

Joining the Conspiracy¹

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Abstract

Accompanying the accusation of malevolent political conspiracy is the accusation of cover-up of these conspiracies by leading institutions of public information; mass media and national law enforcement. A common response to this accusation is that these institutions of public information will reliably reveal such political conspiracies, not cover them up. Unfortunately, the best arguments for this hope are now widely recognized to fail. Further, cover-up does not require descending control of the media by conspirators. The problem is much more complex, one endemic to our information hierarchies. This includes the mechanisms generating the epistemic problem of toxic truths. “Toxicity” is the likelihood that some conspiratorial scenarios, even if well evidenced, are too “toxic” for our usual institutions of public information to disseminate to the public, or even investigate. Cover-up by intentional neglect, not descending control, is the easily predictable consequence. The threat this poses to a functioning democracy is significant.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, Media, Cover-up, Toxic truths, Unaccountability

*“Pay no attention to that
man behind the curtain”.*

L. Frank Baum, 1900

1. Introduction

What if our institutions of public information do not always have the ability to expose malevolent conspiracies, worming their way through our society with vast consequences? What if, worse, even given this ability, these institutions often have compelling, society-regarding reasons not to publicly reveal these conspiracies? The epistemology of these two problems is distinct but closely related: The first concerns certain common arguments for the claim we should be confident that institutions of public information can and will reliably reveal ambitious or “momentous” conspiracies; the public trust approach (PTA) and its

¹ Juha Räikkä points out that this title might be construed as an intentional act. It is not meant to be. As we will see, we can join conspiratorial scenarios intentionally or inadvertently.

supporting claims. The PTA asserts that in Western style democracies, for institutional motives of revelation, conspiracies seriously subversive of our democratic institutions will be reliably (not inevitably) exposed by the mainstream media and national law enforcement. The second concerns the unwillingness of these institutions to do so in certain society-destabilizing scenarios or worse, establish society-destabilizing patterns of revelation. In what follows, we will epistemically examine and relate both.

Toxicity is a set of truths (or at least well justified or warranted assertions), or a temporal pattern of such, that if convincingly revealed by mainstream news outlets and national law enforcement within a certain, relatively proximate time frame to the events in question (a) would with some significant probability (not restricted to 50% or more but often higher) be extremely socially and/or politically disrupting and (b) in many cases this consequence is easily foreseeable by any reasonable person conversant with the current civilization (the “person on the street” criterion).

We will explore and defend the following thesis: Contrary to the PTA, toxicity predictably and in crisis scenarios powerfully constrains publicized mainstream media investigations as well as those of National law enforcement when (b) is also met, for instance in the hypothetical case of a “false-flag”, massive attack on civilians. This is the inversion of the public trust approach. This is clearly an important thesis for social epistemology, and for further research, both analytical and empirical.

Questions like “Who is responsible for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq?” immediately invoke epistemology: *How* do we tell who is responsible? In the case of the Iraq war, this question is especially difficult. Not just because fully grasping the complex moral controversy between the United States’ system of global power and hostile groups is difficult, but because ascertaining the critical but merely descriptive facts is also an intricate epistemic challenge. *Mechanisms of unaccountability* emerge quickly in our society, one so hierarchical. This conundrum is not unique to the Iraq war. America’s previous major war suffered the same. Historians now deny the reality of the official precipitating event of the Vietnam conflict, the March 4th, 1964 gulf of Tonkin attack on US Naval forces. In a now declassified report, National Security Agency analyst Robert Hanyok writes,

As much as anything else, it was that people knew President Johnson would brook no uncertainty that could undermine his position [...] despite doubts [about the reality of the attack], people in the defense and intelligence communities kept their silence [...]. The over-whelming body of reports, if used [by the government], would have told the story that no attack had happened. So a conscious [governmental] effort ensued to demonstrate that the [Tonkin] attack occurred (Hanyok 1998: 39).

This is an institutional conspiracy theory, and apparently a true one.² We must ask: How much unrecognized and so, unchecked, power derives from the very

² Hanyok’s NSA analysis of signal intelligence decisively points to a conspiracy in the US military and intelligence communities to hide the facts of Tonkin on August 4th, 1964. Many other academic historians independently reached the same conclusion prior to NSA declassification in 2005. Hanyok’s account is, by our best current analysis, a conspiracy theory. I define “conspiracy theory” as a causal explanation of events that ap-

existence of such institutions? And even if recognized, how are our institutions of public information, media and law enforcement, likely to respond? Let us focus on the latter question, though the former will, like dogs driving sheep, impel us throughout.

The truth of what did not happen in the Tonkin gulf is what I term “toxic”, undermining the plans of the Johnson administration and Nixon’s to follow, the international and domestic credibility of the United States Federal government and therefore the righteousness—if such is possible—of a brutal war with northern Vietnam, in which more than one million humans eventually died. So it was suppressed in a conspiracy involving dozens if not hundreds of high-placed, high-powered, patriotic, well-educated public professionals.³ A conspiracy never exposed in the mass-media during the events, and only surfacing in a weak and parenthetical way more than 30 years later to little or no public interest; it was “ancient history”. All somewhat unsettling. What does this mean for the needs of democracy?

2. The Public Trust Approach

Conspiracy is dangerous to democracy. David Coady reminds,

Democracy requires that voting be conducted freely, and freedom requires a degree of accurate information about one’s choices; political conspiracy, which inevitably reduces or distorts such information, is therefore in conflict with the ideals of democracy (Coady 2007: 195).

The danger is real. This lies at the heart of anxiety over one form of conspiracy most everyone acknowledges, *election fraud*. Mainstream accounts of recent history reveal that high-level conspiracies happen with disquieting frequency—Watergate and the Pentagon’s deceitful conduct of the Vietnam war are obvious, well-researched examples—and that similar conspiracies may even be the basis of more recent policy—the launching of the West’s recent wars in the Middle East is a plausible example; a compelling case can be made that the

peals to the intentional attempt or success at deception by a group of individuals cooperating for the creation or perpetuation of this deception (Basham 2011: 52-53). Dentith offers effectively the same definition. See his careful analysis (2014: 23-38). This includes active or passive deceit; “say nothing”, for instance. Other definitions prominent in the philosophical literature are similar and for our purposes interchangeable. Any pejorative or pathologizing connotation some still attach to “conspiracy theory” is logically subsequent to what they are directing this connotation to; a non-pejorative definition of conspiracy theory itself. One cannot define a “Dalmatian” without first having a dog to put the spots on. So what is a “dog”? The pejorative/pathologizing approach to defining “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” is no longer well regarded. For instance, see Keeley 1999, Basham 2001, Husting and Orr 2007, Bratich 2008, Hagen 2010, 2011, Dentith 2014, 2016, our 2016a, 2016b and our forthcoming. Empirical research suggests “conspiracy theory” is not a term that motivates public rejection. See Wood 2016. The pathologizing prejudice appears limited to professional media, politicians and a subset of academics.

