

Conspiracy Theory in the Age of the Internet: The Case of the “Birthers”

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Abstract:

Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," hypothesized a specific genre of rhetoric in American politics that revolved around conspiracy theories: grand, sweeping theories of sinister events. Since Hofstadter's essay, conspiracy theories have flourished more than ever. This paper looks at one of the more recent conspiracy theories in American political rhetoric, that of the "birthers," or people who believe that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States and is thus ineligible to be President. By looking at the web page of one of the major Birther leaders, this paper explains and explores the hallmarks of conspiracy theory rhetoric and hypothesizes about the effects of the Internet on the genre.

Barack Obama's Presidential run, election, and inauguration produced a flood of rhetoric lionizing the first African-American president as a symbol of hope and change in American politics. It also, however, produced a cadre of people who believe that Obama was not, and is not, eligible to be President of the United States. The reason given is that he was supposedly born in Kenya, not Hawaii as he claims, and according to the Constitution a U.S. President must be born in America. People who hold this belief have been generally called "Birthers" in the popular media, although they themselves do not use the term.

There are three main reasons why Birther rhetoric is important to understand. First is the theory's commonness among Americans. An August 2010 poll revealed that 27% of Americans think Obama was either definitely or probably born outside the United States, indicating that Birther beliefs are fairly strongly entrenched (Travis). Second, as the 2012 election approaches and Obama begins to run for re-election, there is sure to be an upsurge of Birther rhetoric. Just recently, Sarah Palin, widely considered a hopeful for 2012, was quoted as saying that the issue was a "fair question" (Baumann, 2009)--an important bellwether for future political use of the controversy. A movement that is relatively widespread and likely to have a large impact on the next election is a movement worth understanding in more detail.

Most importantly, however, Birther rhetoric helps illuminate a genre of rhetoric

called the conspiracy theory. A conspiracy theory is "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end. . . . The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil," explained Michael Barkun in his 2003 book *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. "A conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness" (3). American history is riddled with conspiracy theories, from the belief that President Kennedy was assassinated by the CIA to the belief that AIDS was deliberately created by scientists to the belief that the moon landings were faked. In fact, it has been argued that the United States "appears to be especially fertile ground for conspiracy theories" (Vedantam, 2006). Richard Hofstadter (1964), in his essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," argued that "a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population." He went on to note, however, that certain times and situations might call it forth more strongly: "certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties."

Recent polls indicate that people on both sides of the political spectrum in America have a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories: Brendan Nyhan, a professor of Government at Dartmouth College, has compiled data to demonstrate that while about 28% of Republicans believe it very likely Obama is not an American citizen, about 23% of Democrats believe it very likely that George W. Bush was behind the 9/11 terrorism attacks, a conspiracy theory whose followers are called "Truthers" (Nyhan, 2009). Thus it seems conspiratorial rhetoric flourishes in American discourse, and a better understanding of the genre will help in understanding more about American culture.

This paper gives some background into the Birther conspiracy theory rhetoric by examining the web site of one of its major proponents, Orly Taitz. After giving more detailed information about the roots, origins, and claims of the Birther movement, and describing the genre of conspiracy theory in more detail, I explain how Birther rhetoric fits the genre. By doing this, I hope to better understand a movement that will most likely have a large impact on future American politics, as well as to understand American rhetorical styles better in general. The paper closes with some observations about the effect of the Internet on the growth and propagation of conspiracy theories.

The Genre of Conspiracy Theory Rhetoric

Conspiracy theory rhetoric in the United States has a long history. Hofstadter traced the style as far back as the birth of the nation, in "panic that broke out in some quarters at the end of the eighteenth century over the allegedly subversive activities of the Bavarian Illuminati." Conspiracists attributed the French Revolution to the Illuminati's plotting, and developed an elaborate theory of

a libertine, anti-Christian movement, given to the corruption of women, the cultivation of sensual pleasures, and the violation of property rights. Its members had plans for making a tea that caused abortion—a secret substance that "blinds or kills when spurted in the face," and a device that sounds like a stench bomb—a "method for filling a bedchamber with pestilential vapours."

