
Trust No One (on the Internet)

The CIA-Crack-Contra Conspiracy Theory and Professional Journalism



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This article examines the “metastory” surrounding Gary Webb’s 1996 “Dark Alliance” series as a moment of crisis in mainstream journalism. Two forces converge in Webb’s series and its aftermath: (1) establishment journalism confronts and manages the reemergent phenomenon of conspiracy theory, and (2) establishment print-based journalism attempts to organize a relationship with the emergent medium of the internet. When these two forces collide in the profession, conspiracy theories and the web end up mutually defining each other. This problematization of a conspiracy theory has multiple effects—not only in disqualifying the story itself but in reshaping the profession of journalism in its relation to new technology. Eschewing technological determinism, this article demonstrates how a new technology is made sensible through a professional discourse as a way of making it manageable. In turn, professional journalism operates as technical expertise in a liberal political rationality of “governing at a distance.”

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In the first weeks after September 11, 2001, a number of commentators called attention to the swirling rumors and proliferating conspiracy theories about the attacks (see, e.g., O’Leary 2001; Tyrangiel 2001). While official rumors (health panics, specific warnings about vague new attacks) were spread by mainstream news outlets, popular rumors were attacked by those very outlets. In particular, the internet was cited as a catalyst for the rapid deployment and wide circulation of unreliable information. The articulation between untrustworthy narratives and this new medium could be made so smoothly because it had already been performed for a few years. This article examines an early moment where professional journalism, the internet, and irrational narratives converge, specifically around the CIA-Crack-Contra story.

Dark Alliance

From August 18 to 20, 1996 the *San Jose Mercury News* published a three-part investigative series called "Dark Alliance" authored by award-winning reporter Gary Webb. The series was simultaneously posted on the *Mercury News* web site, with links to court transcripts, photographs, other investigations' results, and congressional reports. In the series, Webb reported that throughout the early and mid-1980s, Nicaraguan cocaine traffickers Oscar Danilo Blandon and Norwin Meneses, high-ranking agents of the reactionary antigovernment Contra movement (formed, trained, and financed in part by the CIA), sold cocaine in the United States through "Freeway" Ricky Ross and funneled profits back to the Contras. Webb argued that the crack explosion in Southern California was significantly propelled by the activities of Meneses, Blandon, and Ross (who became one of the largest crack distributors in Southern California) and thus indirectly by the Contra movement. The direct role of the CIA in this sordid endeavor was left to suggestion: the agency would not return Webb's requests for information, and he was content to establish its supervising relationship with the Contras.

The general narrative linking the CIA to the Contras and both to cocaine trafficking was nothing new.¹ However, the Webb series introduced a number of new inflections. First, Webb brought this foreign policy story home, tracing the disastrous effects of the CIA-Crack-Contra nexus on one U.S. city, Los Angeles. In addition, Webb's access to Ricky Ross, the L.A. drug dealer who provided key distribution networks for the suppliers, gave the story an insider dimension unseen before. During Ross's trial, Webb also convinced Ross's attorney to ask certain questions of Blandon on the witness stand, yielding sworn testimony that Webb could use as evidence in his series. These developments contributed to the detail and thoroughness of Webb's story, but more important than the power of the narrative itself was that a well-respected regional daily newspaper published the narrative. A well-publicized three-part series in the *San Jose Mercury News* gave the account a potential legitimacy and circulation it did not previously have.

In this article, I assess the "metastory" surrounding Webb's series as a moment of crisis in mainstream journalism (Kornbluh 1997, 33). Two forces converge in Webb's series and its aftermath: (1) establishment journalism confronts and manages the reemergent phenomenon of conspiracy theory, and (2) establishment print-based journalism attempts to organize a relationship with the emergent medium of the internet. When these two forces collide in the profession, conspiracy theories and the Web end up mutually defining each other. As I will show, this problematization of a conspiracy

theory has multiple effects—not only in disqualifying the story itself but in reshaping the profession of journalism in its relation to new technology.

Eschewing technological determinism, this article demonstrates how a new technology is made sensible through a professional discourse as a way of making it manageable. New media, then, partially receives its meaning and organization through an already existing discourse, journalism.² I am taking journalism (to paraphrase John Tagg [1998] on photography) as one of “the very conditions which furnish the materials, codes and strategies of” internet practices, “the terms of their legibility, and the range and limits of their effectiveness” (pp. 64-65).³ In turn, I show how professional journalism operates as technical expertise in a liberal political rationality of “governing at a distance.”

Piling on the Counterattack⁴

When the “Dark Alliance” series was first published, there was resounding indifference on the part of the major dailies including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. According to media critic Ben Cosgrove (1996), “the only thing more chilling than the story itself is the East Coast media establishment’s stunning inattention to this still-unfolding debacle.” Rather than expanding on the *Mercury News* series and pursuing its leads, major newspapers ignored it. Instead of disputing Webb’s claims as “false,” which would mean bringing the claims into a regime of verifiable truth, the print media generally employed a tactic of neglect. The *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* posted their first stories almost a month after the original series—around the time Webb started making the rounds on CNN and *CBS Morning News*—while the *New York Times* took almost two months.

What happened during that period is crucial to this event. The story began to circulate in nontraditional sites of news production, or what Jon Katz (1992) called “New News” (p. 33). Talk radio (primarily African American oriented), tabloid television shows (Montel Williams did a two-part series), and the internet extended the story’s life; the internet, especially, generated newsgroup discussions, e-mail list serves, and an ever-expanding network of web links (Shepard 1997). As journalist Peter Kornbluh (1997) argued, the

wildfire-like sweep of Dark Alliance was all the more remarkable because it took place without the power of the mainstream press. Instead, the story roared through the new communications media of the Internet and black radio—two distinct, but in this case somewhat symbiotic, information channels. (p. 34)

The *San Jose Mercury News* web site began receiving an extra 100,000 hits per day, at one point having 1.3 million (Kornbluh 1997, 34). Mainstream journalism, in this case, did not give the story "legs" (the active efforts by professional individuals, institutions, and media outlets to extend a story). Normal channels of news transmission were superseded by user interactions with the internet.

Mainstream disregard for the story could not last for long. The increasing visibility of Gary Webb, the growing new-media-fueled outrage in African American communities, and the prominent media campaign by U.S. Representative Maxine Waters began a groundswell that could not be ignored. At that point, establishment journalism's tactics largely shifted from neglect of the story to attacks on the agents of its production (Webb and the *San Jose Mercury News*).⁵ Deeming it a journalistic "pacification program," Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair (1998) called the denunciation "one of the most venomous and factually inane assaults on a professional journalist's competence in living memory" (p. 29). In the following sections, I examine two main targets of this counterattack: (1) how the story violated truth-telling protocols of journalism to the point of being labeled a conspiracy theory, and (2) its online presence.