³ An interesting question is how many levels of authority and in what over-lapping ways this group deception endured. Motivated by differing or the same interests, an institutional system like national military/intelligence can easily and in a stable way replicate deception up and down its hierarchy of information.

Bush administration and the Pentagon knowingly provided the public with many misleading and false claims about the terrorist threats involved in Afghanistan and Iraq. Not a mere guess, the evidence was before the public long before the invasions, particularly in Iraq's case. With near unanimity, experts both American and international, including leaders of the US intelligence community, publically rejected the key justifying claims of the Bush administration prior to the invasion. These criticisms received little media attention and the administration dismissed or ignored any that were contrary to their aims, instead orchestrating a sophisticated and successful media campaign with the cooperation of leading journalists and dominant media corporations, launching the "war on terror" as a televised spectacle, "shock and awe" to unprecedented global viewer ratings and thousands of civilian fatalities. This is also a conspiracy theory. Again, apparently a true one.

Far more ambitious versions of events exist, notoriously, that the US federal government either willfully allowed or actually conducted the attacks of September, 2001. Many have considered the possibility that the attacks were foreseen by American, Israeli and other Western intelligence services but nevertheless allowed for the massive political capital they would accrue to pursue a variety of projects desired by the United States and others. But probably most popular with the global public is that a missile was used to attack the Pentagon (the "Hunt the Boeing" theory) and that the World Trade Centers were destroyed by a controlled demolition (the "Thermate" theory), all the work of U.S. military intelligence operatives, what has come to be called "9/11 conspiracy theory".

A standard reply: Mainstream media would have launched riveting, withering coverage of the nightmare in its many dimensions, law enforcement would have conducted investigations leading to public arrests, trials and convictions (Keeley, 1999: 109-26).⁴ President Bush would have been "perp-walked" to a waiting police van. But none of this happened. Or likely ever will.⁵ So these accusations are *almost* certainly false.

This is the public trust approach. Its "absence of evidence is evidence of absence" inference is key to the PTA critique of ambitious conspiracy theories in academia and frequenting popular media, too (Kelley, 1999, 2003). "Almost" because even those who are most confident in the inference admit that sometimes "cover ups" do happen and successfully. And it is exactly this possibility that our most ambitious contemporary conspiracy theories invoke.

We should recognize that Keeley is not making the implausible claim that if an ambitious political or economic conspiracy is real then the media, government officials, or other sources will *inevitably* successfully report it, and so we should infer since it was not reported, it did not occur. He recognizes that sometimes, dramatic conspiratorial secrets will be successfully kept from sufficient numbers of people, or the right kind of people, for a period sufficient for the success of these conspiracies, and even indefinitely, for good reasons—"national security", for instance—and, on occasion, for bad reasons.⁶ This natural conces-

⁴ Keeley's 1999 is an excellent introduction to some of the basic epistemic, psychological and metaphysical issues surrounding conspiracy theories.

⁵ One is unlikely to be concerned about, or wish to vote in response to, something that happened 70 years ago.

⁶ The distinction between "amount" and "kind" is important in a variety of cases. For instance, imagine that a politically disenfranchised minority population is aware of a

sion will become critical in what follows. The issue that animates Keeley's public trust approach is allegations of morally corrupt conspiratorial deception by national governments in Western style democracies, and when we should disbelieve these; when these are "unwarranted".⁷ Eventually, if there is no compelling revelation of such a conspiracy, belief in that conspiracy becomes increasingly implausible, and soon, unwarranted. It is *unlikely* to exist. But like many, he is confident that in the *vast majority of instances* ambitious political and economic conspiracies involving an "explosive secret" will be revealed. For this confidence to be well placed, it requires that it is *very likely* that such vast conspiracies will be revealed to the public by the very institutions conspiracy theorists question.⁸

The issue becomes: How *likely* is it that a complicated crime, one beyond the reach of ordinary minds, could be *covered up* indefinitely, or for a sufficient amount of time from a sufficient amount or kind of people? Is anything approaching the conclusion "almost certainly not", justified? An honest inventory of both the sources of resilience and weakness in our hierarchical system of information transfer is required. Indeed, because of the existential stakes it is hard to imagine a more relevant and pressing task for epistemologists.

It is important to understand that our discussion is *not* primarily about Keeley's arguments for the PTA. Instead, Keeley's defense of the PTA appears both the most natural and best one in the literature⁹ and exploring its problems leads us, as naturally, to our *primary* concern: What happens when we recognize certain weaknesses with this defense and subsequently explore what patterns of investigation and revelation, or neglect, are more plausible in our information hierarchy? When we evaluate an information hierarchy in terms of its motives or goals, *all* motives and goals must be taken into account, not just those we find laudable or part of the official account of these institutions goals and so, action (or in action). Here we meet the real force of the problem of *toxic truths*: The problem of toxic truths can threaten to *invert* our apparently warranted expectations of public institutions of information, our public trust; critically examining public trust helps us see how these expectations might predictably, even reliably *flip*. This *inversion thesis* is the ultimate thesis of the paper.¹⁰

long, multi-faceted government conspiracy of degradation and elimination of potential revolutionaries within it, in order to perpetuate their oppression. But the enfranchised ruling class, who could end this conspiracy and would do so if made aware, is kept unaware of it. The right *placed* people, not amount, are excluded from the truth and from properly responding to it, so the conspiracy continues to prosper.

⁷ As Keeley deploys the concept of "warrant", warrant is metaphysically "agnostic". For instance, we cannot infer from "p is warranted" to "p is probably true", "warranted" is conceptually unrelated to whether p is even likely to be true. The same applies to the negation of warrant. That p is unwarranted does not allow us to infer p is probably not true. Here, I am assuming the correspondence theory of truth, but need not to secure the conclusions in this paper.

⁸ Keeley endorses this summary and understanding of his argument in personal correspondence and in his 2003.

