” while the music from
"No Church in the Wild" by Kanye West and Jay-Z plays in the background.

The voiceover continues to make claims of the press “shielding” Mr Biden and not covering conservatives. “Ignore the economic recovery, downplay the world peace, pump the place,” says the voiceover.86

This conspiracy theory extended outside the realm of social media and the fringe, when Donald Trump proclaimed during the Republican National Convention in August of 2020 that the Democrats were using COVID-19 as an excuse to promote mail-in ballots, thus the ability to generate “fake” ballots against Trump:

We have to be very careful because they’re trying it again with this whole 80 million mail-in ballots that they’re working on, sending them out to people that didn’t ask for them, they didn’t ask, they just get them and it’s not fair and it’s not right and it’s not going to be possible to tabulate in my opinion. It’s just my opinion. We have to be very, very careful, and you have to watch. Every one of you, you have to watch. … What they’re doing is using COVID to steal an election. They’re using COVID to defraud the American people, all of our people, of a fair and free election. And we can’t do that. The only way they can take this election away from us is if this is a rigged election.87

Donald Trump references the mail-in ballots as the reason the election would be stolen, setting up the idea that if he didn’t win the election it is because of fraud. Trump is bringing this COVID-19 conspiracy into the mainstream with his claims of voter fraud three months before the election. Therefore, when Trump did lose the election, his supporters were able to recall his claims and declare his words as prophetic.


On the morning of January 6, 2021, during the proceedings in Congress to certify the election results, Donald Trump held a rally in Washington DC where thousands came in order to support Trump. After Trump’s speech, the movement become a riot on the steps of Capital Hill that turned lethal. Donald Trump claims that he did not entice the people to violence. Yet, during his speech he did call for his supporters to fight:

And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun. My fellow Americans, for our movement, for our children, and for our beloved country. And I say this despite all that's happened. The best is yet to come. So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue. And we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give. The Democrats are hopeless — they never vote for anything. Not even one vote. But we're going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones because the strong ones don't need any of our help. We're going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country. So let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.88

Donald Trump claims that his message was not one of violence, however, in the speech that he gave that morning he uses the word “fight” twenty times in his twenty-seven-minute speech. The main emphasis on the word “fight” occurred near the end of the speech before he directed the crowd to march to Capitol Hill.

**COVID-19 For World Domination**

This conspiracy theory attempts to persuade anyone who would listen that Bill Gates and an elite few billionaires are attempting to use COVID-19 as a tool for world domination. The conspiracy group Stop World Control, led by David Sorensen, who claims to have received a “divine encounter” attempts to persuade their audience that the

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actions taken by the bureaucracies within the United States Government, world leaders, and the elite class during the pandemic are a nefarious attempt at world domination.

Within this group they claim to have experts in a wide range of fields in order to provide evidence for their claims. These “experts” have degree titles after their names, but no evidence of their credibility is presented. Detailed on their website is the “plan to control the world” by those in the Deep State:

They suppress every effective cure for Covid-19, so they can enforce a very dangerous vaccine onto all of humanity. This vaccine will contain nanotechnology that connects us to artificial intelligence and start the process of transhumanism, making us hybrids that lose the ability to think freely. If you think that's insane, you're right. It is pure madness, but it's nevertheless the hidden agenda behind the vaccine for Covid-19.

Conspiracy theorists use the rhetoric of patriotism in order to make the case that the pandemic is an attempt to suppress rights and the only way to protect yourself is to keep reading their propaganda. Under the banner of “Free Speech is Gone” the website claims:

During this pandemic something very dangerous is happening: suddenly free speech has vanished from planet earth. Only the narrative that is pushed by the big media is allowed. It's what the Nazis used to do. It's what happens in communist China. It's what Russia was known for. But it's not what the free world is used to… Keep reading to see why they do this, so you can protect your life.

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89 The information from Stop World Control is all conspiratorial and not grounded in verifiable facts. The intent is to generate hysteria regarding COVID-19. I do not endorse the information from this group that I will be using for my thesis. My intentions are to demonstrate the lengths that this group will go to in order to persuade the American people that the threat to their lives are certain members of government, wealthy billionaires, and the media.


91 Ibid.
The next thing on the page is a large image of George Washington and the quote, “If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be left, like sheep to the slaughter -- George Washington, First President of the United States of America.”

In regards to Bill Gates’s role in the COVID-19 conspiracy, Stop World Order claims:

The answer can be heard loud and clear throughout the media all over the world: humanity must be vaccinated against Covid-19. Governments are announcing a mandate to force every single person to accept this rushed vaccine, that has been hastily developed without proper safety testing.

…The main voice calling for this, is the world’s leading vaccine dealer, Bill Gates. He became a billionaire through his company Microsoft, but increased his fortune to over one hundred billion dollars by dealing vaccines. He said:

'Investing in the vaccine industry is the best business investment I have ever made'. …Right before the outbreak of the pandemic Gates tweeted: 'I am particularly excited about what the coming year could mean for one of the best buys in global health: vaccines.'

They also claim that the Bill Gates would use the vaccine designed for COVID-19 in order to track and control the population of the entire world:

Bill Gates now wants to make sure the entire world population will buy his vaccines, by calling for a control system that will blackmail humanity. …According to this vaccine dealer only people who have been vaccinated against Covid-19 should be allowed to travel, go to school, attend meetings and work. …Digital vaccine ID's are already being developed and Gates has a patent on the technology that makes it possible to trace an individual's body anywhere. This technology is called WO2020-060606. In addition, Gates wants to set up a global monitoring network, which will track everyone who came into contact with COVID-19.\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
One of the “proofs” that they use for the Bill Gates scheme is an exercise that Gates organized in New York before the outbreak:

A few months before the outbreak, Bill Gates organized an event in New York City. Guess what the event was all about? It was a ‘coronavirus pandemic exercise’. Yes, you read that right: Bill Gates organized an coronavirus pandemic exercise! ...This ‘pandemic exercise’ was called Event201 and happened in October 2019, literally right before the outbreak.