Conspiracy theories have haunted the United States since its conception, so perhaps it is no surprise that they continue to be common in the modern day. In fact, as will be discussed later, there are compelling reasons why modern life and communication actually encourage the propagation of conspiracy theories.

What exactly is the conspiracist mindset? What marks it as different from more socially accepted ways of explaining the world? Richard Hofstadter noted that one of its major hallmarks is a sense of dispossession and powerlessness.

the modern right wing . . . feels **dispossessed**: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners as of old but major statesmen who are at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high.

Hofstadter was writing in 1964 but it is striking how well this passage applies to the American right wing in the wake of Obama's election. Of course, due to the two-party system both ends of the American political spectrum go through cycles of feeling dispossessed and powerless—it is no coincidence, for example, that the "Truther" conspiracy claiming Bush was behind the 9/11 attacks flourished while Bush was in power and his opponents felt denied of power.

Barkun (2003) summed up the three major tenants of conspiracy theories as

follows:

First, *nothing happens by accident*. "Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence have been removed. Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed" (3). Conspiracy theorists see malign forces where others might see chance, incompetence, or ignorance. Rather than see George W. Bush as ignoring and underestimating the threat from Osama bin Ladin, conspiracists see him as secretly orchestrating the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. As Barkun goes on to note, seeing evil intention rather than accident behind world events can be paradoxically comforting: "it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary. Not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose" (4).

Second, *nothing is as it seems*. The surface events that we all see are merely a facade for sinister designs that lurk beneath. A friendly appearance proves nothing: "the appearance of innocence is deemed to be no guarantee that an individual or group is benign" (Barkun, 2003, p. 4) In fact, a benign exterior may seem to nearly mandate a malign force underneath it. And things that seem malign on the surface are usually even more so underneath to the conspiracist. "Trust no one" was the motto of the *X-Files*, one of the definitive conspiracist television programs, and the modern conspiracy theorist takes that very much to heart.

Third, *everything is connected*. "Because the conspiracists' world has no room for accident, pattern is believed to be everywhere, albeit hidden from plain view. Hence the conspiracy theorist must engage in a constant process of linkage and correlation in order to map the hidden connections" (Knight, 2000, 4). One of the quintessential images of the conspiracy theorist is the wall of clippings and cryptic notes connected by lines or strings that prove everything is part of a gigantic system, everything connected to everything else. As Hofstadter pointed out, "The higher paranoid scholarship is nothing if not coherent—in fact the paranoid mind is far more coherent than the real world." Conspiracists are obsessed with showing connections and links, uncovering the Byzantine web of associations that underpin world events. Hofstadter noted that the paranoid mindset has an "almost touching concern with factuality" that sometimes seems at odd with the "fantasied conclusions" they draw, and that concern is very much in evidence in the writings of the Birthers.

These three qualities can be seen in the announcements and comments made on the web page of Orly Taitz, one of the main voices of the Birther movement. Taitz's page,

at www.orlytaitzesq.com, provides a clear example of conspiracy theory rhetoric hovering on the very edges of respectability in America.

Orly Taitz and the Birther Movement

In June 2008, during the presidential race, Barack Obama's campaign published a scanned image of Hawaii's Certification of Live Birth for the candidate (Helman, 2008). This was done in response to increasing rumors that Obama was not born in Hawaii, but in his father's home country of Kenya. This attempt to head off rumors may have worked for the press and the general public, but it only fanned the flames of conspiracy theorists, who continued to find reasons why Obama's birth was suspicious (Koppelman, 2009b).