⁹ Räikkä (2014) disputes that Keeley's are the "best and most natural" objections to ambitious conspiracy theory in Western democracies. I think it is an empirical fact they are the most natural. They also appear to me to be the best we have. The interesting and creative semantic manoeuvre that Räikkä explores (2009, 2014) as an alternative does not appear to me to suffice (see my 2011).

¹⁰ The problem of toxic truths might be christened, the "public *distrust* approach".

The role of hierarchy looms large. Fully grasping the implications of public trust's failure inverts, in critical cases, the thesis that our current information hierarchy reliably truthfully generates almost all of what civilisational humans believe about local, national and global events. An alternative analysis of the probable impacts of hierarchy and basic interests, economic and political, on our information hierarchy is required. Where formally word of mouth among intimates and personal verification played the central role in our beliefs, in the vast informational systems of today we live in a sea of well-managed *hearsay*. Sometimes the spell-binding violence of our times. Such hierarchies have a very limited number of persons in the role of control. So it is the probable relevance judgments and potential intentional neglect by such leadership that are critical for estimating the prospect of *undirected* cover-up.

The role of democracy as a source of governance can be radically reduced and dramatically subverted at exactly this point. This is an anti-democratic Achilles' heel of the entire system. Stalin remarked, "It is not how people vote but who counts the votes." The deeper truth is it is what we vote for or against that counts. And this is a matter of what we have been told and *not told*. Pynchon's famous line in *Gravity's Rainbow* comes to mind, "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they do not have to worry about the answers" (Pynchon, 1973: 251). Control the questions and all else follows.

Keeley's critique of ambitious conspiracy theory and defense of public trust rests on his paradigm of ideal social epistemology, empirical science. Keeley explains,

[It is important] just how large a role trust in both institutions and individuals plays in the justification of our beliefs. The problem is this: most of us including those of us who are scientists and who work in scientific laboratories full of expensive equipment have never carried out the experiments or made the empirical observations that support most contemporary scientific theories. Unless we want to conclude that the vast majority of us are not warranted in believing that the platypus is a mammal and that gold is an atomic element, we need some procedure by which the epistemic warrant obtained by those who do make the appropriate observations can be transferred to the rest of us. In modern science, this procedure involves the elaborate mechanisms of publication, peer review, professional reputation, university accreditation, and so on (Keeley 1999: 121-22).

Keeley then draws an analogy to the information we receive about the actions and motives of our political-economic hierarchy,

In the public sphere where conspiracy theories dwell, there are related mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs. There is the free press, made up of reporters, editors, and owners who compete to publish "the scoop" before others do. There are governmental agencies charged with investigating incidents, producing data, and publishing findings (Keeley 1999: 122).

So like in science, we can trust mass corporate media and national law enforcement with the truthful transfer of information. Keeley infers that our warranted confidence in these institutions is almost always greater than any evidence we might have for a conspiracy theory that casts doubt on their reliability. Again, if the conspiracy theory is true, the conspiracy would very likely be

quickly revealed to the public in a timely fashion. If it has not been, it is very likely to be false; belief is unwarranted.

But is there really sufficient parallel between the reliable regulation of information in the sciences and the political and economic realm to justify such a sweeping, hopeful conclusion? While initially appealing, the analogy becomes unconvincing—there are both problematic disanalogies as well as stunning failings even within scientific peer review, which given Keeley's analogy, predict at least as stunning failures within public institutions of information.

Nature, unlike people, presumably does not aim to deceive us.¹¹ She tells no lies. Experimental replication is an important tool of good science, the transmission of multiple results to the public, be they successful replications or disconfirmations, appears reliable, at least when the results are far removed from any practical considerations; various motives for distortion or suppression. But unlike carefully described and perfectly general scientific experiments, that can be reenacted anywhere the expertise and apparatus are available, the public cannot replicate much of media or law enforcement investigations, or ascertain with any certainty how these were actually conducted, or not, nor can they have direct access to much of the evidence collected, or ignored. They cannot observe or replicate the actions, motives, reasoning and direct communications of key players in these information hierarchies, be it mass media or law enforcement, that play a controlling role in investigations, or the neglect of such.

It is also important to recall that science is conducted, funded and disseminated (or not) by human beings, not gods of truth, and that a successful act of conspiracy, like other acts, merely requires the "*triangle of crime*"; ability, opportunity and motive. Where significant motive is lacking there is little reason to doubt the veracity of science or its reliable transmission. But where significant motive exists, and ability and opportunity, the accusation of conspiracies to distort or sequester scientific truth cannot, unfortunately, be simply dismissed. Especially when there is significant motive. We might worry opportunity and ability find a way.

Keeley's appeal to the purity of science begs the question against many conspiracy theories that impugn its invocation: Wherever humans are involved conspiracy is sometimes a significant possibility. Science can fail for these same reasons, a legacy involving diverse motives, internal and external to science, examples going all the way back to Lysenko and the paleontological charade of Piltdown. Confirmed conspiracies and cover-ups attend these failings. The controversy over the anthropogenic origin of global warming and its degree includes the accusation that for various reasons, some noble and ideological, others malevolent or self-serving, a group of scientists and politicians have organized themselves to perpetrate a highly profitable fraud upon the public; the "science of global warming" is a itself conspiracy, if not utterly then of intentional exaggeration, one with profound implications for political and economic policies affecting our entire population.¹² The profit lies in the political influence, research

¹¹ Nature, that is, as revealed in well-conducted empirical studies. As Keeley also puts it, "Unlike the case of science, where nature is construed as a passive and uninterested party with respect to human-knowledge gathering activities, the conspiracy theorist is working in a domain where the investigated actively seeks to hamper the investigation" (Keeley 1999: 120).

¹² See *provocateur* James Delingpole (2011).

funding and personal financial consideration, as well as the public veneration of these planetary savior-scientists, scientists until now, who were relegated to the understandably maligned role of “weather forecasters”. We need not endorse any of these accusations to concede they represent an epistemic challenge not well met by peer review, and by extension, the PTA.