The problem with this “proof” is the generic term “coronavirus” that is can be used to describe any kind of outbreak of the flu. One wouldn’t need to have COVID-19 in mind when they are talking about the “coronavirus.” This problem with the term “coronavirus”
continues within the rhetoric of the COVID-19 conspiracy theory. Stop World Control continues with the relationship between coronavirus and Bill Gates:

Also in September 2019 the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board released a report titled ‘A World At Risk’. ...It stressed the need to be prepared for... a coronavirus outbreak! ...On the cover of the report is the picture of a coronavirus and people wearing face masks. In the report we read the following paragraph: ‘The United Nations (including WHO) conducts at least two system-wide training and simulation exercises, including one for covering the deliberate release of a lethal respiratory pathogen.’

Did you catch that? ...During a TED talk Bill Gates echoed this goal, when he literally said that vaccines can be used to reduce the world's population with 10 - 15%!\(^94\)

On the same document they insist that COVID-19 is meant to reduce the population, control the population, but then declare that the virus is being blown out of proportion:

Scientists from Stanford University in California show that the mortality rate of covid-19 is between 0.02 and 0.4%. ...To put these figures in context: seasonal flu has a mortality rate of 0.1%. When this study was criticized, the principal investigator responded: “There's a kind of mass hysteria at work here that just insists that this must be the end of the world, and it must be that the sky falls on our heads. It's based on speculation and science fiction and an outright attack on studies with data. But rejecting real data in favor of speculation is mind-boggling.” - Dr. John Ioannidis, Stanford University. ...The famous Oxford University also came to the following conclusion: "The COVID-19 fatality rate is somewhere between 0.1% and 0.41%."\(^95\)

Using the rhetoric of science for the purpose of persuasion against the “fact” regarding the information published for the public health crisis, the conspiracy theorists claimed that:

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
\(^{95}\) Ibid.
Face masks don't help but increase the risk of infection. The six feet rule has no scientific basis. There is no risk of infection outdoors, in shops or in restaurants. The only way to transmit covid-19 is to stand close to someone who has a cough and a fever. And the mortality rate of covid-19 is the same as that of seasonal flu. ...These are statements by some of the most renowned scientists on earth. A greater contrast with the madness spread by the media and governments is inconceivable.\textsuperscript{96}

The Deep State and Shadow Government

The above image demonstrates the concept that the leaders of this country, politicians, government agencies, big business, internet providers, the mass media are all

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
part of the Deep State bent on world domination. The message of this image tells this audience that you cannot trust anything you are told by anyone with any kind of credibility.

The last example of the persuasive nature of the information of the website suggests that the planned coup for world domination is a plan that has been in existence for a long time and that Bill Gates and his billionaire friends are part of a larger and a more well organized society that has actually been in control for since the middle of the last century:

Besides powerful billionaires who buy corrupt leaders, there is another reality that needs to be addressed in this context. Bill Gates doesn't work on his own. He is a member of the world famous and controversial Bilderberger group. This ultra-secret society was co-founded in 1954 by the Dutch Prince Bernard, together with top figures from politics, food industries, media, pharmaceutical industries, etc. ...It is a strictly secret organization that decides what really needs to happen in our countries and in the world. They give instructions to governments, media and many industries. No one can be a part of it, except by personal invitation. ...Government leaders are forbidden, except by invitation. Yet this group makes important decisions that determine the course of our society, without the people being aware of it. ...Shadow governments are a reality and have an astonishing influence in countries all over the world. ...This is why 5G is pushed through, even though hundreds of doctors and scientists warn of the serious dangers to public health. But this higher level of radiation is necessary to trace the entire population. That is why the government does not listen to the hundreds of experts. They have to blindly do what the shadow governments tell them.⁹⁷

Analysis of Conspiracy Theories and the Production of Panic

John Lyne argues that there is a place in rhetorical discourse for not only analysis but also application. It is naïve to think that the study of rhetoric is about knowledge only,

⁹⁷ Ibid.
but within the analysis there is also persuasion. How the information is dissected is as important as the instruments used in the procedure:

the relationship between knowledge and interpretation no longer admits of an either-or approach. ...Rhetoric, in its dominant traditions, is not just about how one resides in a framework of meanings and interests, but how one articulates and uses these.\(^98\)

Within the concepts of argumentation and discourse exists the persuasion that those who are subjected to any kind of information, whether it be scientific, political, religious, or even for the purposes of entertainment, rhetoric is everywhere in everything. Including in conspiracy theories and even information being presented to the public for their own well-being and safety. All contain a type of rhetoric and how that rhetoric is articulated determines the power of its ability to persuade someone to do or believe whatever it is that the speaker is striving for. Lyne discusses the “design” of the information being presented when he states:

The "design" conception is well worth contemplating at a moment when our modes of interaction are increasingly being structured by computer software and the internet. … Would it be so off the mark to say that software is epistemic? One could think in terms of what we might call knowledge-formatting. Arguments format knowledge in particular sites; software formats generically. …Even formatted knowledge should be seen as knowledge-in-relation, and externally contestable. …The rhetoric of science gets its most traction, I believe, when it looks at knowledge-in-relation, as externally contestable, which often means under contestation, whether because of different theoretical commitments, different methodologies, or differences in credibility of experts. …How do we proceed when our knowledge-producing procedures clash? When our experts differ? When different scientists are using different exemplary cases?\(^99\)

\(^{98}\) Lyne, John. “Knowledge and Performance in Argument: Disciplinary and Proto-theory. (Special Issue: The Epistemic View, Thirty Years Later).” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, vol. 35, no. 1, American Forensic Association, June 1998, p. 3–.

\(^{99}\) Ibid.
The format of the knowledge or information is key to its ability to be persuasive. The conspiracy theorists use high quality graphics, well designed webpages, and memes in order to present the idea that the information that they have has been credibly cultivated. In some cases, there is the suggestion that they are advancing the science of whatever they are advocating regarding COVID-19.