The topic of Obama's eligibility simmered through the campaign and the first months of his presidency, but became more prominent in the news in the middle of 2009 due to a few controversial court cases. Three of these cases were prosecuted by Orly Taitz, a lawyer from California. In the first case, *Cook v. Obama*, an Army reservist refused to serve because he claimed Obama was not eligible to send him to war. The case was dismissed in July 2009 when the Army Reserve rescinded Cook's deployment orders (Gordon, 2009). The second case, *Rhodes v. Macdonald*, earned Taitz a stinging reproof along with the dismissal in September 2009, as the plaintiff claimed Taitz had filed the case without his consent. "Unlike in Alice in Wonderland, simply saying something is so does not make it so," stated the judge (Mundy, 2009). The final case, *Barnett v. Obama*, was also dismissed in October 2009 (Holmes, 2009).

This trio of cases ensured that between June and October of 2009, Taitz was making the news with some regularity. She appeared on many talk shows to explain her theories; her news exposure helped ensure that "birther" was one of the finalists for the New Oxford American Dictionary's new word of the year in 2009 (Gross, 2009). However, the series of losses--especially the extremely quotable rebuke in September--as well as some unflattering appearances on talk shows, including one where she called the host a Nazi (Koppelman, 2009a), added up to an increasing sense that Taitz was not a credible source. Perhaps the capstone came when she was selected by *Salon* magazine as the second most crazy person in the United States in 2009 (Birther in Chief, 2009).

Despite the various setbacks dealt to Taitz and her cause in autumn of 2009, she has remained undeterred and committed to exposing what she sees as Obama's falsehoods, filing a new case in early December 2009 claiming that "there was a concerted and a well orchestrated effort by a number of individuals to assassinate my character, endanger my

law license and ultimately derail my case against Mr. Obama" (Wisckol, 2009).

Thanks to her media appearances, Orly Taitz has come to be seen as a key figure in the Birther movement, although her future involvement is questionable if she continues to lose ground both legally and rhetorically. Her web page serves as a gathering point for a variety of people who agree with her beliefs, and is thus a valuable source of rhetoric about this conspiracy theory.

The sample of rhetoric for this paper was drawn from Taitz's web page for June, 2009: a month chosen because it was before any major setbacks happened and the Birther movement was at the height of its power. Most of the material discussed in this paper is drawn from Taitz's own statements and comments; in some cases comments from people other than Taitz are used as examples as well. Taitz is careful to head her web page with a disclaimer that "the articles posted represent only the opinion of the writers, do not necessarily represent the opinion of Dr. Taitz, ESQ, and Dr. Taitz, ESQ has no means of checking the veracity of all the claims and allegations in the articles." Despite this disclaimer, it is sometimes extremely difficult to determine who is saying what on Taitz's site. Some posts appear to be written by other people; others appear to be other peoples' words, re-posted and not clearly marked by Taitz, and some are Taitz's actual words. If not clearly indicated as by someone else, I have taken posts to be by Taitz. As such, statements by people other than Taitz may not reveal anything about her personal beliefs, but they do reveal a great deal about the kind of person who is drawn to the Birther movement and how they see the world.

Birther Rhetoric and Conspiracy Theories

A visitor to Taitz's web page quickly becomes overwhelmed with the sheer amount of information being talked about: dates, places, telephone numbers, historical references and current events fly by in bewildering proliferation. Theories about Obama's parentage abound, as do theories hinting at darker and more malignant possibilities than mere ineligibility. According to the Birther conspiracist, Orly Taitz is a lone figure, a bright spark against an almost impossibly-powerful juggernaut threatening to crush her and all American liberties. The rhetoric on Taitz's site shows the hallmarks of all the major forms of conspiracy theory rhetoric, as illustrated below.