Nevertheless, Keeley champions public trust as a sweeping antidote to the significant possibility of momentous but unrevealed conspiracies,

It is [a] pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions [of information transmission] entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes (Keeley 1999: 123).¹³

We should question this inference. The pattern described is precisely what we should expect from a *competent conspiracy*.¹⁴ “As time passes” those outside the conspiracy will fail to accumulate damning evidence—tantalizing evidence, perhaps, but not damning—because the conspiracy was conducted *competently*. But the damning evidence remains, albeit unknown, and may remain unearthed for many decades—recall Hanyok’s long over-due revelations—or even forever. “As time passes” is as easily a *misleadingly brief* period of failed popular revelation. It also appears to be an increasingly short one in our society, so one increasingly easily met. The older the event, the less most people care about the facts and the less likely these will be revealed in a way salient to the public or of any political significance. This cycle has consistently accelerated. Call it the *United States of Amnesia*: Conspiracy theories about society-wide political and economic manipulation, abuse and mass murder are rarely refuted and laid to rest.¹⁵ They are forgotten or become museum relics emptied of significance: Kennedy. In the rush of contemporary civilization, memories are short, attention fractured and concentration quickly perishes. We just move on. The case goes “cold”, like so many deaths that are also suspected murders. But we would not infer from this there was no murder. We would infer we do not know; *agnosticism* concerning the murder. The same goes for theories of well-executed conspiracies. Regrettably, the rational response is agnosticism.¹⁶

Instead let us focus on Keeley’s other claims, ordinary to the public trust approach: (1) the successful, long-term cover-up of momentous political and economic crimes in societies like our own is extraordinarily unlikely due to our warranted trust in primary sources of public information, media and law en-

¹³ In a follow-up Keeley (2003: 109) notes, “It is generally true that ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,’ but this maxim is misapplied in cases in which evidence is actively sought and is not discovered in spite of its discovery in other parallel situations [as in proper science]”.

¹⁴ Or simply a lucky one.

¹⁵ Even centuries later they often develop supporting evidence and examples of the general conspiratorial vulnerabilities of our civilizations very well. There are numerous examples in historiography.

¹⁶ See my 2001, 2003 and 2011.

forcement, to transmit to us reliable beliefs revealing these complots, and (2) this warranted trust is further supported by the skeptical expedients involving other *secondary sources* eventually required by such conspiracy theorists in order to save their theories from falsification.

This reasoning leads to a regress of question-begging responses. Keeley argues that we can trust our primary sources of public information because their motives are most always success at the task of reliable transmission of critical information to the public, especially in the case of momentous events. Empirically, it is a curious position, as this is the very opposite of the fact that they have deceived the public for many reasons at many points in recent history, *especially* in the case of momentous events. When we recall the findings of numerous historians surveying recent Western history his argument betrays a striking but familiar amnesia concerning these institutions. But logical problems will be the focus of our concerns.

Keeley's confidence in primary institutions of information begs the question against the conspiracy theorist. A central contention of popular conspiracy theorizing is that primary sources of public information, media, law enforcement, routinely ignore, or when actively pressed, obscure the reality of certain nefarious acts of powerful institutions with which they are part of, connected to or have an interest in protecting. Keeley attempts to escape this by offering we must posit a *great many* further people and institutions, *secondary sources* (and so on), are all intentionally involved in a conspiracy to hide the truth. Because the dominant motives of at least many of these secondary institutions and persons are success at reliable transmission of information to the public, we can be confident that critical information will in most all cases, no matter how dangerous, be successfully transmitted by them—presumably via the active cooperation and support of the primary ones, the public pronouncements of the national media and of law enforcement—perhaps by that icon of our public trust narrative; the secondary sources call a “press conference”, supportively attended by government prosecutors and earnestly disseminated by national and international press.

One might think this a remarkable fantasy, or not. Either way, this is the same question begging argument, circling the prior question begging one; we can trust other powerful institutions privy to the facts because they are trustworthy, even when the powerful institutions of corporate media and law enforcement are not. We might think it more likely that when secondary sources witness primary sources' manifest disinterest or even hostility to certain claims, they will take this as a cue to exhibit a similar attitude; no directed conspiracy required.¹⁷ But Keeley again argues that we can trust these other public sources of information because their motives are almost entirely limited to the task of reliable transmission of critical information to the public. With endless layers of numerous bureaucracies, this maneuver can go on just as endlessly. But reality halts this epistemic regress: If you approached American conspiracy theorists of the 1950s who claim mass media and law enforcement are purposely ignoring the real dangers of radioactive fall-out to the down-wind public caused by the Atomic Energy Commission's nuclear bomb testing—including a mass die-off of live-stock—with the reply that all can rest assured, the Department of Agricul-

¹⁷ With the failure of the PTA, concerns about governing by manufactured crisis gain plausibility.

ture will no doubt hold a press conference to correct the deception, they would not be impressed. Nor should they be. It never happened.¹⁸

In the end the PTA tries to ground the trustworthiness of public institutions, be they governmental or corporate media, in the *uncontrollability* of their vast bureaucracy of employees in possession of a significant conspiratorial secret, which will rebound upon any leadership that tries to keep it, exploding it into public view.

[An ambitious or momentous conspiracy] cannot be [conspiratorially] controlled because the world as we understand it today is made up of an extremely large number of interacting agents, each with its own imperfect view of the world and its own set of goals [...]. To propose that an explosive secret could be closeted for any length of time simply reveals a lack of understanding of modern bureaucracies (Keeley 1999: 124).

How could so many keep such a terrible truth for any time?

A good question, and perhaps the root source of public trust's psychological appeal: We need to believe in the honesty of other human beings. Maybe this is "the world as we understand it today" but it is also a poor caricature of life within our information hierarchy. The competent conspiracy theorist can argue that (1) the overwhelming majority of employees in these bureaucracies are excluded from critical information and (2) the high-placed remainder effectively controlled *via* a variety of means both advantageous and punitive; "carrots and sticks". True, a vast diversity of values and goals exists, there are two almost all of us have at the top of the list, the quality and existence of our lives and the lives of our loved ones. (3) It is also circular, presupposing honest and supportive cooperation of mass media and law enforcement with these persons, when securing the reliability of these primary sources of information is the ultimate *conclusion* of the argument. Even when underlings encounter these difficult and seemingly anomalous facts, their well-inculcated "the leaders know best" response, augmented by intimations of "national security" cannot be blithely dismissed. There are also well-known, proven coercive methods to maintain discipline among both leadership and lower echelons in these hierarchical organizations.