Conspiracy Theory and Reasonable Truth in Reporting

Much of the criticism of Webb and the *San Jose Mercury News* was directed at the alleged "shoddy" reporting and editorial practices that went into producing the story. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* depicted Webb's story as lacking evidence and being unfounded (see Heyboer 1996; Solomon 1997; Cockburn and St. Clair 1998). Webb and the paper, critics charged, violated journalistic responsibility by implicating the CIA without a "smoking gun" *definitively* proving the agency's complicity in the drug smuggling (Cockburn and St. Clair 1998, 395). Far from carrying out their own investigations, many newspapers made a priori judgments on Webb's findings, dismissing them even before the CIA and the Department of Justice conducted their own in-house investigations.⁶ Reverting to the professional protocol of relying on official sources, the major dailies now cited those "close" to the story, even if unnamed (Golden 1996). According to a *New York Times* statement, "our best sources say that the CIA was not a major factor in the crack epidemic" (Katz 1996). Their "best sources" were identified as CIA officials.

Lack of facts and official denials became the litany indicting Webb's narrative. No critique interrogated the conditions of truth telling, including uncooperative official sources, vested interests, and generalized institutional secrecy. Even though Webb's published findings were tame com-

pared to his original version (the story went through massive editing and toning) and to others' more dramatic claims about the CIA's role, the story was still dismissed as speculation, "fantasy" (White 1996; Massing 1999), "myth" (Britt 1996), and a revamped "rumor" (Beato 1996; Cohen 1996). Conjecture, the argument ran, was not the investigative journalist's job.⁷

Even more fatal were denunciations of "Dark Alliance" as a "conspiracy theory" (Fletcher 1996; Mitchell and Fulwood 1996; Yoder 1996; Morris 1996; Wood 1996; Maxwell 1996; Overbeck 1996; Lane 1996a; Editorial, *Tampa Tribune*, 1996; Beltrame 1996; Head 1997; Hinckle 1997; Jurkowitz 1996). Such speculations, earlier discredited for violating journalistic protocol, were now depicted as the irrational fantasies of a political paranoid. After "Dark Alliance" was published, House Representative Maxine Waters, who spearheaded the demand for a formal congressional investigation into Webb's claims, was called a "conspiracy theorist" (Parry 1998c). And Howard Kurtz (1996) snidely remarked in one of his numerous attack pieces on Webb and the *Mercury News*, "Oliver Stone, check your voice mail."⁸ Attacks often attributed claims to Webb's "conspiracy theory" that the series never made: the CIA was directly responsible for the crack epidemic; the agency deliberately introduced it into African American communities.⁹

The most explicit way Webb's story was marked as a conspiracy theory was through the claim that "Dark Alliance" incited "black paranoia" (Cockburn and St. Clair 1998; Naureckas 1997; Knight 2001). This black paranoia was not simply defined as a collective psychological condition—it was given historical and social underpinnings (Terzian 1996a; Claiborne 1996; Editorial, *Boston Globe*, 1996; White 1996; Kempton 1996; Lane 1996b; Mitchell and Fulwood 1996; Britt 1996; Maxwell 1996). Black paranoia was a significant object of concern in the 1990s, not only with the CIA-Crack story but also in relation to AIDS genocide narratives (Asim 1993; Bock 1994; Brown 1996; Cathy Clark 1995; Cheryl Clark 1992; Deparle 1991; Mungen 1997; Tucker 1995; Yoder 1991).¹⁰ Because of this history, argued Richard Cohen (1996), "a piece of black America remains hospitable to the most bizarre rumors and myths—the one about the CIA and crack being just one" (p. A21). In general, these mainstream accounts treated the belief systems of African Americans as "sociological curiosities" (Naureckas 1997). Such appeals to social and historical contexts made the CIA-Contra-Crack theory intelligible and worked to explain the occurrence of *prima facie* misguided theories.¹¹ And, in Gary Webb's case, fanning the flames of "race paranoia" was further evidence of an egregious violation of journalistic protocol.

Ultimately, the mainstream press, according to *New Times Los Angeles* journalist Rick Barrs (1996), argued that "Webb had overstepped the bounds of journalistic ethics and fueled genocide theorists in black

communities." The response to Webb's story was geared toward discrediting him as well as the *San Jose Mercury News*, as their "procedures were unacceptable" (Adams 1998), and they "went too far" (Rieder 1997b). "Lack of evidence" was not interpreted as an investigative opportunity but as a transgression of journalism's codes of conduct and truth-telling procedures. In sum, any dispute over facts was imbued with the defense of journalism's professionalism.

The attack on Webb's evidence had less to do with the truth value of the claims than with the very forms of truth telling allowable in professional journalism. As Peter Kornbluh (1997) argued,

The furor over "Dark Alliance" and the mainstream media's response to it dramatically raise the issue of responsible and irresponsible journalism—particularly in an era of growing public cynicism toward both government and the institutional press. For many in the media, Webb's reporting remains at the core of the debate over journalistic responsibility. (p. 39)

What counts as evidence and responsible reporting? What counts as an authoritative narrative? These questions depend on the "game of truth" situated in the professional setting of journalism, hence such factors as the reliance on official sources for credibility and the permissible boundaries of speculation for reporters (Foucault 1988). While journalism is not isolated in its practices (i.e., it is embedded in relations with corporate interests and the state), its self-defined occupational concerns about autonomy shape knowledge conditions specific to the profession. Later I will discuss this commitment to a professional, "autonomized" expertise as an important dimension of liberal governance.¹² Now, I turn to how Webb's story was linked to a rise of "conspiracy theorizing" in the 1990s, and in turn this theorizing became intertwined with the very definition of new technologies.

Conspiracy Theories and the Internet

The discrediting of Webb's account as conspiracy theory came at an interesting moment in mid- to late 1996, when conspiracy theories were a hot topic in journalism.¹³ The crash of TWA Flight 800 had occurred only one month before, sparking numerous alternative accounts of the plane's demise. Even before the joint investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board and the FBI was fully under way, the official story was that mechanical failure had caused the crash off Long Island. Others speculated that a bomb on the plane caused the crash or that Arab terrorists shot the plane down with a surface-to-air missile (Hidell 1997). The most publicized counternarrative was promoted by one of journalism's own eminent

representatives, Pierre Salinger.¹⁴ Armed with a portfolio of documents, Salinger held numerous press conferences where he hypothesized that U.S. naval exercises off the Long Island coast had gone awry, with an errant missile hitting the plane. Salinger's early evidence was drawn from a document circulating on the internet and confirmed by unnamed intelligence sources.

"Dark Alliance" and Salinger's TWA Flight 800 story were linked in numerous articles and broadcast news segments (Beato 1996; Alter 1997; Witkin 1997; Roeper 1997; Canon 1997). These and other "paranoid" theories were declared "emblems of the times" (Berg 1997) and part of an "age of conspiracy" (Alter 1997). Joel Achenbach (1996), in the Style section of the *Washington Post*, wrote that the Salinger and Webb stories were examples of a "time besotted with Bad Information." At this historical, premillennial juncture, the pundits claimed, it had become difficult to distinguish good information from bad, as even conspiracy theories could appear seductively logical and objective. To avoid the seduction, Achenbach (1996) pleaded, a "controlled skepticism" is required to distinguish legitimate knowledge producers (especially journalists) from pretenders and "information manipulators." Unlike journalism's problematizations of other conspiracy theories, the Salinger and Webb cases represented the profession's *own agents*. It was harder to reject a conspiracy narrative as "other," when respected journalists—themselves experienced adherents to journalism's truth-telling practices—were its authors. So the object of concern became the internet, and transgression became not authorship but internet involvement in the construction and dissemination of conspiracy narratives.