Nothing happens by accident. One of the key tenets of the conspiracy theorist is the belief that there are no coincidences, that everything is part of the larger, malign pattern of force. Events pile up to create the impression of a vast, evil power that controls everything: a world view that is both terrifying and paradoxically reassuring, as it posits a

Manichean world where evil and good are easily-defined, if not easily-recognized. Thus, spotting an article written in an Esperanto magazine about Obama's eligibility prompts musing from Taitz about George Soros, a wealthy businessman, philanthropist, and backer of Obama:

Interesting fact: I am not a linguist, I might be wrong, but I remember reading that George Soros speaks Esperanto (first international language that has a number of Roman languages intertwined in one). From what I recall, his father was an Esperanto teacher and "Soros" is a pseudonim [*sic*], that means "going up", maybe soaring. Incidentally [*sic*] it sounds very similar to "Zoros" which means "bad news", "bad things" in Yidish [*sic*] (a Eastern -European dialect of Ashkenazi Jews, mixture of Hebrew and German). (Article about Obama, 2009)

This kind of statement is classic in its sense of vague menace and hinted connections never clearly spelled out by the speaker. To Taitz, it is not a coincidence that an Esperanto magazine is talking about Obama's eligibility, because Obama supporter Soros speaks Esperanto. Similarly, a supporter of Taitz's notes in comments that they have been attempting to vote on a White House poll to say that the eligibility issue is the most pressing one, but the White House has not yet sent the necessary password: "They're very slow to send passwords to people like us. And yes, I do think they've made a note of my email address and know what I'm going to say" (White House forum, 2009). A computer glitch is ruled out in favor of a cabal of people deliberately tracking, monitoring, and screening select people in order to prevent them from voting in a poll.

At its most extreme, the conspiracy theorist must fear for his or her life, as "accidents" encroach on his or her safety. Automotive troubles become assassination attempts:

A few days ago my husband's car died. It was taken to the shop and they found that a fuse was missing and they could not find that fuse anywhere in the car. At the same time a warning signal went on in my car. It took me a few days to get to the mechanic, as I had to fly to Tulsa OK. When the car was checked on Thursday, they found that a clamp was removed and a vapor emissions hose was disconnected. It caused the gasoline vapors to go to the engine, which could've caused a combustion. My whole family could've died. I reported this to the police. I am preparing dossier #9 with all the details.

Later in June 2009, Taitz also claimed that an assistant to her former client (who had since brought legal action against her to try and stop her from representing him) had been heard threatening her (the assistant's) sister. A week later the sister was dead: "Official cause

of death, from what I understand, is drug overdose. However, drug overdose can be self inflicted or inflicted by others" (I am back, 2009). This information had caused her to fear for her own life:

I got concerned, if this woman could plan a hit, a contract on her own sister, it would not be inconceivable that she would plan a hit on an attorney and her family, if this attorney outed her.

To the conspiracy theorist, dark designs work to hinder or harm the cause of the truth at all times. Coincidence falls away in favor of a belief in signs and portents, hidden messages and deeper meanings. As Taitz notes when talking about an important upcoming court date: "I am no historian, but from what I remember July the 13th is the eve of the Bastille day. Is that a sign?" (Please come, 2009). Nothing is random.

Nothing is as it seems. To the conspiracy theorist, evil lurks behind a friendly face, and behind unfriendly faces is malignity beyond comprehension. Barack Obama is nearly a perfect example of this. One of the common tropes of the Birther movement is to list Obama's "other names": Barack Hussein Obama, or Barry Obama, as he was known in college, or Barry Soetoro, as he was known when he lived in Indonesia with his stepfather. Far from being a natural result of complicated family circumstances and shortening an unusual name into a more common nickname, these different names reveal a fundamental duplicity at the heart of the President, a dark and malign shadow behind the smiling public face. As such, most Birthers will refer to Obama as "Barry" or "Soetoro" much of the time, symbolizing his essential untruth.

Everything about Obama's life hides disturbing, deeper truths. One of the more popular rumors about Obama in Birther circles is that he has had former gay lovers assassinated:

To be quite honest, I am less concerned with Sanford's affair with a Latin beauty, as I am with Larry Sinklair's reports about Donald Young being Obama's homosexual lover and being found shot in the head execution style at the onset of the Democratic Primary. The same happened to yet another gay parishioner of the same Trinity church and Chicago PD sits on it's [*sic*] hands and provides no answers. (Dangerous liasons, 2009)