Finally, public trust's regress to secondary sources and then a herd of lower-level rogue bureaucrats appears to contradict its initial premise; the regress assumes the mainstream media and law enforcement *can* easily deny critical facts to the public, and *subsequently* must be challenged by secondary institutions. But if cover-up at the primary level is a significant possibility, one that must be defended against, why is it not an equally significant possibility with secondary

¹⁸ The opposite occurred. US Federal government denials remain orthodoxy to this day and are supported by seemingly fallacious studies, for instance the South/North partition cancer-rate study in Utah; fallout was evenly distributed in both the South and North of Utah, and well over thresholds that produce mass-cancer. The government study subsequently infers fallout has no role in cancer rates, as both are equal. Among many other works largely neglected by the media, see Carole Gallagher's 1993. There is no longer doubt that down-winders were lied to by the US Federal government and their protests and evidence discarded or ignored by national media and law enforcement. Of course, that was a time of crisis, as we are often told, is also ours. See Charles Pigden (2007) for an insightful historical review and analysis of past and recent political conspiracy.

institutions? Why are they even less likely to?¹⁹ It is not that, “attempt after attempt to falsify a conspiracy theory appears to succeed, and this apparent success must be explained as the nefarious work of the conspirators” (Keeley 1999: 122). The worry is that attempt after attempt are never attempted.

In conclusion, contra arguments for public trust, an examination of the evidence specific to particular conspiracy explanations, instead of an examination of our televisions, appears a more reliable and convincing method of epistemic evaluation. Next we will consider how much more.²⁰

3. The Problem of Toxic Truths: Significant Grounds for Public Distrust

Conspiracy is dangerous to democracy. Our epistemic predicament grows worse because hopeful claims about the reliability of our institutions of information transmission are not merely question begging, but on reflection, historically contradicted; not merely a failure to demonstrate, but a demonstration of failure. Keeley’s are, after all, the most natural and ordinary ones to offer and in the task he has set for himself it is difficult to see how anyone could have done better; more persuasively or with greater clarity. Indeed, Keeley’s conclusion, a high confidence in the reliability of pronouncements of mass media and national governments concerning momentous events like 9-11, is the norm in Western style civilizations and elsewhere. But both public trust and its related *uncontrollability* ignore a vast number of real-world institutional motives for cover-up and how these can exploit the public’s many, mutually reinforcing epistemic vulnerabilities. Even in a democracy that recognizes itself as primarily valuable for being a democracy. Especially in one.

3.1 Beyond Begging the Question: The Problems of Toxicity

A sober reflection on the realities of human affairs forces us to examine the problems of toxic truths. Toxicity does not require intentional descending control of media and law enforcement. For the present we can set aside the haunting spectre of direct control. The problem of toxic truths is not descending control by a hypothetical cabal of conspirators. Instead, it is the fact that the responses of mass media and law enforcement to toxic truths are predictable from the perspective of a momentous, reasonably competent conspiracy.²¹ This alone generates a complex set of considerations supporting the accusation of successful cover-up, all consistent with descending control and easily augmented by it, but entirely independent of it. The distinction here is between active cover-up

¹⁹ Secondary institutions are probably more likely to, as in issues of official public information they are subject to the more powerful elements of their government and they do not routinely report to the public except in comparatively superficial ways.

²⁰ Keeley appears, in the main, to have abandoned his arguments in response to a number of criticisms. But several years later in a bizarre policy paper by Adrian Vermeule and former Federal public information officer Cass Sunstein, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures”, we see Keeley’s arguments re-deployed as justification for a systematic covert government project to undermine theories that are contrary to official narratives. See Sunstein and Vermeule 2009. Also see Hagen’s insightful critiques (2010, 2011).

²¹ “Mainstream” or “Mass media” in the current, ordinary sense; news corporations like ABC, BBC, CNN, FOX, Reuters, Associated Press and so on.

and cover-up by neglect. We will explore the latter. Ironically, in our current economic and political system, a mature system of capitalist representational democracy, one can argue that the more brutal the conspiracy and high-placed the conspirators, the more likely it is to not be revealed or even explored; what I term the “why look?” response to toxicity. The irony doubles; the ultimate motive for this pattern of avoidance can be a fundamental commitment to the preservation of our current system of markets and our representational democracy. This involves nothing more than the motives and goals normal to our society. Toxicity presents us with the likelihood, the warranted belief, that the information hierarchy will intentionally ignore democratically critical, significant possibilities and so realities. They are just too toxic. This is not a criticism of public trust, it is an *inversion* of it. Were there never a mind possessed by public trust, there would still be the problem of toxic truths. In certain scenarios, the very scenarios public trust attempts to address, toxicity predicts that these institutions will reliably obscure democratically critical truths by ignoring socially toxic but epistemically significant possibilities. The more appalling and disruptive the truth, the less likely it will be revealed. Toxicity is the inverse relationship between democratically critical information and the likelihood of revelation by the normal institutions of its information hierarchy. In what follows we will defend the inversion thesis.

A simple example: Consider corporate mainstream or mass media in the context of 9/11 or anything like it. We cannot ignore that communication corporations have profound interests in supporting the stability of the present political and economic hierarchy. Their existence and extraordinary profits rest on it. These successful corporations rely on and are also part of vast retail establishments. Would a mass-media investigation aimed at convincing the population that the highest elements of national government are involved in the mass-murder of thousands of civilians be the story of the century, or corporate suicide? Probably both. Promulgating such conspiracy theories with the full force of mass media, theories that undermine the very legitimacy of national government and can create mass disillusionment, violent unrest, even wide-spread revolt and revolution, is entirely contrary to their fundamental interest in a stable political and economic order. Particularly when that government is the dominant (or among the dominant) one on earth. Whatever the ultimate motives of corporate leadership, there is likely at some basic level also a moral dimension, sensitive to at least utilitarian moral considerations: Would it be ethical, even if true, to persuade hundreds of millions of citizens their national governments are directed by or in collusion with domestic terrorists? And national or international law enforcement does nothing? Predictable chaos and rebellion might easily create a death toll greater than the attacks themselves and the riots and wars to follow. Should we unleash a society-shattering truth simply because it is the truth? It would be surprising if this would not compel silence on the part of chief editors and corporate boards.²² Any corporate media organization will quickly recognize all of this before they look. *The story is toxic.* A non-starter. So why look?