Another way that the conspiracy theorists persuade the public that they are honestly investigating the claims of the medical community is by presenting their own list of “experts” to give the idea that their claims are just as credible or more so then the government and medical agency experts. Lyne describes this idea of the rhetoric of the expert:

Expert knowledge calls everyday knowledge into question; one expert calls another into question; one theory contests another. These clashes bring out the agonistic side of inquiry and the quest to know. Science versus non-science is a hardy variant of this contestation. ...The line between science and non-science is invented in different contexts for different purposes. Such lines are provisional. Boundaries may be fluid, genres may be blurred, but knowing how to draw a line remains the contribution of rhetorical argument, inside or outside of science. Having learned new lessons in social constructivism, we do not want to lose a sense of the dialectical interplay between knowing and doubting as a construction, either. Knowing is conceptually uninteresting if it draws no lines or nets our every cognitive activity; this is why characterizations such as "epistemic" need to be used discriminately. Claiming to know ordinarily occurs against a backdrop of doubt and the possibility of disagreement and gets part of its meaning from the contrast, and from the possibilities for argument. Doubting is itself a kind of epistemic achievement; not a simple absence of belief, but a position within a framework of belief.\(^{100}\)

Where is the true science? One of the keys to deciphering which science is the “correct” science is in the peer-reviewed nature of the scientific claims themselves. Who are the scientists and medical experts? What are their credentials? Are their credentials given? If

\(^{100}\) Ibid.
not, then they may not be providing factual information. In that regard, the credentials of the experts and the line of evidence being used in the science community becomes part of the work of persuasion on the part of those delivering the scientific information. One would think that if something has “science” behind it or if it a “scientific finding” it can be trusted? But who is the authority to call something scientific? I could describe this thesis as a scientific experiment and offer it as evidence for some kind of scientific claim, but without have scientific credentials to back up my claim, it is nothing more than an uniformed theory (perhaps even an uneducated theory).

According to Burke, much of what we know about the world and the universe at large is based on information that we have been given and not by our own personal experiences. In fact, we know very little by first-hand information. Burke says that for humans, “the overall ‘picture’ is but a construction of our symbol systems.”101 We take information that has been given to us and using language we reach certain conclusions. However, the conclusions that we draw are necessarily not the same for every person, because the language and symbols that we use to filter the information with results in different interpretation of the same information. Burke’s term for this is the use of “terministic screens”. Burke says that a terministic screen is “composed of terms through which humans perceive the world, and that direct attention away from some interpretations and toward others.”102 Burke uses the example of a photograph being viewed differently based on the type and color of filter that the photographer used in

102 Ibid. pg. 45
taking the picture to illustrate that same is true with how humans perceive the world. We see the world differently because of the different filters or screens that we use. These screens are based on our own preconceived notions, ideas, and experiences. Burke says that these terministic screens “direct the attention” by telling us how to interpret the information and the manner in which that information is given.\footnote{Ibid. pg. 45}

Regarding the difficulties for the American people to distinguish between the information that is posted online by credible medical and government agencies that those of conspiracy theorists are explained in light of Burke’s “terminist screen.” Particularly, I argue that the terministic screens of doubt and skepticism over the government’s ability to tell its citizens the truth caused conspiracy theorists to direct their attention away from the truth surrounding COVID-19 -- making it a government conspiracy.

I believe that the concept of terministic screens helps to make a comparison between the panic of the COVID-19 pandemic generated by conspiracy theorists and that of the panic generated by those listening to their radios on the evening of October 30, 1938, when over a million people were inadvertently convinced that aliens from Mars had landed in New Jersey and a war had begun against the Army and Martian forces. Even though Orson Wells had announced that they were doing a radio drama that night on the Colombia Broadcast System and radio network, many believed that what they were listening to was actually happening. The reason for this is the filtering of information that was received on the radio by the audience within their own
understanding and life experiences. For many the radio was the source of news regarding heightening tensions in the world because of Hitler’s invasion of Germany’s neighbors, breaking news of tragedies such as the Hindenburg and the advances in technology facilitated an opportunity for a broadcast group to dupe millions of Americans with a tale of science fiction. For those duped by the conspiracy theorists regarding COVID-19 believed what they were hearing because of their own distrust of the government and healthcare agencies, the advancements in technology that allows many to receive their information via the internet and social media. Many believed the conspiracy theories because of the information on their smartphone in the same way as the information received by the radio. After all, how could technology lie? Technology isn’t the problem; it is the persuasive actions of other human beings with their own agendas apart from what is in the best interest of society. This comes down to the use and misuse of symbols.

Burke’s essay on the Definition of Man describes humans as “the symbol-using animal.” Symbols or language tell us most of what we know. We have very little information that we receive first-hand. Burke states:

Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so “down to earth” as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our “reality” for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? …And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced first-hand, the whole over-all “picture” is but a construct of symbol-systems. …And doubtless that’s one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naïve verbal realism

104 Ibid. pg. 491
that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality.\textsuperscript{105}

Burke describes the disconnect between what we know in our lives firsthand and what we know by information handed to us by every other source imaginable. The problem comes when we assure ourselves that the information handed to us is above reproach. We take for granted that the platforms by which we glean information are telling the truth and are not being deceptive or that they cannot be misinterpreted. That is not to suggest that we develop a paranoia in regards to information, but that we should no longer cling to the naïve notion that we understand reality apart from the use of symbols; it is those very symbols that give us the scope and depth of our reality.