Of course, one of the most common arguments about Obama is that behind his Christian facade is an Islamic extremist. Yet strikingly, the accusation appears nowhere on Taitz's blog in June 2009. Part of the reason for this is that it's taken so much for granted it no longer needs to be discussed. It comes up here and there, for example in a post where a reader of Taitz's blog pointed people to a story about a ruling against public Christian

proselytizing: "With major American Muslim festivals comes the ban on Christian free speech. A sign of what's coming to America" (From WND, 2009). The underlying assumption was that Obama is working to stifle Christian expression and encourage the Islamic faith. In another post, Taitz suggested a variety of Birther bumper stickers, including "Obama Bin Lyin'," a pun on "Osama bin Ladin" and an equating of the two (Need help, 2009). When people frequenting Taitz's site began to suspect the web page was being targeted by the government in a cyber-attack, a reader noted: "Isn't this what the Iranian mullahs are doing to their people right now?" (Obama, 2009). The title of the post: "Obama got great education, our level of freedom of speech is on the level of Iranian mullahs" made clear the connection--Obama has learned from his Islamic masters how to stifle freedom of speech. All of these statements assume the audience is fairly certain of Obama's secret Islamic agenda.

Evil hiding beneath a fair facade often compounds the sense of danger for a conspiracy theorist. After Taitz posted about receiving death threats, one of her supporters noted darkly: "Think twice before you hire security...unless they are family or you know them personally. Your opposition would love to provide your security. I think you are already aware of recent 'suspicious deaths'" (Threats, 2009). Because all traditional institutions have been infiltrated, the conspiracy theorist cannot trust the government, the police, the hospitals--all are potentially working to destroy the conspiracy theorist.

Everything is connected. Perhaps the most fundamental tenet of the conspiracy theorist is that all events, however small or seemingly disconnected, tie into the vast conspiracy. When conspiracy theorists appear on television shows or parodies, they always come with a large chalkboard of notes or wall of clippings, everything connected by elaborate lines or pieces of string. The discussions on Taitz's web page in June are no exception. On June 7, Taitz reposted a story from a web page discussing how FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) would be doing exercises on U.S. soil with soldiers from other countries. "Rumors of foreign troops on our soil have been circulated for a long time," stated the story, "BUT this is not a rumor. It is a blatant fact as stated by FEMA on their government website. THIS IS AN INVASION" (FEMA martial law exercise, 2009). While not busy preparing to invite Mexico to invade the U.S., Barack Obama is apparently "planning to murder millions of Americans with deadly swine flu vaccine" and kill or imprison his opponents in concentration camps (Does anyone, 2009). He also is working hard to perpetuate the "hoax" of global warming (This article, 2009)

The "everything is connected" rule is perhaps best exemplified in a post by Taitz

on June 27, in which the conspiracy theorist's dazzling leaps of logic and intuition are on excellent display. To summarize the tortuous reasoning: Taitz found a woman named Phyllis Albriksten in Washington who was listed with the same social security number as Obama's mother. Taitz called the woman and the woman said she actually had a different social security number (implying a clerical error). Skeptical of such a simple explanation, Taitz engaged in some guessing:

So, what does it mean? Did Stanley Ann Dunham use Albriksten's name in conjunction with her SS number? Did somebody with an access to Dunham's SS number saw Albriksten's name in an old year book and decided to merge two together to create a record? Who could it be? One wild guess? For what purpose? (Important-WA connection, 2009)

Taitz then searched for the last name "Albriksten" and found someone (not the person with Obama's mother's social security number) who worked for a company called "Ecoworks." In her post Taitz breathlessly explains the significance of this connection:

I found the most amazing information that tie the Albriksten family right back to Obama through the "ECOWORKS FOUNDATION! (...and Al Gore!) Ecoworks Foundation happens to be the *lead investor* in a development project in Northeast [sic] China to develop a prototype of a sustainable rural village! (Sounds like something that Stanley Ann would be a part of!)