For instance, the "African American paranoia" that Webb's story allegedly fueled was linked to the increased usage of the internet to spread the story. Jack E. White (1996) claimed that, while black conspiracy theories were long-standing, what was new was that the CIA-Crack story "spread via a new black lane on the information superhighway" (p. 59). White went on to make sense of the internet *through* these conspiracy theories, stating that the "'Black telegraph'—as some African-Americans call the informal word-of-mouth network they've used to keep in touch with one another since the days of slavery—has moved into cyberspace" (p. 59). White defined the Black Telegraph, which includes both talk radio and cyberspace, as "a font of bizarre fantasies" (p. 59). The internet here takes on the characteristics of an already subjugated "informal" communications or rumor network, the home of "conspiracy mongers . . . fanning the flames" (p. 59). This new technology, then, was rendered intelligible as a space of rumor, gossip, urban folklore, and fantasy.

Salinger's story also involved the internet. According to Jodi Dean (2000), "Conspiracy's haunting of some media accounts of the Internet"

begins around the time of the Salinger story (p. 66). While Salinger himself argued that his account and the evidence for it came from a French intelligence source, news accounts focused on the prior circulation of the narrative on the web. Tom Teepen (1996)'s Cox News Service article, calling the friendly-fire scenario absurd on its face, blamed the internet: "Certainly the media explosion, its new vents often unstaffed by sober gatekeepers, is a vast petri dish for growing foul cultures. Even legitimate journals wind up reporting wildfire charges because their currency in other media becomes news" (p. 17A). Salinger's persistence continued to provoke responses from mainstream journalism. In early 1997, *60 Minutes* presented a segment on the Salinger story. Journalist Cathy Young (1997) called the broadcast "an alarmist report on the Net as a haven for conspiracy buffs" promoting "a new flurry of concerns about whether the Internet is a source of valuable information or of paranoia-fueling junk" (p. A7). In essence, mainstream accounts argued that while a conspiracy theory may in itself be based on "bad information," it is made even more "foul" because it circulates through an untrustworthy medium. Salinger's story thus joined Webb's CIA-Crack-Contra story to create a moment where journalism problematized conspiracy theories, the internet, and their mutual affinity.

Even before the Webb and Salinger stories, the articulation between conspiracy theories and new technologies had already been made in journalism.¹⁵ The articulation between conspiracy accounts and the internet continued after the Webb controversy.¹⁶ But the Webb story is different insofar as the confluence of these two phenomena became the very defining feature of the "Dark Alliance" series. It is to this simultaneous attack on Webb and the web that I now turn.

A number of journalists went beyond criticizing Webb's story by finding fault with the story's online presence (Cohen 1996; Golden 1996; Kurtz 1996; Achenbach 1996; Shaw 1997; Canon 1997). According to G. Beato (1996), newspapers did not go far enough in criticizing Webb's story. They attacked it only at the level of evidence, overlooking "one of the most significant aspects of the Dark Alliance series: that it achieved at least as much of its impact from its presentation as it did from its content." Beato specifically cited the Web incarnation as the problem, disparaging it as something "you might find on the Fox network." The *Mercury News* article contained "twenty-something grunge typography and . . . free-wheeling sensationalism," producing an "x-appeal and a decidedly tabloid TV sensibility" geared toward "post-Cronkite conspiratainment buffs." The *Mercury News*, according to Beato, was "savvy enough to capitalize on" the web's penchant for housing conspiratorial rumor mongering, mentioning that the paper had been a pioneer in moving print-based journalism into cyberspace (it was the first U.S. daily to establish a significant online presence). It is no accident, Beato claimed, that the paper used the CIA-Crack-

Contra story, "so pregnant with newsgroup innuendo, to serve as the foundation for its most ambitious online presentation to date." Once again, conspiracy theories and the internet inextricably form an organic synthesis, in which the characteristics of each resonate with, and determine the qualities of, the other.

This connection was continued in a *Los Angeles Times* article called "Cyberspace Contributes to Volatility of Allegations." According to Eleanor Randolph and John M. Broder (1996), Webb's story was "a case study in how information caroms around the country at whiplash speed in the digital age," and the use of "the World Wide Web to disseminate the story's material may have contributed" to the misinterpretations (p. 14A). The article even quotes the *Mercury News's* internet director asserting that conspiracy theorists "are well-represented in the online world," as if to anchor the articulation between conspiracy narratives and the internet through one of the accused agents in this articulation (p. 14A). Randolph and Broder warn that this "volatile effect of combining reporting, high-decibel promotion and the global reach of the World Wide Web" will need to be confronted by news producers (p. 14A).

Beato (1996) echoed this warning when he claimed that the story's "official nature, as well as its sheer bulk, gave [it] a mantle of well-documented legitimacy." For Beato, this "information overload has always been a standard technique of conspiracists."¹⁷ This dissemination of info-glut makes the web "the conspiracist's medium of choice." The internet "reduces an investigative journalist's ethical responsibilities" and therefore the "new capabilities of this medium—its speed of transmission, its capacity for targeting receptive audiences, and establishing real dialogue—are powerful attributes that call for unusually high levels of responsibility and restraint." Beato can make this technologically determinist statement, however, only after saturating the technology with intelligibility through its link to conspiracy theories. Defined as a "hotbed" (Fallows, in McChesney 1997), "fertile ground" (Lasica 1996), or "medium of choice" for conspiracy theories (and other amateur knowledge), the internet is in this way made meaningful for the profession of journalism.

The Net and Journalism: Crisis Online

Rendering the internet intelligible was a primary concern for journalism at this time. According to Cockburn and St. Clair (1998), "Webb's series coincided with the coming of age of the Internet," when the establishment press had to "face the changing circumstances of the news business, in terms of registering mass opinion and allowing popular access" (p. 30). Webb's story was a sign of the "looser standards" that came with online journalism and constituted a danger to traditional investigative journalism

(Hanson 1997; Weinberg 1996). Just a few months after "Dark Alliance" was published, J. D. Lasica (1996) wrote an extended piece for the *American Journalism Review* on the crisis of going online. Lasica posed apocalyptic questions like "What will be the role of journalists when anyone with a computer and modem can lay claim to being a reporter? Will professional journalists be needed in an era when people can get their news 'unfiltered'?" (p. 20). But by the end of the article, this threat of extinction subsides, as Lasica finds not just hope for survival but a chance for the profession's renewal. Because the internet offers new interactivity and interconnectedness, "journalism needs to look at the Net not as a threat but as an opportunity to repair our strained public relations" (p. 30).

