

*Retitled: **Even Conspiracy Theorists Are Alarmed by What They've Seen***
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By Annie Kelly - Aug. 4, 2023, 5:09 a.m. ET



The date was Jan. 20, 2021, and Stephen Miles Lewis was trying to keep the peace.

Two weeks before, a mob of pro-Trump protesters had stormed the Capitol building, and the circles Mr. Lewis ran in were now brimming with tension. Many of his closest friends had been outraged by what they saw. But he also knew someone who had been there, who now claimed that the violence had been stirred up by antifa agents disguised as Trump supporters.

Mr. Lewis, a middle-aged man with a round face and a gray beard who goes by the nickname SMiles, sat at his desk, in front of a wall covered with posters of aliens, flying saucers and Bigfoot. In a YouTube video, he urged viewers to “take a step back and hopefully think, meditate, reflect on the times that we’re in,” to not “malign the others’ viewpoint.” He expressed frustration that the term “conspiracy theorist” was increasingly being used as an insult. After all, he pointed out: “I am a conspiracy theorist.”

At the time, Mr. Lewis was trying to project calm, to help ensure that the community he’d been part of since he was 18 didn’t tear itself apart. But in the years since, he has found himself unsettled by the darker elements of a world he thought he knew.

Over the past year, I’ve been part of an [academic research project](#) seeking to understand how the internet changed conspiracy theories. Many of the dynamics the internet creates are, at this point, well understood: We know its capacity to help users find one another, making it easier than ever for people to get involved in conspiracy networks; we also know how social media platforms prioritize inflammatory content and that as a result, ideas and information that make people angry travel farther.

What we felt was missing from this story, though, was what this period of change looked like from the perspective of conspiracy theorists themselves.

My team has been speaking to researchers and writers who were part of this world or connected to it in the pre-social media era. And we’ve learned something surprising: Many of the people we’ve interviewed told us they, too, have spent the past few years baffled by the turn conspiracy culture has taken. Many expressed discomfort with and at times outright disgust for QAnon and the related theories claiming the 2020 election had been stolen and said that they felt as if the very worst elements of conspiracy culture had become its main representatives.

It’s worth noting that our sample was biased by who agreed to speak to us. While all of conspiracy culture can be characterized by its deep skepticism, that skepticism doesn’t always point in the same direction. Although we’ve approached as many people as possible, so far it’s mostly been those on the left of the political spectrum who have been interested in talking to university researchers. (They’ve also been overwhelmingly men.)

Still, what our interviewees had to say was striking: The same forces that have made conspiracy theories an unavoidable force in our politics have also fundamentally changed them, to the extent that even those who pride themselves on their openness to alternative viewpoints — Sept. 11 truthers, Kennedy assassination investigators and U.F.O. cover-up researchers — have been alarmed by what they’ve seen.

Mr. Lewis's sense that conspiracy networks would be rived by tensions in the aftermath of Jan. 6 was well founded. Rumors immediately began circulating that the rioters had been infiltrated by agents instigating violence — an accusation that some of the rioters themselves took to social media [to denounce](#). Ashli Babbitt, the rioter who was fatally shot by a police officer during the attack, was simultaneously lionized as a martyr and derided as a false flag.

All this ultimately left Mr. Lewis less inclined to play peacemaker and more inclined to take a step away from it all. Today, he says, he increasingly avoids some of the language that floats around the conspiracysphere: Terms like “the illuminati” used to feel like fun ideas to play with. Now he worries they could be used to create scapegoats, or even encourage violence.

SMiles Lewis grew up in Austin, Texas, with his mother — his parents separated when he was very young — and it was his close connection with her that first sparked his interest in the unexplained: “There was a sense, early on with my Mom and I, where we felt like we were reading each other’s minds,” he said. The two of them would watch shows like “That’s Incredible!,” which retold stories of paranormal encounters. Mr. Lewis recalls his mother telling him after one episode: “If you are ever in distress, just concentrate on me really hard, and I will get the message.” Her theory got put to the test when Mr. Lewis was a teenager: Once, when home alone, he heard voices in their yard after dark. Afraid, he considered calling his mother, but the fear of losing precious new adult freedoms stopped him. The next day she asked him if everything had been all right, because out of nowhere, she had felt the overwhelming urge to call. Mr. Lewis took this as confirmation that there was more to human abilities than science could yet rationalize.