Since humans are symbol-using animals who receive most of what they know about reality by the symbols that are communicated to us through language, sometimes we misinterpret those symbols to be something that they are not. Burke labels this unfortunate ability of misinterpretation (in his \textit{Definition of Man}) as the “symbol-misusing animal”:

In referring to the misuse of symbols, I have in mind not only such demagogic tricks as I have already mentioned. I also think of “psychogenic illnesses,” violent dislocations of bodily motion due to the improperly criticized action of symbolicity. A certain kind of food may be perfectly wholesome, so far as its sheer material nature is concerned. And people in some areas may particularly prize it. But our habits may be such that it seems to us loathsome; and under those conditions, the very thought of eating it may be nauseating to us. …When the body rebels at such thoughts, we have a clear instance of the ways whereby the realm of symbolicity may affect the sheerly biologic motions of animality.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. 493.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. pg. 495.
Our minds get in the way of seeing the wholesomeness of a particular food item, because we have programed it to interpret such as repulsive because of our symbol-using. For example, I grew up in a culture that has a distaste for fried chicken livers. There is no reason to have this dislike, other than the idea of being repulsed by them was handed down to me through my parents. I have never eaten chicken livers, but I in turn have passed that same repulsion on to my children because of my own reaction. Therefore, being repulsed by chicken livers is a product of our symbol-using. Recently, my oldest son was eating enjoyably what he thought was chicken fingers, yet when he found out that they were chicken livers he became ill. Nothing was physically wrong with the chicken livers, they were prepared correctly, but because he misinterpreted what they were, he enjoyed what he thought he would be repulsed by, and then once he found out the truth, he became ill. This is an example of Burke’s symbol-misusing animal much in the same way as his example of Franz Boas and dumplings that he misinterpreted to be blubber.\(^\text{107}\) Nobody told him it wasn’t blubber until he become violently ill, nor did he ask ahead of time. Applying this definition of humans as symbol-using, symbol-misusing, gives us a better understand of what happened on October 30, 1938 when millions of Americans turned on their radios that evening and during the pandemic of 2020 when millions panicked by the information they received from conspiracy theorists. Many missed the keys to understanding that they were listening to a radio drama. Keys such as the radio identification announcements, the newspaper publications of what was being

\(^\text{107}\) Ibid. pg. 496.
broadcasted on the radio, the comparative nature of the broadcast to other information being that was normally received on the radio ways. Regarding the pandemic, conspiracy theorists took the symbols presented by the media and the health officials and advocated that the information was conflicting, inaccurate, or intentionally misleading. I argue that there are several factors at play that caused these conspiracy theories to be trusted in the way that the War of the Worlds broadcast was trusted as the truth.

**Everything is Connected**

“Everything is connected” is the main argument that conspiracy theorists make. They are unable to distinguish between random events and those that are premeditated in nature. They believe that everything happens for a reason, not that there is necessarily order to the universe by some higher power who is deciding what will be and what will not be, but that there are those that work behind the scenes in our world who are purposefully manipulating events nationally and globally to bring about an outcome that is profitable to them. From the conspiracy website, StopWorldControl.com:

> Nothing is about your well-being, but everything is about creating a world of control. Read the entire report to see the facts for yourself. ...You will also see abundant evidence that the pandemic has been planned for decades and how everything is orchestrated with mass fraud, global bribery, unprecedented censorship and extreme corruption in media, and governments.108

Whether it is a virus, terrorist attack, assignation, or even natural events, these “master manipulators,” those who are part of the Deep State are in control not for the purpose of the greater good, but so they can remain in power or in control of the world. It is about

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108 “THE PLAN TO CONTROL THE WORLD”
world domination. Compassion, morality, kindness, love, all take a back seat to their own interests.

**Trying To Make Sense Of The World**

Of course, this is an attempt by the conspiracy theorists to make sense of the world. There is so much that feels chaotic about the world that we live in, that for some, the chaos cannot be random. There must be someone controlling the things that are happening in our world. So, the idea that a group of terrorists would hijack planes and bring down the World Trade Center, disturbs their sense of “order” in the world. Better to think that the government acted to bring down the towers in order to justify war in the Middle East for oil. Shane Miller states that:

> Scholars have argued that the acceptance of conspiracies depends on the audience's need for certainty combined with the audience's lack of specific, particular knowledge. Conspiracy theories are born from uncertainty. An event occurs--an airplane crash, a building explosion, an assassination--that is outside of society's normal range of experiences.\(^{109}\)

Because of the conflicting information by the government and the medical community, there exists a distrust that these entities have our best interest at heart. Into this void the conspiracy theories attempt to explain the confusion as a nefarious plot to deceive the public. The conspiracy theories portray themselves as the most informed among us. Llyod Bitzer suggests that this void offers to conspiracy theorists "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be."\(^{110}\) This worldview that things must be explained in a

\(^{109}\) Miller, Shane

certain way in order for them to be real becomes for those who believe in conspiracy theories an idea that all things happen for a reason. Even those events that occur randomly have some kind of intent attached to them.

Random chaos does not fit within the rhetoric of conspiracy theory, better to think that it all has order to it. There must be something more sinister at play than just evil people doing bad things. There has to be a larger more nefarious purpose to major events in our world. Over-exaggeration, super-hype, reading between the lines, connecting dots in unusual ways (not in the most logical way).

In 2017, a random survey of 1,511 adults from across the United States were asked about topics they believed “the government is concealing what they know.”111 24.2 percent of those who were surveyed believed that the government was concealing what they knew about the moon landing. The survey concluded that:

When you question people about their belief…they seem to fall into two camps: Those who know next to nothing about the historical event, but latch on the conspiracy theory anyway because that’s easier than studying the issue, and besides, it reinforces their existing world view. The other group of theorists have memorized the minutiae of the supposed conspiracy and recite it back to you.112

For doubters, whether it’s easier to believe the conspiracy or if they are intimately knowledgeable with all the ins and outs of the theories in existence, everything is being filtered by their world view and the terministic screens that they have set in place in their lives. That would mean the sky really isn’t the limit to what we are capable of as a society. Better to think that it was a hoax performed on the world. In the same way,

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112 Ibid. pg. 2
conspiracy theorist today advocate that COVID-19 is a hoax performed on the world by the Deep State, corporate giants, and the federal government.