The internet as both threat and promise is reiterated in 1997 by David Shaw (1997) of the *Los Angeles Times*:

There is no clear agreement among editors on how best to capitalize on—but not be cannibalized by—this powerful new medium. This is a problem . . . of how to maintain the core function, values, and identity of a newspaper while taking advantage of the interactivity, synergy, graphic display and unlimited space the Internet offers. (p. A1)

This double valence, I argue, is resolved through a reinvigoration of the profession's authority, especially a reaffirmation of its gatekeeping function in the public sphere of rational knowledge.

In 1995, the president and CEO of the Associated Press gave a keynote address at the Interactive Newspapers Conference emphasizing the need to establish trust online; this sentiment was echoed by many other editors (Fitzgerald 1995b, 34). Journalists "must not let themselves be seduced into dropping their own standards," the CEO argued, because "journalism still carries the responsibilities that journalism has always carried" (Fitzgerald 1995a, 31). To avoid this technological allure and preserve the profession's credibility, *Interactive Week* editor-in-chief Gary Bolles called for journalism to reinvigorate its filter function by creating "trust circles" amid the flood of new digital information (Fitzgerald 1995b). An advertising framework was suggested, in which newspapers (and even individual journalists) would function as "brand names" with high trustworthiness quotients, producing brand loyalty that will retain newspapers' credibility (Fitzgerald 1995b).

Even after the Webb story's peak, J. D. Lasica (1997) argued that "in the still-evolving conventions of this young medium, we should embrace the enduring standards and values of traditional journalism: editorial integrity, balance, accuracy, respect for others and fairness" (p. 52). Staci D. Kramer, then chair of the Society of Professional Journalism's Task Force on Online Journalism, argued that the

organization's traditional code of ethics is a good place to start. Its tenets are direct and clear: Seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable. . . . We need to remember: Common sense doesn't leave the room when online journalism comes in. (in Lynch 1998, 42)

It is not surprising that the profession would affirm its basic principles. The important point here is that the threat of new technology was being handled through an even stronger affirmation of the profession's values and codes, as a way of reestablishing a waning authority.

The events surrounding Webb's story mark a moment where the internet medium, the journalism profession, and conspiracy narratives converge. The metastory around Gary Webb's exposé emerged when journalism was experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. This was a self-problematization in which the profession reflected on how its codes and protocols would encounter the new technology of the internet. Mainstream journalism, concerned and even anxious about its relation to the new medium, charges it with being the chosen medium for unreliable fantasies of conspiracy theories. Reciprocally, the untrustworthiness of these theories' information is not just inherent in the theories themselves—they are untrustworthy precisely *because* of their circulation on the internet.

Coding the Net

The internet, in this professional narrative, is coded as anarchic, turbulent, and disorderly. Just before the Webb series was published, *New York Times* staff writer Eleanor Randolph (1996) declared that "the Internet is a medium defining itself, an untamed universe that has yet to be domesticated by any of the newspapers, magazines, television networks and other entities experimenting with online products" (p. A1). In a similar vein, Philip Terzian (1996b) asserted that "the Internet . . . refuses to be tamed," in an editorial that mentions the proliferation of conspiracy theories. He describes the net as

essentially subterranean, a kind of drainage system. It seems to be a sort of space-age labyrinth: slow, overweight, haphazard and confusing, leading to no concrete destination. Its aptitude for good has yet to be proven; its power to do harm is still brimming with potential. (p. 31A)

And Catherine Ford (1997), discussing the relationship between the internet and conspiracy theories, claims that

much of [cyberspace] is raw copy—unedited, uncensored and unfiltered. It is the perfect forum for liars, cheats and megalomaniacs; the perfect outlet for

those whose opinions are so beyond the pale that no reputable publication would touch them. . . . If television is entertaining into ignorance, cyberspace is informing us into anarchy. (P. B3)

The internet is thus both excess (too much information careening with wild abandon) and lack (of ethics, filters, trustworthiness). Cyberspace is an untamable, irrational world, swirling with disorderly forces and dangerous unlimited possibilities.

In a curious way this new medium is defined as a "state of nature," an unrestrained and therefore ungovernable form of freedom. We can see this articulation between ultramodern technology and undomesticated nature in the mid-1990s proliferation of "Wild West" metaphors applied to cyberspace and the internet.¹⁸ This was especially true for analysts looking at how journalism would deal with the new technologies (Markoff 1994; Randolph 1996; Rieder 1997a; Blumenthal 1997; Shaw 1997). "Bringing the gray lady to the Wild West Web," as journalist Laura Italiano (1996) eloquently put it, would mean taming the unbridled information flows through the application of professional protocols. Lacking the reasoned responsibility that has come to define modern rationality, the internet functions as the ghost of the premodern that liberalism has constantly tried to ward off.

In this case, coding the internet as "out of control" smoothly leads to a conception of it as *needing* control. The wild world of cyberspace (particularly wild because of the unfiltered, even irrational, theories abounding in it) requires professional taming. These protocols would preserve journalism's professional credibility while allowing journalism to synthesize with the emergent technology. Faced with a new development in the amateurization of news and information circulation, and fearing the loss of credibility as a filtering function, this unbridled technology is domesticated through the reaffirmation of the reasoned truth-telling protocols of journalistic practice.¹⁹

For journalism the development of the internet was not simply a technological breakthrough in a history of progress. It was also a disruptive force, a threat not only in the usual sense (the hand-wringing sentiment "no one will read print journalism anymore") but also to the very *integrity* of journalism as a profession.²⁰ I am not arguing that these understandings indicate a technophobic reaction by print-based establishment journalism. Mainstream journalism exhibits not an aversion to the new technology but an attempt at a controlled incorporation of it. What is at stake is *how*, not *if*, these new technological practices will be incorporated into journalistic practices. This annexation requires a set of problematizations of the technology in order to make it intelligible and therefore manageable.

These problematizations affect the very material, organizational relationship between journalism and the internet. It is an articulation that both

gives a meaning to the technology and reorganizes the profession itself. In a double movement, the technology's meaning is fixed by its use as journalism's discursive threat, even as journalism reinstitutes its legitimacy against that particular meaning. The problematization of the internet *by* journalism, then, is also the self-problematization *of* journalism. By constructing the internet in this way, journalism also authorized itself to intervene, to alter the internet and itself, to freshly articulate itself to this new technology.

Journalism as a Profession

As a professional institution, journalism has a specific set of effects on the internet. But how rigidly can the category of "profession" be applied to the various practices that compose journalism?²¹ While the definition of a profession remains a contested subject (see Larsen and Olav Olsen 1996; Abbot 1988; Starr 1982), considerable scholarship tracks the *effort* by journalism to constitute itself as a profession. Michael Schudson (1978) traced the historical emergence of "objectivity" as the journalistic ideal that gave journalism coherence as a profession.²² Schudson, examining Walter Lippman's writings, argued that this concept of objectivity was an attempt by journalism to professionalize itself through the scientific method.²³ Training procedures, barriers to entry, and recognized credentialization processes were other features used by journalism—as by all other true professions—to achieve professional sovereignty or autonomy. This self-conscious process of "autonomization" consumed journalism's leaders in the first half of the twentieth century.