National law enforcement faces the same. Is it credible that investigators or their supervisors would conduct a thorough investigation and reveal to the public that high-placed elements of the very government they represent and enforce the will of murdered thousands of American citizens? We might think damage

²² The argument isn't that these are the correct utilitarian considerations, but that these are likely among leadership.

control is more likely the order of the day. There is little doubt an overwhelming priority of the US federal government and its bureaucracy is the continuity of this government. Such is the nature of established national governments everywhere. Is there anything the federal government would not stoop to in order to stay in power? We cannot say, but it should not surprise us if the answer is, “no, nothing.” Any high-level law enforcement officer knows all this. The situation is *quite clear*. So why look?²³

This is intuitive. Imagine your much-loved sister is killed in a car wreck. Then, at the funeral, surrounded by your supportive and loving family, mourning this senseless tragedy, a seemingly sincere but distant relative approaches you. She says she has compelling evidence that your loving father murdered your sister, and your favorite uncle and aunt are in on it. It is true dad was once involved in shady dealings, but such a disgusting allegation, if openly entertained at a time like this, could tear your family apart, undermining all it has accomplished together: No, it was just a car wreck. Call security.

Whatever else, that is the problem of toxic truths.

The value of a general symmetry between the pronouncements of law enforcement and media is also relevant. In a public crisis and subsequent acts of state—conspiratorial or not—public support and an enduring, justifying narrative are critical to long-term and ultimately successful projects. “United We Stand”, as silencing, democracy-defying as a motto can be, is not surprising. All things remaining equal, in a contest between societies, those that do not unite and so act will not prevail against those that do. Leadership in mass media and national law enforcement no doubt recognizes this, as an institutional, largely unquestioned norm and among the more reflective, as a personal commitment. In an established stable state, their role in traumatic circumstances—internally manufactured or not—has long been to maintain public confidence and compliance, the continuity of governance. A shared stabilizing narrative, whatever its truth, is often beneficial and often necessary. Any significantly divisive acrimony and mutual accusations of incompetence or even cover-up is the last thing the public should expect to experience from them. Both mass media and law enforcement will, at least in the short term, quickly harmonize. Responses to toxic truths will not only be similar in many cases, law enforcement and media will be prone to fine-tune their responses to each other in order to create a sufficiently coherent, mutually consistent narrative for the public, the best in the flow of events, that they can. Presenting and closely exploring a pattern of evidence for toxic truths that fundamentally disrupts this goal could be disastrous, not merely for the task at hand, but more importantly, for the credibility of the very system of public trust that these institutions survive upon. Again, why look?

Next, imagine mass media and law enforcement leadership do look. While surveying initial evidence of a truly momentous government conspiracy, or even a convincing dossier, there lurks a paralyzing but tempting line of thought, a surrender before what is, for most of us, the many unknowable considerations

²³ Both the enforcement agencies of other nations and international law agencies face related constraints. In a world integrated economically and politically, particularly in the West where popular credibility for Westerners' lies, the diplomatic consequences are clear. Were The EU to put the US presidency on trial for mass murder of Americans, the disruption of political, economic and power-allegiances would be immense from all quarters. It's unthinkable from a real-politic perspective. This is also epistemically relevant.

that animate both publically known, elected global leaders and their more clandestine partners. However deceptive and seemingly vicious the acts of our present hierarchy, the powers that be *must have their reasons*. These perhaps sincere partisans of democracy—one beset by so many threats—are defending it. These are necessary expedients and when they involve violent acts on a global scale, this is the surest sign of their severe *necessity*. They are, in ways sometimes unclear to us, ultimately attempts at fine works for a better world. Consider the alternative and its fullest implications for the wars fought, lives lost, the nature of our nations, the meaning of the flags at the top of their poles.²⁴ We should *trust in the conspiracy* the way some trust in God. To do otherwise would be reckless. So why are we looking?

The alleged conflict between knowing leadership and an unknowing, incompetent public is manifest in each of these avoidant responses to toxic truths, a tension we witness all the way back to Plato's Republic, where democracy is explicitly rejected and the entire ideal society is a perpetual conspiracy, a "myth of the metals". For a neo-Platonist a similar but superior method might be democracy's public embrace but covert rejection. Today we find this style of reasoning among media pundits defending ever-growing surveillance states and both their covert, extrajudicial actions, and open large-scale, violent interventions into world affairs. Democracy is a fine thing to allow the citizenry to pursue when they largely understand the stakes and the stakes are not too high, but some things cannot be trusted to the popular judgment; they are too important. Only an enlightened and if need be ruthless leadership²⁵ can rise to these tasks, the burden of the able and willing.²⁶ Perhaps these persons may be forced at times on their own initiative to sacrifice many for the security of many more, and for the future we have collectively accomplished. This is a relevant hypothesis here.

The question then becomes, "How confident, given our limited evidence, can we be that the brutalities we might uncover are not vital to the security of the state?" Such questions are especially halting in times of global transformation. The project of an enduring global civilization is immensely challenging. A responsible agent of the public trust may easily conclude the truth may be too toxic for the public to absorb, too complex for them to grasp the imperatives at work behind it. This is also foreseeable. So why look? And if you do, any farther?

Finally, if a mass media outlet did publically endorse something like alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory, it is hard to imagine they would long continue to do so. In any context like the attacks of 2001, it is much more likely they would be quickly flayed as unpatriotic, terrorist-supporting²⁷ and "conspiracy theo-

²⁴ Such a line of reasoning forces to ask why we believe current national governments are not simply the dominant crime syndicate in any particular territory. In what ways do we distinguish them from a protection racket with the predictable elements of the benevolent patron? Is this a "gangster" planet?

²⁵ Orwell (Eric Blair) is said to have remarked, "The people sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready in the dark."

²⁶ These consequentialist projections of governmental or mass media reasoning appear an echo of the general objections to any simple consequentialist moral theory. Again, the contention is not that these reasonings are correct, or even the correct consequentialist ones, but that it is plausible they reflect the level of moral insight to be expected of leadership within officialdom, political and economic.

²⁷ As Jack Bratich insightfully defines "terrorist" as used in political narratives, "the whatever enemy".