**Deep State**

Those behind the scenes working to create a new world order or those who are on a different playing field than those of politics played out on our nightly news. They are in positions of influence on both sides of the political aisle and their plots and plans are on a greater scale. It doesn’t matter which party controls Washington, they always have the upper hand and the political leaders in their pocket. According to conspiracy theorists, that is why Donald Trump had to be defeated, because he could not be controlled. He operated outside their sphere of influence and so drastic actions had to be taken.

**Government Bureaucracies**

Different from a deep state which is usually an organization made up of actors from different parts of government, the bureaucracies themselves can be controlled by the President himself. Some conspiracy theories hold that the government itself is creating the trouble, as suggested by the COVID-19 conspiracy theorists. In fact, Ronald Reagan even recognized this with his tongue-in-cheek line about the most terrifying words in the English language: “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”

113 This idea that the United States government is incapable of helping the citizens of this country in a crisis stems from the problems that Lynn describes with using science as a rhetorical device. The government attempts to do the scientific work necessary to understand and combat

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the growing pandemic, but not all scientists agree as to the “correct” approach. Science is a trial-and-error method that includes the discussion of scientific minds to determine the next best course of action to continue the research. Conspiracy theorists interpret this scientific debate as a conspiracy at worst and incompetency at best.

The conspiracy theorist and the claims that they perpetuate have the potential to cause harm. One doesn’t have to look any further than the event on January 6, 2021 in what some call an insurrection attempt\textsuperscript{114} to see the power of conspiracy theories. Colin Klein, Peter Clutton, and Adam Dunn state:

Conspiracy beliefs have the potential to cause harm both to the individual and the community. Conspiracy endorsement is associated with lowered intention to participate in social and political causes, unwillingness to follow authoritative medical advice, increased willingness to seek alternative medicine, and a tendency to reject important scientific findings. …Many people passively endorse conspiracy theories, in the sense that they will assent to one or more conspiracy-related beliefs if asked. Conspiracy endorsement can be a relatively weak attitude, reflecting a general suspicion of the powerful. Measurement of assent also appears to be strongly influenced by contextual and partisan cues. A subset of individuals who endorse conspiracy theories also actively engage with conspiracy theories by, for example, discussing and spreading them online.\textsuperscript{115}

While conspiracy theorists have been around much longer, the advent of new mediums of communication have worked to help spread conspiracy theories. While advancing technology has made it possible for us to have information more readily available, it also comes with the risk of messages that are hurried and therefore inaccurate, messages that


are misunderstood by the general public, and messages that are premeditated to cause panic.

During the time of the War of the Worlds broadcast, radio was a mainstay in most homes. It was the thing that families gathered around after dinner for news and entertainment. Broadcasters quickly developed standards methods of communicating news and information as well as programs that were meant for entertainment (the radio play/drama). One could turn on the radio and pretty quickly determine what kind of broadcast they were listening to. However, what happens if a broadcast crosses the line into a different rhetorical method? What if a radio drama portrayed itself as a network breaking news flash? This is exactly what happened during the War of the Worlds broadcast that created a panic much akin to the kind of panic that conspiracy theorists hope to generate with the messages that they generate regarding COVID-19 and their use of social media platforms.

In response to the panic-inducing claims of the conspiracy theorists, social media platforms in 2020 initiated censorship algorithms to combat the false information and propaganda being spread by the conspiracy theorists116. In some cases, the one posting false information had their accounts suspended, while others saw their posts targeted with disclaimers about the falsity of the claims that where generated.

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Donald Trump become one of the most significant examples of social media’s efforts to counteract the claims that he made on their websites. The posts that he published went from being flagged with a disclaimer and reaching a point that he received an all-out ban on social media for his efforts to incite riots.117


118 Ibid.
Burke observes that “all members of our species conceive of reality somewhat roundabout, through various media of symbolism” (52). With the use of terministic screens, human beings are able to take an event such as the lunar landing, view it with the same source, but walk away with totally different interpretations of the information provided. The same is true with those who believe in the conspiracy theories involving COVID-19. As long as humans use symbol and language to interpret the information around us, there will always been a difference in the way that information is processed because of our uniquely contrived terministic screens.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Benjamin Franklin and Regulatory Solutions

War of the Worlds panic happened because of the timing of world events, a pioneer in entertainment used the persuasiveness of radio medium, and real fears of a real threat that were transliterated into a science fiction reality for millions on the east coast that fateful Sunday evening. The Coronavirus panic happened because of: timing of world events (real pandemic, virus, vaccine, election), conspiracy theorists using the persuasiveness of social media platforms -- manipulating the facts, turning real fears of a real threat into science fiction reality for millions of Americans (Those who believe the election was stolen, refuse to wear masks, refuse the vaccine despite the evidence). PT Barnum is attributed as saying “There’s a sucker born every minute.” What can we do to prevent panic over information that isn’t true? While Barnum may have been suggesting that people are “sucker” who get conned into believing something isn’t true, I believe the problem results from the inability of some to comprehend the keys available to determine the factual nature of knowledge. While many choose to stay uniformed and thus creating a space to find themselves vulnerable to misinformation, I believe that as a society it is our duty to help one other with the ability to think critically, to not accept information merely on face value or because of the attractive and persuasive nature of the information. The effectiveness of any given speech isn’t necessarily in how well it shines,
but on whether or not it is believable. So, what do we do when false information looks and sounds believable? The answer in 1938 and 2020 was the same—the need for regulation.

The panic produced by the War of the Worlds broadcast and the COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, serve as proof that not all speech should be totally free. Regulation is a necessity when it comes to mass media. While free speech is a guarantee given to us by the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States of America, even some of the founding fathers who created the Bill of Rights recognized that there needs to be from time-to-time regulation on speech. One such example is that of Benjamin Franklin who advocated for free speech but also believed in the necessity of censorship.

Long before the ratification of the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech and freedom of the press, Benjamin Franklin had been an advocate for both since his teenage years living in the American colonies and later as a founding father of this new country. Benjamin Franklin believed that one of the most significant principles in society is the freedom of words. Yet, being a great principle doesn’t mean that such freedom should be limitless. Using his own press, Franklin demonstrated that even an advocate for free speech believed that there were times where censorship was needed for the public’s good.