Journalism also sought autonomy through the development of an ethical vision. Douglas Birkhead (1984) argued that journalism took on a moral and ethical component since a "vision of responsibility could distinguish a profession even in an industry" (p. 10). But this project would never be fully realized, according to Birkhead. Instead, "journalism would be destined to a perennial state of semi-professionalism, to a continuous dynamics of emerging professionalism, to a faith in a 'spirit of professionalism,' rather than in the exact example of the established professions" (p. 11). It is this very flexibility, this incessant self-modification, I argue, that allows journalism to adapt to such new conditions as the internet, and thus to persist.

As an ongoing exercise in professionalization, journalism engages in a form of self-reflection: it takes itself as an object of concern. These self-problematizations take place through a variety of mechanisms and institutional sites. Among the more formal mechanisms are professional associations (newspaper guilds, editors' societies, publishers' associations), conferences, codified guidelines for reporting and editing, journals and reviews, in-house manuals, popular books, trade publications, and pedagogical training programs in institutes and academic departments. More

informal, everyday occupational practices also contribute to this professionalization. Among these are the daily ad hoc editorial decisions in any given newsroom, self-regulated procedures of reportage, layout and design decisions, the exertion of publisher controls, unstated assumptions about the role of corporate advertisers, and debates about these matters on editorial pages.

At stake in these sites is the collective definition of journalism as a profession. As a profession, journalism seeks to develop a series of competencies, a technical expertise, a professional acumen (e.g., "news judgment"). The result is a set of relatively coherent practical techniques that come to constitute professional consistency (no matter how loose and alterable). Journalism *rationalizes* itself, giving itself cohesion, integrity, and a purposeful social function. These reflections may revolve around the profession's social and political role. They may also focus on its relationship to its readership, to citizens in general, and to government and corporate interests. Reflection is often organized around the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, creating an ongoing series of defenses of "freedom of the press" and free speech as a way of preserving the profession's autonomy. Regardless of the content of these reflections, this process of self-problematization itself acts as a *form* of professional self-constitution in which journalism gains autonomy through rationality (both as reasonable truth telling and as self-regulating institution).

From this professional-discursive perspective, the discrediting of Webb's story follows from journalism's self-regard as a profession, whose protocols and technical expertise have been transgressed and must be reauthorized. Webb and the *Mercury News* are depicted as violating the rules of good journalism and are taken to task for it by their peers. The story becomes a nodal point around which the profession reaffirms its values and procedures. In addition, positioning the CIA-Crack-Contra story as "conspiracy theory" (i.e., as outside journalism's game of truth and as irrational) affirms the *rationality* of the profession's protocols. Finally, as I have shown regarding the net, discrediting "Dark Alliance" for its online presence is a professional concern, especially since the profession was redefining itself vis-à-vis new technologies.

Freedom and Responsibility

The problem now is how to code the journalistic internet as a public space, as a free space in the marketplace of ideas, yet one still isolated from the seductive wild world of technological excess. Autonomy of the profession must be preserved, while thwarting the unbridled anarchy of unregulated thought and action. To this end, freedom itself is rejuvenated as liberal rights and responsibilities.

The value of freedom attached to technology is still freedom of the press in its classic liberal sense. This process assumes the negative definition of freedom in which freedom *from* state intervention is a given: the profession's leaders never suggest that a responsible internet will come from state regulation (see Fitzgerald 1995a, 1995b; Lynch 1998; Lasica 1996, 1997). Reviving journalism's position in public affairs thus requires not only "that the rational order of civil society be contrasted with the irrational disorder of natural society . . . [but also] between civil society and political society, that is, between civil society and the State" (Hardt 1995). The freedom of the cyberpress is defined traditionally, as an *internal* issue, not an issue for legislation or censorship. Journalism, in this way, remains protected from external encroachment.

With freedom defined as an in-house matter, a second, technically positive version of freedom can be promoted. Embedded in the profession's protocols, codes, and rules for professional conduct, this notion of freedom provides a range of possible actions for subjects as long as they operate by the rules. As journalistic agents carry out their duties, professional freedom is intertwined with responsibility.²⁴ Taming this unruly cyberspace requires the bolstering of professional protocols of truth telling, by journalism's responsible subjects.

Freedom and responsibility are likewise intertwined in concepts like "journalistic ethics," "news judgment," and "professional conduct," which all work to produce a kind of reporter who operates through authorized procedures of knowledge production. As Michael Parenti (1993) argued, among others, reporters do not need direct censorship. By treating their "self-censorship as a matter of being 'realistic,' 'pragmatic,' or 'playing by the rules,'" reporters learn to regulate themselves (p. 41). By doing so, journalists recognize that their public duties "require the exercise of greater responsibility" (Nerone 1995, 51-52).

The notion of responsibility, endemic to journalism's historical professionalization, operates through everyday practices to produce self-monitoring journalistic subjectivities (autonomized reporters, editors, even readers). This applies to forms of journalistic truth telling as well, insofar as freedom entails truth and reason (in journalism's case, objectivity, balance, and the reliance on official sources). Journalism's agents are "responsibilized," which conditions the freedom espoused by the profession (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996, 12).

Because of this entangling of freedom with reason under the sign of responsibility, untempered denunciations of the *Mercury News* story became possible, indeed mandatory. Being an irresponsible account irresponsibly connected to an irresponsible new medium, Webb's story functioned as a kind of test case for an internet-journalism coupling. The test case revealed excess: excess that needed to be curtailed even as professional

freedom through responsibility was reaffirmed and reinvigorated. Official journalism, via its articulation of the internet to conspiratorial fantasy, reiterated its professional values by binding freedom to responsibility and liberty to duty under the flag of reason. Freedom, still defined by journalism's professional codes and practices, remained intact, as did those codes and practices themselves.²⁵

Beyond the Sectarian: Governing and the Regime of Truth

One could argue that the journalistic issues emerging in the CIA-Crack-Contra metastory were simply a hermetic occupational debate, a cyber version of familiar, parochial intrainstitutional turf wars. By this account, professional envy—the fact that a regional newspaper scooped more prestigious ones—explains why established news organizations had to discredit the *Mercury News* (see, e.g., Barrs, 1996). But the CIA-Crack-Contra metastory transcended the isolated concerns of a single profession to open a broader set of issues.

It is not enough to leave this analysis at the intrainstitutional level, an in-house approach that reduces journalism to an occupational activity, rather than treating it as a social and political force. The professional regulation of, and struggles over, journalistic knowledge production are *specific* battles about wider truth-telling practices. According to John Tagg (1988), "What give such sectional actions a wider significance are their precise positions . . . in the 'political economy' of truth in our society, [in] . . . 'a regime of truth'" (p. 94).²⁶

Journalists have come to define themselves as professional gatekeepers for the marketplace of ideas, allowing some claims to participate in truth telling while excluding others (Nerone 1995). We can see these broader effects if we return to Walter Lippman's writings on how to found and authorize journalism as a profession. Lippman (1955) argued for a liberal conception of freedom based on detachment from the irrational and attachment to scientific principles. A profession, then, is not isolated and purely autonomous: by drawing from broader social values of reason, freedom, responsibility, and truth telling and then reinvesting those values through concrete occurrences, the profession of journalism is caught up in a larger social assemblage. Furthermore, its very effort at autonomization places journalism in what a number of thinkers, following Michel Foucault's work on governmentality, call a liberal art of governing (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; T. Miller 1998; Rose 1999; M. Dean 1996; Foucault 1991, 1997; Gordon 1991).