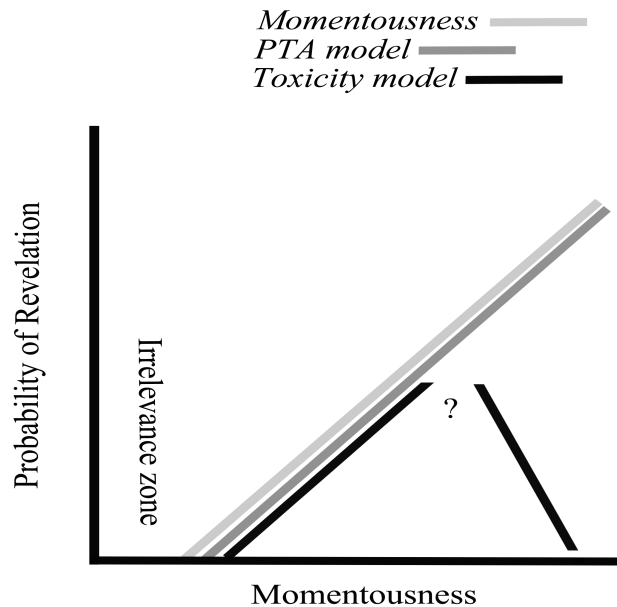
rists”, both by Federal authorities, politicians and competing mass media, “moving in for the kill”. The evidence presented would be largely ignored, dismissed by “experts” and reduced to straw-man characterizations. Retraction would quickly follow. The tragic fate of professional journalist Gary Webb well illustrates this.²⁸ The same can be expected for National law enforcement officials that publically support such theories. Their silencing and dismissal, perhaps prosecution for such a treasonous act or other offenses, seems almost inevitable in the heady years following such attacks or similar debacles. After all, “United We Stand”. This pattern appears far more plausible than the expectation such law enforcement officials or mainstream outlets would be lauded for heroic actions, supported by government authorities, praised and happily joined by competing mass media. This is clear before looking. So why look?

It is critical to recognize the motivating concern in all of these mutually reinforcing scenarios is not that widespread disaster will *inevitably* result, but that the multitude of both short and long term, nonlinear repercussions are unpredictable and potentially quite dangerous, and among these is the stark danger of rapid political catastrophe. The sum risks, recognized and unrecognized, not just inevitabilities, can be sufficient. Toxicity extends to inevitability, probability and possibility. In various crisis scenarios, the worse the worst case consequences of investigation and revelation are, the greater the probable caution. Risks vary in scope, temporal proximity and the details relevant to diverse parties. Sometimes toxicity will be ignored, revelations made public. But the greater the obvious toxicity and complexity of its effects, the less likely it will be. Events perceived as existential threats will almost inevitably, at least at first, when it most matters, be deferred to official explanation. And whatever the immediate consequences of the revelation of particular events, there is the growing danger of demonstrating to the public a destabilizing cumulative pattern: If we have a fundamental stake in the continuity of our current political and economic hierarchy, the corrosive effects of repeatedly revealing a *chronic pattern* of intrigue, including mass murder, must not be long nurtured. Agents of the government must not be endlessly portrayed as gangsters, working for worse. Repeatedly, the image of a benevolent patrón must instead step forward, protecting the people, fighting for justice and human rights, securing a better tomorrow. Like a good father. This is the essential stabilizing task, minimizing the popular perception of the *prior probability* of conspiracy in our society, whatever its true measure.²⁹

A simple diagram of the cumulative result of the multi-dimensional problem of toxicity in contrast to the PTA.

²⁸ In 1996 Webb broke a front-page story in the *San Jose Mercury News* that the CIA was using its air assets to transport large quantities of cocaine into the US, proceeds returned to the anti-communist Contras of Nicaragua, an accusation that eventually emerged as well-evidenced and accurate. Major news outlets destroyed Webb’s career and he eventually committed suicide by two revolver shots to the head. See journalist Nick Schou’s (Charles Bowden, contributor) 2006/2014 and a subsequent movie, *Kill the Messenger*, 2014. Academic historians have chronicled a number of similar examples; a pattern we might call “the United States of Amnesia”.

²⁹ Keeley offers a supporting analogy (and an old adage) to illustrate the general problem of toxic truths. Suppose a bank kept loaning money, vast amounts, and it reached a point where if the bank were to demand repayment, it would bankrupt the bank and everyone else. Leave that debt alone. It is “toxic”. I appreciate this analogy (discussion, 2015, University of Miami, Coral Gables).



The “?” points to the empirical question of *thresholds* where toxicity becomes powerfully dissuasive of investigation (“why look?”), let alone revelation, “irrelevance zone” marks events of so little perceived public interest that they are not, or scarcely, attended to, and the terminus of the downward toxicity line represents a very low, but not literally zero, probability of revelation.³⁰

Toxicity concerns momentous public revelations, where “momentous” includes “fundamentally disruptive” in a social and subsequent physical sense, physically disruptive in the same sense that hurricanes can be; riots and other violent, social disorders, including wars, immediately come to mind.³¹ History is littered with such events, and more cumulative ones. An illustration of what toxicity does *not* mean in the development of recent Western political history is the dramatic contrast between the time worn trope of Watergate and the accusation that the US Federal government destroyed the citizen-filled World Trade Centers and launched a missile into the Pentagon. Watergate enjoys a singular status as the paradigm and even outer limits of “believable” conspiracy in Western high placed politics. This status is strange in light of far more momentous Western political conspiracies that have come to light. It might not be particularly surprising that a national-level politician in the US, who eventually became a US president, would be aware of and take advantage of covert surveillance of the opposition party in an up-coming presidential election. When Richard Nixon did both this revelation did not imprison him or in any significant way even

³⁰ Space limitations prevent the including a discussion of the threshold issue. See my forthcoming, “Conspiracy, Toxicity and Thresholds of Media/Governmental Neglect of Investigation”.

³¹ A helpful anonymous reviewer for this journal notes that toxicity will vary, among other factors, with how happy a population is with its government. This is an important factor. People will trade truth for happiness.

briefly derail his party, and, except for brief outrage that quickly dissipated, it led to no significant social disruption.³² Nixon was pardoned and a Vietnam war-weary nation moved on. The lion's share of the immediate commentary on the event focused on how inept Nixon was to get caught as directly connected, particularly his creation and release of the damning evidence of his Oval office tape recordings (worse, redacted).