To better understand this dichotomy of advocacy for free speech and advocacy for censorship, I feel it is necessary to establish Franklin’s prowess as a writer and printer during America’s colony days in order to demonstrate the application of Franklin’s approach the regulation of mass media today.
Around the time of his seventeenth birthday, Franklin took over the duties of printing the paper owned by his brother, James, titled *New England Courant*, when the authorities jailed James for the words that he had published in opposition.\(^{119}\) During this tenure as editor, Ben Franklin began to dabble into the arena of free speech. In his autobiography, Franklin states, “I had the management of the Paper, and I made bold to give our Rulers some Rubs in it.”\(^{120}\) However, these rubs wouldn’t come with his own name attached to them; he would do so with his series of essays printed under the pseudonym of “Silence Dogood” (Lemay xi). There were fourteen Dogood essays in total, but it is number eight that emphasizes the “rubs” against the rulers concerning the freedom of speech:

> Without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech… This sacred Privilege is so essential to free Governments, that the Security of Property, and the Freedom of Speech always go together; and in those wretched Countries where a Man cannot call his Tongue his own, he can scarce call any Thing else his own. Whoever would overthrow the Liberty of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freeness of Speech; a Thing terrible to Publick Traytors.\(^{121}\)

In this letter, Franklin strongly advocates for free speech by tying together the concepts of free thought, wisdom, and liberty. The relationship between these concepts hinges on the ideal principle of free speech. Using these terms in association with free speech, Franklin elevates the use of words to that of religious texts. Adherents to a religious order


\(^{120}\) Ibid.

treat their texts with reverence. Franklin is calling for the same kind of respect for words produced for the public in general. He goes on to call freedom of speech a “sacred Privilege,” firmly establishing this religious connection in a not-so-subtle way. By making this argument, Franklin provides a litmus test for his readers to gauge whether they live in a free society and nation. I argue that for the readers of The New-England Courant in 1722, if they were in doubt as to whether or not they lived in a place of “free Government” or a “wretched” country, they didn’t need to look any further than Franklin’s pseudonym. If free speech were a championed cause of the day, Franklin would have had no need to hide his name. In a free society where free speech is protected, Franklin could publicly rub the rulers without fear of censorship or punishment. Instead, Silence Dogood has to call out the rulers by comparing their system of government to that of the fallen Roman Empire when she states, “Freedom of Speech is ever the Symptom, as well as the Effect of good Government. …Rome, with the Loss of its Liberty, lost also its Freedom of Speech; then Mens Words began to be feared and watched.” In turn, Dogood calls the rulers out as providing the public a bad government because free speech is frowned upon and then poses Rome as an object lesson for the rules of what not to do.

With this beginning foray into printing for the public, Franklin realized its benefit as a persuasive tool. By publishing rubs against the rulers, Franklin is also convincing his readers that the need for a free press and freedom of speech was in the public’s best interest. By the way, Franklin won’t just use this tool to advocate for free speech, but also as the “strategic steering of popular opinion…from his advocacy of paper currency
(1729) to his efforts to pave the streets and build schools (1750s).”\(^{122}\) Michael Warner describes Franklin’s publications as “an attempt to enact the translation of print rationality into civic virtue.”\(^{123}\) Franklin is trying to be persuasive and move his readers to action, and he is also educating them on what he believes is best for the public. An effort that Warner calls “pure socialization.”\(^{124}\) Todd Thompson argues that Franklin’s ability to persuade from his publications is very much like the ability of a minister preaching to his flock, calling Franklin’s audience “a congregation of readers” a “fellowship” capable of taking action in the “public-sphere.”\(^{125}\) That action focuses on what is best for the public. The interest to do what is best for the public best interest also necessarily means that the individual entity producing information must adhere to the moral condition that the information will prevent harm or cause no harm. This steering of public opinion for the greater good not only is an element of a healthy society needed in at the founding of this country, but also one needed today with social media and the ease in which information is spread. The ease by which information is spread today calls on a high accountability on the part of those who managed mass media platforms for the sake of what is best for the public.

However, doing what is best for the public doesn’t automatically harmonize with totally free speech. What I call regulation in the time of radio and social media, Franklin describes as censorship. Yet, Franklin also accepted the idea that some censorship was a


\(^{124}\) Ibid.

\(^{125}\) Ibid.
necessary practice, that there needed to be exceptions to the rule. Even in “Silence Dogood” number eight, in the middle of advocating for free speech, Franklin provides a caveat:

…without Freedom of Speech which is the Right of Every man, as far as by it, he does not hurt or control the Right of another: And this is the only Check it ought to suffer, and the only Bounds it ought to know.\textsuperscript{126}

The exception that Franklin places on free speech is that it does not hurt or control someone else's rights. Continuing with the idea that Franklin treats free speech as a “sacred” right, these exclusions sound like the Golden Rule – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In other words, I have the right to say what I want as long as it does not cause harm to an innocent person.

In 1731, Franklin addressed the fact that he had been harmed by being censored and condemned for his printing practices to the point he once again turned to his presses and released an \textit{Apology For Printers}. In this publication, he addressed his belief that free speech means equality of speech:

Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter: Hence they cheerfully serve all contending Writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the Question in Dispute.\textsuperscript{127}

Franklin held to the idea that the public could decide for itself what is right and good. Given his trust for the public (notice it is not the government that he applauds), Franklin feels very confident in advocating for free speech. Franklin believed that printers should

not be held liable for what is printed; instead, the source should be what gets judged by the public. The metaphor “don’t shoot the messenger” is aptly applied here. Yet, it is here that I there is some separation between print media in Franklin’s day and social media content of today. Those who run social media sites today have come to terms with the fact that because something can be freely posted on these social media sites, doesn’t mean it should be allowed. If it causes harm, then it is the duty of the mangers of such sites to act accordingly. We have seen this action demonstrated by fact checkers of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. While these sites didn’t create the content, they did censor the content in order to prevent harm.