In its practice of autonomization, self-reflection, and deploying freedom through responsibility, journalism enacts a form of liberal governance. This

style of governing, or political rationality, contains a notion of freedom that is not "equated with anarchy, but with a kind of well-regulated and 'responsibilized' liberty" (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996, 8). At least since John Locke, according to Barry Hindess (1996), governmentalized freedom has been linked to the "use of Reason" (p. 129). In Hindess's view, developing "appropriate habits of thought and behavior" is crucial to liberalism's "indirect regulation" (pp. 129-30). Liberal political rationality thus signifies both a form of governing (governing at a distance, indirect regulation) and its content (a subjectification that relies on the exercise of reason). Liberal governing through reason requires a modicum of freedom entwined with a responsibility guided by rationality.

Crucial to a history of liberalism as a political rationality is "the question of the relation between the mutations of politics and the history of systems of expertise" (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996, 7). In a liberal ethos of governing,

the activity of rule must take care to observe and maintain the autonomy of the professions and the freedom of the public sphere from political interference. Thus, in the process in which intellectuals and scientists act as critics of the State, they can none the less serve to act in the interests of good government. (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996, 10)

This autonomy of the professions is not opposed to governing; autonomy is a crucial component in its calculation.

The professionalization of journalism can be seen as an institutionally specific enactment of this liberal ethos. Incessantly clamoring for freedom from direct forms of state intervention and historically attempting to carve out its own autonomous, hermetic space (detached from various interests and based in a notion of responsibility and reason), journalism autonomizes itself through the techniques of professionalism. Nevertheless, because its freedom is well regulated (by its own professional protocols) and responsibilized, its autonomy is still well within the liberal art of governing. As Michael Schudson (1978) argued, Walter Lippman's faith in science had a political valence: "As absolutism falls . . . science rises. It is self-government" (p. 125).

As a scientific endeavor, the journalistic profession is self-monitoring and self-regulating such that recourse to state intervention is rarely needed.²⁷ Through its incessant self-problematizations, the journalistic profession can still claim its moral function as the "agency for integrating a complex society" (Birkhead 1984, 4). Birkhead's thesis that this professionalization is never fully realized makes it all the more effective as liberal governance, which as a *practical activity* of rule requires flexibility and adaptability to new circumstances. The recurrent self-reflective ethos

of professional journalism provides an incompleteness that makes it more effective as a self-governing institution.

In the case of the CIA-Crack-Contra metastory, this professional autonomization operated successfully. There was no need for direct state intervention into the matter (e.g., preventing the *Mercury News* from publishing Webb's story). Instead, the responsabilized profession could act to dismiss the story via its protocols of truth telling. As a conspiracy theory, Webb's story violated both the rules of reportage and of reason and was therefore untrustworthy (i.e., unprofessional). A well-regulated and responsabilized liberty, tied as it was to the profession's scientific procedures of rational knowledge production, still guided journalism's activities.

Autonomization and flexibility were at work in defining the internet as well. Through its provisional disruption and eventual restabilization, journalism bolstered its authority and integrity as a profession in the face of a technological "state of nature." Empowered with the innovative ability to destabilize itself to adapt to new conditions, professional journalism carried on its "action at a distance."

And there are even more explicit possibilities for professional journalism's general effects: for example, expertise "render[s] reality thinkable and practicable, and constitut[es] domains that are amenable—or not amenable—to reformatory intervention" (Rose 1996, 42). Government does not take place on naturally given or unmediated objects: rather, "expertise plays a part in translating society into an object of government" (p. 13). With regard to the CIA-Crack-Contra metastory, we can see the ability of expertise to create a governable domain. Journalism problematizes the internet by attributing certain meanings to it, namely, as a space of untrustworthy uncontrollable information practices and, more important, as the "medium of choice" for conspiracy theories. This problematization of the internet contributes to ongoing crises and panics over the new medium and adds to the debate around state regulation of cyberspace (around issues like pornography, pedophilia, hacking, and online extremism). As Laura Miller argued in 1995 (specifically with regard to the "Wild West" metaphor), "The way we choose to describe the Net now encourages us to see regulation as its inevitable fate" (p. 51). Defining the internet as the home for the dangerous ideas of political paranoids can provide the conceptual conditions for policies and laws that boost surveillance and intervention into cyberpractices, with the rationale of controlling excessive, extremist speech. I am not arguing that this kind of direct linkage occurred, nor that journalism's articulation of the internet as a dangerous site was itself original. Rather, as a discourse that rendered the internet intelligible, the profession of journalism contributes to a larger set of social and political activities.

Journalism's professional sphere is therefore not simply an in-house affair. Its effects include a reaffirmation of journalism's specific position within a larger politics of truth (especially narratives about state practices) and a continuation of the professional and/or technical expertise function in a liberal style of governance.

Conclusion

As Jodi Dean (2000) argued, the articulation of conspiracy rhetorics to the World Wide Web "places the question of the terms of truth and trust at the center of debates around the Internet and the World Wide Web" (p. 62). This was certainly the case when professional journalism dealt with the reemergent phenomenon of conspiracy theories and the newly emerging internet. Moving print-based journalism into cyberspace required that the space be defined and proper use circumscribed. The profession of journalism, through an affirmation of its core values, made sense of the new media in a way that made cyberspace more hospitable to journalism going online. And these values (responsibilized freedom, reasonable truth telling) were enacted over against transgressors like Gary Webb and the *San Jose Mercury News*.

The CIA-Crack-Contra metastory represents a recent historical "success" of the dominant. Journalism, through an isolation and privileging of certain cyberpractices, bestowed a meaning and coherence to the internet congruent with its own historical ascendance as a profession. In doing so, the profession was able to reinvigorate itself as an autonomized practice in a liberal art of governing.

But this consolidation of a dominant internet practice, and along with it the restabilization of journalism as a profession, is never final. The profession's moments of disruption are not simply internal disturbances—they mark the battles that *produce* a provisional victory. This provisional victory can occur only through a subjugating strategy that affirms the power relations involved in the production of professional knowledge. In other words, the crisis over the public that accompanies journalism's professionalization is not guaranteed to relegitimate itself.

Reviving professional protocols has a political and popular dimension, as the threat of amateurization comes to the foreground. Gary Webb, as a transgressing journalist, was merely an internal scapegoat, a figure who needed to be expelled from the ranks for his transgressions. However, had the story not spread through the internet by way of its amateur practitioners, this scapegoating might not have been necessary. Webb's story might have remained an obscure deviation from the official line on the CIA's relationship to the Contras and their drug sales, and disappeared into the vast dustbin of journalistic history. Professional journalism encountered the

amateur in its ranks: not Gary Webb per se but the untrustworthy knowledge production, irrational truth telling, and irresponsible cyberpractices that followed "Dark Alliance." This anxiety over the public fueled the attempted stabilization of professional journalism, just as this anxiety marked the birth of the profession.