To the conspiracy theorist, facts that seem random become linked in sinister significance: someone with the same last name as someone who owns a company that works in China was listed as having Obama's mother's social security number once. This confirms for the conspiracy theorist that there are secret connections lurking everywhere, part of a bigger picture only the enlightened can possibly puzzle out. The question that Taitz asks rhetorically: "For what purpose?" remains unanswered.

Conclusions: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet

As Hofstadter notes, conspiracy theories have been a staple of American rhetoric throughout its history. Indeed, the human brain's tendency to form connections and see patterns may mean conspiracy theories are an unavoidable byproduct of the cognitive process. However, in recent years the Internet has led to an explosion in conspiracy theories. The reason is simple: the Internet makes it possible to find people who agree with nearly any theory, no matter how outlandish. As a result, conspiracy theorists no longer have to feel like lone voices in the wilderness. If the theory is something that a fairly large number of people believe in, something that is openly discussed in mainstream

media--most recently talk show radio host Rush Limbaugh has semi-seriously discussed it (Chalt, 2010)--then there will be enough people on the Internet who believe it to create the impression that one is part of a huge movement. Barkun notes that

one effect of the Internet is to obscure the distinction between mainstream and fringe sources; another is to bind together individuals who hold fringe views. The validation that comes from seeing one's beliefs echoed by others provides a sense of connection for otherwise isolated individuals. Excessive claims have sometimes been made for "virtual community," but surely one effect of the Internet is to confirm and embolden those whose beliefs normally receive scant social reinforcement. (20)

The Internet becomes a vast "echo chamber" in which the conspiracy theorist can find people whose views are the same and receive encouragement. Inevitably, if the groups receiving support are ones a person agrees with, the Internet seems to be a helpful, supportive place. But when one finds groups of people receiving affirmation and support that one considers wrong, whether it be support for Birthers, for gay teens, or "pro-ana" communities (groups of people with eating disorders who encourage each other to lose more and more weight), the Internet becomes a more onimous place indeed.

A more complicated reason that the Internet may foster conspiracy theories lies in the fact that the architecture of the Internet reflects and mimics the very things that make conspiracy theory thinking work. Specifically, the system of hyperlinking--the endless unraveling web of pages that loop back and repeat each other and connect in strange and unexpected ways--replicates the conspiracy theorist's suspicion that everything is connected, that there are mysterious patterns running through information. Mark Fenster explains that

the ability of web pages to "link" to one another has enabled the emergence of a never-ending hypertext network where the interested can endlessly track theories about historical or recent events from site to site, finding duplicative and often conflicting information from one place to the next. Conspiracy on the Web serves as a visual representation and experience of the endless interperative process of conspiracy theory, forever suggesting new links to follow and information to appropriate. (184)

The implication is that over and above providing a place to gather and find like-minded people, the Internet *functions like a conspiracy theory* in its very structure. The redundant, recursive links encourage the feeling that everything is connected, that there is more than meets the eye, that there are no coincidences.

Because of all this, it seems clear that Birther and other conspiracy theories may well be a permanent fixture of life in the Internet Age. Conspiracy theories have haunted

American rhetoric since the country's inception, but now that the Internet is creating linkages between people and ideas around the world, we may be entering the Golden Age of the conspiracy theory. Now more than ever it becomes important to understand and explain conspiratorial thinking and discuss and clarify when it appears. The alternative is a public discourse increasingly dominated by paranoia and polarization.

Richard Hofstadter foresaw and summarized the problem succinctly in 1964 when he wrote about the vicious cycle of conspiracy theorists who see themselves as marginalized and shut out of the political system.

A distinguished historian has said that one of the most valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do *not* happen. It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop. He has a special resistance of his own, of course, to developing such awareness, but circumstances often deprive him of exposure to events that might enlighten him—and in any case he resists enlightenment.

Conspiracy thinking creates citizens who see patterns and demons where there are none. In this age of the Internet, where people can mobilize their forces much more easily than ever before, conspiracy theorists and their struggle with demons only they can see can affect the general world more than ever before. We cannot afford to dismiss such thinking as "crazy" and resist enlightenment ourselves.

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