Franklin’s Apology takes it a step further to suggest that printers don’t even need to agree with what they print necessarily. Again, that is the public’s responsibility to agree or disagree with:

That it is unreasonable to imagine Printers approve of every thing they print, and to censuer them on any particular thing accordingly; since in the way of their Business they print such great variety of things opposite and contradictory. It is likewise as unreasonable what some assert, That Printers ought not to print any Thing but what they approve; since if all of that Business should make such a Resolution, and abide by it, an End would thereby be put to Free Writing, and the World would afterwards have nothing to read but what happen’d to be the Opinions of Printers.128

Franklin ties together the printer’s intent and the spirit of capitalism in his argument for a free press. It is not a good business practice for a printer to only publish what he agrees with or aligns with his own opinions. By so doing, the printer would limit his ability to make his printing press financially successful by excluded potential earnings from those the printer disagreed with, making it much more difficult for the printer to earn a profit. However, the problem with this concept is it conflicts with Franklin’s earlier statement in

128 Ibid.
“Silence Dogood No. 8” when he limits the press by excluding speech that would be harmful or infringe on someone else’s rights. If the intent is to earn a living, the printer would have no problem printing everything and anything to that end. Notice that Franklin does make a distinction between harmful press an offensive press:

8. That if all Printers were determin’d not to print any thing till they were sure it would offend no body, there would be very little printed.
9. That if they sometimes print vicious or silly things not worth reading, it may not be because they approve such things themselves, but because the People are so viciously and corruptly educated that good things are not encouraged.¹²⁹

Franklin understands that if one would try to become “politically correct” by taking the stand that nothing would be printed that was offensive, then there would be no need for printing presses. Anything and everything that gets published has the potential to be offensive to someone else. Can one find the line between what is best for business of media and what is best for the audience? Does the line exist or is it a futile activity because what would be printed would be so watered down it would not be of value to anyone nor persuade anyone to do anything? Radio networks in the wake of the War of the Worlds broadcast demonstrated that there was a line that should not be crossed—anything meant for entertainment should not be styled after real-flash news. Social Media sites today also have determined that there is a line that shouldn’t be crossed—anything that would cause the populous to believe information that would be harmful to their health or could cause insurrection. But this line that was established by modern mass media is also acknowledged by Franklin.

While Franklin does advocate for free speech, acknowledges the exception to the rule of a totally free press:

¹²⁹ Ibid.
...yet Printers do continually discourage the Printing of great Numbers of bad things, and stifle them in the Birth. I my self have constantly refused to print any thing that might countenance Vice, or promote Immorality; tho’ by complying in such Cases with the corrupt Taste of the Majority, I might have got much Money. I have also always refus’d to print such things as might do real Injury to any Person, how much soever I have been solicited, and tempted with Offers of great Pay; and how much soever I have by refusing got the Ill-will of those who would have employ’d me. I have heretofore fallen under the Resentment of large Bodies of Men, for refusing absolutely to print any of their Party or Personal Reflections.130

Now Franklin has taken his “check” on free speech a step further than the Silence Dogood letters. Before, it was anything that was harmful or infringed on another’s rights. Now he exclaims that his own press (one that has been censored in the past) is currently participating in the act of censorship. His exclusions now include things that would endorse vice or immorality. At that moment, his own opinion would determine vice or immorality, and that would then mean that Franklin would print or not print things according to his opinion.

The balance between free speech and censorship that Franklin tried to achieve is still being weighed and judged today. Where is the line? Is the one that Franklin found between speech that was good for the public and what was harmful and immoral one that should be implemented today as with the case of radio regulations after War of the Worlds and social media regulations in 2020? Scholars admit that this balance is challenging to achieve in the public realm that claims to belong to a free society. James Carey observed that “free speech and free press were a little like bargains struck with the devil.”131 Barring any kind of free speech would then open Pandora’s box to include the

130 Ibid.
possibility that any speech can be censored no matter how wholesome, right, or trustworthy it is. The Founding Fathers realized this difficulty and attempted to assuage it with the First Amendment. However, I argue that the First Amendment was not created to provide everyone the liberty to publish anything they wished regardless of the consequences to society. Instead, the architects of the Bill of Rights worked to create a “conversational society.” According to Carey, the intent of the First Amendment is a society of:

People who speak to one another, who converse. Other words might do: a society of argument, disputation, or debate, for example. But I believe we must begin from the primacy of conversation. It implies social arrangements less hierarchical and more egalitarian than its alternatives. While people often dry up and shy away from the fierceness of argument, disputation, and debate, and while those forms of talk often bring to the surface the meanness and aggressiveness that is our second nature, conversation implies the most natural and unforced, unthreatening, and most satisfying of arrangements.

It is that idea of people in a civilized society being able to stop their rhetoric to listen to the persuasive words of others. This concept is something that has seemed to be lost today. Nobody seems to be listening to the opposition’s argument; instead, they are vilified and discredited without listening to the words. The ability to express those words freely is hampered when the conversation is not allowed to happen. The conversation is what the First Amendment intends to protect.

What results in a press that fails to allow the conversation to occur is what Franklin warned against in his *Apology*. That of a one-sided press that only speaks of the opinion it agrees with and omits the rest. Carey continues his argument about the press,

132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
allowing the conversation is what is best for the public’s interest. Carey argues for the participation of the press as a facilitator of the conversation. Mass media today are the facilitators of the conversation and thus have a duty and responsibility to take up the moral mantel that Franklin established to allow for the free discourse of information but to regulate that discourse by preventing speech that is harmful to the public. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they control the conversation, but that they allow this public space to exist free from discourse that is meant to be harmful and generate panic. While I acknowledge that this is easier said then done, the case of the War of the Worlds demonstrates that such regulation is possible. Never since 1938 has such a panic been repeated on the radio waves. Also, social media today is making efforts to allow discourse but also to give the audience the opportunity to seek fact over conspiracy theory. While mass media is a capitalistic venture, those who operate these mediums must balance the need to produce capital with the moral duty to prevent harmful discourse in their public forms.