Journalism's relationship to the public, to readers as political subjects, is cast in doubt as the vocation's authority is challenged. Will science prevail in saving the reading public from themselves? This was Walter Lippman's concern in the early days of professional journalism and continues to this day. Only now, the amateur is immersed in new technologies whose ability to enhance new forms of association is not so easily captured by professional protocols.

As journalism reaffirms its protocols of scientific knowledge production and while the internet's meaning is not yet solidified, it is important to follow cultural battles, changing conditions, and provisional victories. By closely tracking such events we can understand the historical success of the dominant as contingent in order to mark the struggles that comprise current contexts.

Notes

1. In 1985, Associated Press (AP) reporters Robert Parry and Brian Barger broke the story in an AP dispatch (Kornbluh 1997; Parry 1997a). A year later, the Christic Institute conducted investigations into the relationship between the agency, the Nicaraguan anticommunists, and cocaine's infusion into the United States as a component of the Iran-Contra affair. Christic's legal brief and video documentary *Coverup* set the template for future research into CIA-Crack-Contra research. The link between the CIA, drug smuggling, and support of anticommunist insurgent groups is even older. As the Christic Institute's findings point out, many of the major players in Iran-Contra were involved in running heroin from the "Golden Triangle" (Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) to the United States in the early to mid-1970s and using the profits to support anticommunist fighters in the region. For an earlier version of this research, see Alfred McCoy's (1972) *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*. The Senate Committee Report headed by John Kerry in 1989 indicated that CIA agents had knowledge of Contra cocaine smuggling. *Cocaine Politics* (1991) by Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall elaborated Christic's findings, as did numerous articles in such progressive magazines as *Covert Action Quarterly*, *The Nation*, and *In These Times*. For an overview of some of this progressive literature, see Vankin (1996), especially pp. 186-201; see also <http://www.copvcia.com/> for an archive of this literature. Celerino Castillo, former DEA agent, wrote of his firsthand experience in *Powderburns: Cocaine, Contras and the Drug War* (1994). Bill Clinton's potential role, both as governor of Arkansas, where the city of Mena was allegedly a major stopover for Contra cocaine smugglers, and as president, was investigated in Terry Reed and John Cummings's *Compromised* (1995) as well as in an ongoing series

in the *Arkansas Gazette* from 1988 through 1991. And the narrative circulated outside of published works, informally among African Americans on what Patricia Turner (1993) called the "black grapevine" (see especially pp. 180-201) and in visual culture (like the movie *Panther*).

2. A similar approach can be found in Michael Warner's (1990) *Letters of the Republic*, in which the history of print technology is bound up with, and given meaning by, the political and symbolic contexts in which the technology comes to be what it is. John Tagg's (1988) work on photographs also provides a useful framework that avoids technological determinism. Bringing Warner's historical account of print's symbolic contexts together with Tagg's genealogy of the discursive and institutional conditions of a medium's emergence works against the grain of technological determinism.

3. Obviously, journalism is not the only, or necessarily the most important, discourse about the internet. There are a number of contexts and actors that have contributed to making the internet intelligible and coherent, including corporate, state, and media/cultural contexts. A context not often analyzed could be called the professional-discursive. I am examining the profession of journalism as a discursive context for the internet. While journalism certainly contains elements of the above contexts (corporate, state, cultural), its professional practices and institutional skirmishes have their own specificity, especially insofar as the profession historically constituted itself in order to be distinguished from the other forces.

4. For a more detailed account of this counterattack, see Cockburn and St. Clair (1998, esp. chap 2), Solomon (1997), and the various articles published by Robert Parry in the *Consortium* (see Parry 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

5. The effects of this attack became very plain. For example, *Dateline NBC* canceled its follow-up segment on Webb's series after the counterattack began.

6. These internal investigations validated most of Webb's claims and produced even more admissions. In May 2000, CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz released the third volume of a report from a four-year in-house investigation on the relationship between the agency, the Contras, and crack cocaine. According to Peter Dale Scott (2000), the reports acknowledge that

the CIA made conscious use of major traffickers as agents, contractors, and assets. It maintained good relations with Contras it knew to be working with drug traffickers. It protected traffickers which the Justice Department was trying to prosecute, sometimes by suppressing or denying the existence of information. (P. A19)

This report followed two previous reports acknowledging that, indeed, Contras financed themselves through cocaine sales in the United States and listing about fifty participating Contras. The CIA, in these reports, worked with more than half of them even after becoming aware of their drug trafficking. The reports also revealed that the Reagan administration (specifically the Department of Justice) protected these activities by giving the CIA clearance not to report any knowledge of them. Taken together, the reports, even with their heavy redactions, present more charges than Webb's relatively tame series.

Not surprisingly, the major daily newspapers generally ignored the reports' release. When they *were* reported, the findings were sanitized and downplayed; the

New York Times, for example, cast the CIA in a passive role (as “ignoring” or “failing” to investigate the drug-trafficking allegations) (Parry 1998a). In addition, the *New York Times*, even though it knew the basic findings of the reports, chose to publish an unfavorable review of two books (*Dark Alliance* by Gary Webb [1998], and *Whiteout* by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair [1998]) that reached many of the same conclusions as the official report. The reviewer, James Adams (1998), deemed the two books “unsatisfactory” and their claims of a CIA cover-up “laughable” (p. 28).

7. Lack of follow-up prevented substantiation or verification of some of Webb’s claims, and ultimately *Mercury News* publisher Jerry Ceppos (1997) printed a correction apologizing for the story’s lack of safeguards against misinterpretation. In a display of buckling to pressure from the more established newspapers, Ceppos’s correction (which was not a retraction) eventually led to Webb’s reassignment and resignation. Not surprisingly, Ceppos’s correction garnered front-page coverage. When Ceppos became upset at how his statement had been interpreted as a retraction by the mainstream news organs (especially the *Washington Post*), he wrote a letter of response and clarification. The *Washington Post* refused to print it.

8. Oliver Stone has become a cultural icon and punchline for all theories conspiratological. Specifically, this association references an earlier battle in which journalism took part. The release of Stone’s film *JFK* initiated a vicious offensive by many journalists who argued that popular culture had no business treading on journalism’s professional turf in interpreting news history and contributing to collective memory (for an analysis of this turf war, see Zelizer 1992; Simon 1996). Similar “conspiracy theory” epithets were hurled at Stone’s work, and this controversy, according to Jon Katz (1992), was indicative of a new crisis in journalism between old news and new news.

9. This kind of attack followed almost inevitably from mainstream journalism’s consensus on earlier claims of a CIA-Contra-Cocaine nexus. When John Kerry’s congressional report on Contra drug links was released in 1989, *Newsweek*’s “Conventional Wisdom Watch” captured the media’s reaction in its labeling of Kerry as a “randy conspiracy buff” (Parry 1998b).

10. I analyze the stakes of this problematization of black paranoia for Leftist politics and cultural studies in Bratich (2003).