Spying on opposition parties is commonplace and even expected. Competent organizations carefully and thoroughly insulate leadership, though. Unlike Nixon, "rogue elements" are successfully blamed if spying is revealed. But even if we find all this surprising, what is even more surprising is that we might equate the toxicity of a revelation like Watergate to the toxicity of revealing an alleged conspiracy as proposed by alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory.³³ Spying on an opposition party is trivial in comparison to the revelation that the US federal government murdered almost 4,000 of its own citizens to create public support for two foreign wars and a domestic and global police-state, pursuing this project to the point where more than 100,000 people in Afghanistan and Iraq were killed with two years and untold others later.³⁴ Comparison of alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory and its consequences to Watergate trivializes the issues here and is hardly applicable to the real concern, potential and foreseeable forces of toxicity. Watergate's ubiquity in popular and academic discussion, in contrast to now well-established, humanly catastrophic conspiracies like the Tonkin Gulf deception, which eventually killed at least 1.5 million humans by official accounts, is curious, even stunning. We might be concerned that mainstream media, academia and subsequently the public are embracing an exemplar that is misleading, one minimizing the catastrophic effects of high placed conspiracy in very recent history, the history of a representational democracy.³⁵

3.2 Silencing Individuals

But what of the lone investigator, the rogue agent who populates Hollywood movies, unveiling the conspiracy to the world? This trope is basic to our political mythos; the "deep throat" informant of Watergate lore, the generic, shocking, all-revealing "press conference", and print media/internet doppelgangers.³⁶ On

³² Republican icon Ronald Regan was elected to consecutive terms as US president within a decade.

³³ I would include the multiple shooter Kennedy assassination theories. To equate a single killing of this kind with the mass murder is either to radically inflate the value, symbolic or otherwise, of a single politician, over the murder of thousands, or radically deflate the status of those who are not in any way known to us, "ordinary citizens".

³⁴ A brief review shows this is now considered a conservative number, while protracted, often contentious controversies surround the proper demographical methods. See, for instance, the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2008).

³⁵ While more aggressive critics of the US war in Vietnam would put the number of dead much higher, and understandably so, even official US accounts place the number at almost 1.5 million dead: 1,353,000. To comment further involves us in the moral absurdity and obscenity of such detailed numerical debates ("body counts"), reducing us to minds of the calibre that caused this catastrophe. However, see Lewy 1980 for a careful if conservative historical analysis.

³⁶ Again, the severity of the allegations effects appears relevant. What is the level of toxicity? Discrediting an official, or an established government? This matters to the toxic truth problem. But the felling of a mere president or prime minister encourages the belief

the public trust approach we need mainstream media and law enforcement to transmit truth. In the context of sufficiently toxic truths, if such agents go rogue and conduct personal investigations they face a media and law enforcement establishment that has already wisely walked away. Their efforts are futile and easily foreseen as so. Word of mouth can accomplish little in our vast civilization, the internet notwithstanding. Where virtually every view of events is passionately championed, without official recognition the truth is lost in a sea of alternatives.³⁷ Add to this the reality of devastating punitive measures to self and loved ones and our iconic rogue agent will not only be a failure, but probably rare.³⁸ This is ancient. The advent of “democracy” and the “free press” has not vanquished it. In our daily media it remains in operation every minute of every day. From this perspective, the fact most of us do not directly encounter it is simply a testament to our personal political insignificance.

4. Conclusion: Social Epistemology and Catastrophe Theory

The perspective of conspiracy theorists that assert cover-up has some epistemic merit. In our present Western style information hierarchies, undirected cover-up appears probable when critical interests are at stake, and can be encouraged and re-established when deviated from. Unlike millennia old, reality-detached, abstraction-driven narratives of global skepticism, here only the intersection of familiar history with well-known motives for intentional neglect is at work.³⁹ If we restrict ourselves to established hierarchies of information, this can be an epistemic catastrophe. Alternatively, in our increasingly distributed networks of information, there are options to our information hierarchies.

Commitment to the success of our system of representational democracy can easily, even predictably, be twisted into a betrayal of that very system. So how can we, as a self-governing people, defend against our epistemic vulnerabilities? In the end, we may be recognizing our hierarchical information societies may inevitably be at critical instances, for the vast majority, *epistemically opaque*. Unlike ancient, small tribal groups where close mutual surveillance and long familiarity give us considerable access to social realities, in societies as vast and hierarchical as our own there may be no adequate mechanism for the majority to reliably ascertain the facts in certain extreme, and extremely important,

that contemporary mass media is boundless in its bid for the truth, but attacking the fundamental legitimacy of the central government of its own world power would be a surprising scenario, whatever the truth, whatever the epoch. I suspect this only occurs in incredibly rare political and economic circumstances, for instance, the American revolution against Great Britain.

³⁷ To advocates of the current system of information and subsequent governance, this is a serious concern. To advocates of a new pattern, this appears an opportunity.

³⁸ It is remarkable what pictures of one’s children playing in the park, or of a significant other at the local market, sent from an untraceable source, without a word of explanation, can do in the imaginations of otherwise courageous women and men.

³⁹ The hyperbole of Robert Anton Wilson notwithstanding: Wilson claims that if we reduce the death toll of the NAZI massacre of Jews by significant percentages, say 70 percent, we can no longer make a reliable inference to the very occurrence of WWII. There are social and ubiquitous personal evidences at work in this confidence in the existence of WWII, none of which have any connection to the holocaust. Uncharacteristically, Keeley (1999) endorses Wilson’s surprising inference.

events. A visual image: The typical pyramid of information, with few at the top, knowing much, and sometimes struggling to prevent information's natural, gravitational flow of descent, is really upside down. Invert the triangle, and dangerous information wells at the narrow bottom point, and only through intentional efforts, will it ever be pumped upward and spread to the wider, public expanses. No intention, no effort; none needed beyond a studied silence, in agreement (conspire) and in preparation should there be a few who present what they fail to realize are still-born questions. And conspiracy theory? A nascent but not yet blooming prison riot that never dies? What would a civilization that we have compelling reason to believe is relatively conspiracy-free, *particularly in times of crisis*, look like? Whatever the answer, it would not look like ours. Curative and creative work⁴⁰ lies ahead.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ For an alternative social epistemic information system, consider a distributed, horizontal network of information sourcing and analysis, one epistemically responsible, with shared, reliable standards. This could be a subset of the internet, a distributed information transmission system without a hierarchical, effective monopoly. Another subset of the internet, one without serious epistemic standards or rational communicative dispositions, is easy to endure. What is not so easy to endure is a hierarchical system of information rather like our current one.

⁴¹ I would like to thank Massimo Dell'Utri for careful editing. For helpful comments I wish to thank Charles Pigden, Matthew R.X. Dentith, Martin Orr, Juha Räikkä, Rom Harré, Brian Keeley, Marius Raab, Joe Parent, participants of the Society for Contemporary Philosophy, the Center for Security and Intelligence Studies and the London School of Economics, the 2015 University of Miami (Coral Gables) Conspiracy Conference, also the University of Turku and University of Abo, Turku, the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, the Bucharest Institute for Research in the Humanities, anonymous reviewers, Pixie Picasso and, of course, Otto Blaast.

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