The one thing that the press cannot do is separate itself from the public arena. Carey describes the relationship of the press with the public as vital it the existence of the press:

The "public" is the God term of the press, the term without which the press does not make any sense. Insofar as the press is grounded, it is grounded in the public. The press justifies itself in the name of the public. It exists, or so it is said, to inform the public, to serve as the extended eyes and ears of the public. The press is the guardian of the public interest and protects the public's right to know. The canons of the press originate in and flow from the relationship of the press to the public.

\[134\] Ibid.
\[135\] Ibid.
Protecting the public’s right to know has been taken today to exclude those that the media does not feel fits the narrative that the media subscribes to. What has resulted from the press forgetting its place as the public's eyes and ears is a press that divides along party lines. There is no conversation and exchange of ideas, so Republicans and conservatives subscribe to right-wing media that does not provide a fair and balanced discussion, and Democrats and liberals subscribe to left-wing media that does the same thing. There doesn’t seem to exist in the press today a place where the whole public can come together and converse; no one is capable of deciding for themselves what is right and wrong; the media has done that already for us.

Benjamin Franklin understood the press's duty to continue the conversation for the public and the government's responsibility not to restrict the press's speech. Today those ideas still exist; however, there is always the danger that the law would limit speech. Daniel Solove argues this point by stating that:

When the law restricts the circulation of information, it creates potential threats to free speech. This is one of the main reasons that the law of defamation and privacy are limited in scope. If the law’s goal is to restrict the spread of information when it causes harm, how can the law do so without unduly infringing upon freedom of speech?\footnote{Solove, Daniel. “Free Speech, Anonymity, and Accountability.” \textit{The Future of Reputation}, Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 125–60, doi:10.12987/9780300138191-007.}

This is the point that Franklin wrestled with: Where is the line? How do you prevent harm without suppressing free speech? Because as Franklin’s own words suggest, there have to be exceptions to the rule of free speech. Solove demonstrates why this line is hard for the government to find:

Freedom of speech gives us the right to express ourselves even if our speech is trivial, despicable, crass, and repulsive. We don’t allow the government to regulate “matters of taste and style” in speech, the Supreme Court has ruled, since “one man’s vulgarity is another’s lyric.” As the
Court also declared, we have a “profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide open.”

Just because I don’t like something that someone else says, just because I may be offended by someone’s words, even if I find those words to be immoral or vain, I must respect the fact that the government would protect that speech. This would mean that Franklin’s line has gone too far. It may be that I believe something is immoral, but someone else believes that it is moral; neither the government nor the press should decide that this is the area where the public should be allowed to converse:

As the law professor Owen Fiss observes: “On the whole does[speech] enrich public debate? Speech is protected when (and only when) it does, and precisely because it does.” In other words, free speech is most valuable when it contributes to public discussion on issues of policy and politics.

Above all, no matter where you or I may believe that line should be, the ultimate goal of free speech is to allow for the discussion on what would make this country better.

Franklin's best exception to the rule of free speech is when harm is involved. Harming someone else with language or using that language to provoke harm on another does not contribute to public conversation and therefore should not be protected by the First Amendment. Solove makes that connection to Benjamin Franklin by using his words:

If by the Liberty of the Press were understood merely the Liberty of discussing the Propriety of Public Measures and political opinions, let us have as much of it as you please. But if it means the Liberty of affronting, calumniating, and defaming one another, I for my part...shall cheerfully consent to exchange my Liberty of Abusing others for the Privilege of not being abus’d myself.

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137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
Protecting the public doesn’t mean keeping the truth from the public (or letting the people decide what the truth is); protecting the public from harm would be of utmost importance, and for Franklin, it is more important than having the privilege of free speech.

If we apply Franklin’s notion of preventing harm, there is still room for free speech, speech that allows the free flow of ideas and discourse. Those who would abuse this freedom should not be allowed the privilege of free speech—even if it were the President of the United States. When the President of the United States incited violence against the citizenry that he swore to protect from harm, should his words be censored? Yes, because they insight harm. He should have taken the position of Franklin—the exception of the rule: Free speech is the pinnacle of a free society, within reason.

In some ways, Franklin’s ideas about how the press and the media should operate are akin to the oath that physicians must take: Do no harm. With the ability to transmit words to a much larger audience today, in order to keep the conversation alive, it is most certainly possible for the media to let the public decide which information is harmful or not worthy to be read. Disclaimers on posts that may be harmful may allow the conversation to happen in the way intended by the Founding Fathers. Above all, we owe it to ourselves, the public, to insist our speech continue to be free, but it is also our duty as the public to keep our fellow citizens from harm and violence. I believe that is the intention of Benjamin Franklin’s advocacy for free speech and the space that he made for the judicious use of censorship.
Fast-forward to 1938 and the ideas of censorship and regulation are called for by those who were *War of the Worlds*:

“How will we know when news is news, or when it is just fiction, if that is an example of future radio programs?” wrote on Mississippian to the FCC. “Evidently the program departments needs a little more censorship.” But that word, “censorship,” with its connotations of political or moral control, obscures what most of the people really asked for. “Regulation” would be a better term. As one Coloradan put it, “Where are our policemen of the air?”

As a personal note, at the beginning of this research project, I very much held to a libertarian view of the freedom of speech. I believed that there shouldn’t be any kind of regulation on speech, however, the events of 2020 and early 2021 as well as the knowledge gained from working on this year long project has led me to the place where I do believe that regulations are needed. In order to maintain a healthy society, I believe regulation of speech in the public arena is not only needed but necessary. Benjamin Franklin understood the idea of limited free speech, not as a way to silence the public, but in order to protect the public from harm. I believe social media platforms are starting to discover the balance between what “sells” and what is helpful. If speech is used to produce panic in the public, then that speech must be regulated to prevent such from happening.

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140 Schwartz. Pg. 246
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