11. As I have argued elsewhere (Bratich 2001), this is a cultural approach in which conspiracy accounts are still symptoms to be read, products of social and cultural conditions—or expressions of frustration, oversimplified and channeled in the wrong direction. Rather than address the truth claims of those beliefs, media reports looked for their rationale outside of the claims themselves, in historical experience or social conditions. It was taken on faith that none of the claims made were credible; it is only the *emergence* of the claims that needs to be addressed.

12. In the Webb case, press-state relations are important, and not just in the propaganda model offered by Chomsky and Herman (1988). For Cockburn and St. Clair (1998), the presence of former CIA operatives on the staff of the major news organs may have contributed to the vociferous defense of the agency and the vitriolic attacks on Webb. In addition, the disclosure (in the *New York Times* no less) that “the Agency has ‘owned or subsidized’ more than 50 newspapers, news services, radio stations, periodicals, book publishers, and other communication entities, most of which were overseas” has solidified this government-media connection (Lee and Solomon 1990, 117).

13. This is not to say conspiracy theories were not problematized earlier in the decade. As mentioned above, the denunciation of *JFK* as a conspiracy theory was prominent in the early 1990s. Also, 1995 saw a flurry of analysis on the "conspiracy culture" allegedly sweeping the United States. Much of the attention was focused on the militia movement, depicted as the most visible and dangerous consequence of conspiracy theorizing.

14. For an elaborate treatment of the friendly fire account, see James Sanders (1997).

15. Conspiracy culture in general was linked with the net (Mashberg 1995; Timko 1995; McClellan 1995; Leiby 1995; and, for a transatlantic perspective, Westley 1995). Within days of the Oklahoma City bombing, militia uses of the internet were a hot topic in journalism (see especially Egan 1995; Glass 1995; Rich 1995; Saunders and Globe Staff 1995; Sauer and Okerblom 1995; as well as the 1995 network news segments "Terrorism over the Internet" on *ABC World News Tonight* and "Militia Groups Use TV and Internet to Spread Their Message" on *CBS Evening News*). The net was claimed to be the newest technology used to spread terrorist and militia messages (along with more traditional means like magazines, pamphlets, videos, books, and particularly shortwave radio). Concern about militia threats online was not reserved for mainstream journalism; such publications as the *Village Voice* chimed in on the post-Oklahoma City debate (Davis 1995).

16. The speed with which conspiracy theories surrounding Princess Diana's death emerged and spread was attributed to online circulation (see Belsie 1997; Colker 1997). The life and death of Heaven's Gate members was also added to this mix as another example of cyber perniciousness (see *New York Post* Staff 1997).

17. This critique of conspiracy narratives as overload of data is *itself* a standard technique of disqualification. Here, the glut is seen as a dangerous swarming multiplicity that begs for filters, standards, and techniques of discrimination, best provided by professionals.

18. Coding the internet as the Wild West had numerous semiotic valences. From the generally positive views of the internet as a site of experimentation (Elrich 1995; Impoco 1996; Crowley 1996), business prospecting (Verity 1994; Elsworth 1996; August 1997), and libertarian frontier possibility (Leo 1995) to the panic rhetoric around business dangers (Reuters dispatch 1995; Pegoraro 1997), cyber war (Editorial, *Economist* 1996), and cybercrime (Myer 1995; Editorial, *Newsweek* 1994; Reynolds 1995; G. Miller 1996; Editorial, *Washington Post* 1995), the Wild West metaphor proliferated. By late 1996, however, there were calls to abandon the metaphor in favor of more ordered and lawful cyberspace (Humphrey 1996), and by 1997 declarations were made that announced the end of the Wild West mentality (Neuwirth 1997; Editorial, *Washington Post* 1997; Richtel 1997; Campbell 1997). Even then-president Clinton employed the trope in declaring that "our task is to make sure that it's safe and stable terrain" (for e-commerce) (Baker and Chandrasekaran 1997). For an account of how this metaphor operates with regard to hackers, see Taylor (1999).

19. Across the Atlantic, the coding of the Web as anarchic in order to be governed is made more explicit. Jim McClellan (1995) argued that while the "Net is clogged with paranoia" and "bona fide daft ideas," "if it could just get beyond moral panic and conspiracy paranoia, the Internet could play a crucial role in doing something

about this sense of 'disaffiliation' and actually involve people in some sort of 'process of governing'" (p. 63). The internet here is given both a technological subjectivity and positioned as a force of liberal subjectification (getting political subjects to participate in government).

20. *Integrity* here refers to its two definitional components: (1) soundness, wholeness, structural consistency and (2) moral uprightness, honesty, truthfulness, and trustworthiness.

21. As Michael Parenti (1993) argued, "Reporters and editors who say they are guided by professional integrity and journalistic standards of autonomy and objectivity have rarely, if ever, defined what they mean by these terms. 'Professional integrity' remains largely unexplained and somewhat contradictory" (p. 59).

22. This ideal functioned to distinguish journalistic practices from their dependence on corporate interests and governmental influence, as well as from popular will. Objectivity also arose as a way of overcoming subjective biases and their undesirable public consequences (loss of faith by readers, general disintegration of democratic consent) (Schudson 1978, 156-58).

23. Michael Schudson (1978) noted that Walter Lippman furnished "the most sophisticated rationale for objectivity as an ideal in journalism":

Lippman's prescription for the ills of journalism was science. He believed that the pursuit of scientific method in journalism would make the press not only more professional, but also more liberal and heroic. Liberalism meant openness, he wrote—remaining free in mind and action before changing circumstances without being paralyzed by skepticism. The person taking on the liberal spirit makes an effort "to remain clear and free of his irrational, his unexamined, his unacknowledged prejudgments." (Pp. 154-55)

For an analysis of how Lippman's call for a rationalized profession was predicated on moral panics and conceptions of an unruly public, see Gretchen Soderlund (2001).

24. This link is strongest in the "social responsibility" theory of the press, which promotes "a liberal hostility to government, a liberal faith in reason, [and] a liberal belief in private property. Social responsibility is clearly a species of liberalism, as the label 'neoliberal' implies" (Nerone 1995, 99). Journalists define their social role as "gatekeepers," as having the power "to regulate the marketplace of ideas on behalf of the public" (p. 52).

25. In addition, other versions of freedom involved in journalism, such as wider participation in the production of news, or increased access to information about state practices and to decision making, is left unattended at best and specifically subjugated at worst.

26. According to Foucault (1981),

In societies like ours the "political economy of truth" is characterized by five historically important traits: "truth" is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to a constant economic and political incitation (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of an immense diffusion and consumption (it circulates in apparatuses of educa-

tion and information whose extent is relatively wide within the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media . . .); lastly, it is the stake of a whole political debate and social confrontation ("ideological" struggles). (quoted in Tagg 1988, 172)

27. This is not to say that the state exerts no influence on journalistic practices, especially during wartime military management (although some might argue we are in a state of permanent war). However, this is primarily done through journalism's *own* professional protocols (e.g., the reliance on official sources). This way, state dependence can be enacted and justified as an internal rule, rather than as an external imposition.

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