Once Mr. Lewis graduated from high school, he joined the Austin chapter of the Mutual U.F.O. Network, an organization for enthusiasts to meet and discuss sightings. From there, he became the leader of a support group for people who believed they’d had close encounters with aliens. Mr. Lewis never had such an experience himself, but he said the group didn’t mind — they just appreciated that he kept an open mind.

U.F.O.s and conspiracy theories have always been intertwined, but it was Sept. 11 that really turned Mr. Lewis political. As he speculated in an editorial for The Austin Para Times after the planes hit the towers, he felt that he had “been a witness to Amerika’s greatest Reichstag event ” — a planned disaster to justify fascist encroachment on civil liberties, something many of the writers Mr. Lewis admired had warned of.

For Mr. Lewis, conspiracism was always about thinking critically about the narratives of the powerful and questioning your own biases. In our interviews, he saw his interest in the parapolitical — in how intelligence and security services quietly shape the world — as

connected to his political activism, not so different from attending an abortion rights rally or joining a local anti-Patriot Act group. All were about standing up for civil liberties and citizen privacy against an opportunistic, overreaching state.

But for all Mr. Lewis's political idealism, there was also something undeniably invigorating about conspiracy culture. This was a scene free from the stifling hegemony of sensible mainstream thought, a place where writers, filmmakers and artists could explore whatever ideas or theories interested them, however weird or improper. This radical commitment to resisting censorship in all its forms sometimes led to decisions that, from the perspective of 2023, look like dangerous naïveté at best: Reading countercultural material from the 1990s can feel like navigating a political minefield, where musings about the North American "mothman" and experimental poetry sit side-by-side with Holocaust denial. Conspiracy culture was tolerant of banned or stigmatized ideas in a way many of our interviewees said they found liberating, but this tolerance always had a dangerous edge.

Still, Mr. Lewis looks back nostalgically on days when there seemed to be more respect and camaraderie. The aftermath of Sept. 11 and the war on terror presented, he said, a threat to citizens that the conspiracy-friendly left and right could unite over. Now the rift between the two was deep and vicious. He felt as if the ideas that had first attracted him to conspiratorial thought had been "weaponized," pointing people away from legitimate abuses of power and toward other citizens — the grieving parents of Sandy Hook, for example — and at times involved real-world violence.

When I asked Mr. Lewis when he first heard of QAnon, he told me a story about a family member who'd sent him a video that began with what he saw as a fairly unobjectionable narrative of government abuses of power. "I'm nodding my head, I'm agreeing," he said. Then it got to the satanic pedophile networks.

The conspiracy culture that Mr. Lewis knew had celebrated the unusual and found beauty in the bizarre. He had friends who considered themselves pagans, friends who participated in occult rituals. "The vast majority of them are not blood-drinking lunatics!" he told me. Some of his friends were no longer comfortable talking about their beliefs for fear of becoming targets.

Others we interviewed told us similar stories: about a scene that had once felt niche, vibrant and underground but had transformed into something almost unrecognizable. Greg Bishop, a friend of Mr. Lewis's and editor of the 1990s zine *The Excluded Middle*, which covered U.F.O.s, conspiracy theories and psychedelia, among other things, told me that as the topics he'd covered had become more mainstream, he'd watched the vitriol and division increase. "You'd see somebody at a convention who was frothing at the mouth or whatever, figuratively, and that's changed into something that's basically a part of the culture now."

Joseph E. Green, an author and parapolitical researcher, described how in the past, attending conferences on conspiracy topics, “there’s always a couple of guys in there who will tell you after they get familiar with you that the Jews run the world.” Mr. Green had no interest in such ideas, but nor did he think they ran much risk of going mainstream. But somewhere along the way, conspiracy spaces on the internet had become “a haven” for the “lunatic fringe” of the right wing, which in turn spilled back into the real world.

Jonathan Vankin, a journalist who wrote about the conspiracy scene of the 1990s, said watching the emergence of QAnon had been disillusioning. Mr. Vankin never considered himself a conspiracy theorist, but as a journalist he felt an appreciation for them. They may not have always gotten the facts right, but their approach was a way of saying, “The official story, the way we’re fed that every day, isn’t really necessarily the way it is.” Now, he said, conspiracy theories felt more like “tools of control” that changed how people saw the world, not in a liberatory sense but “in a distorted way” — one that no longer challenged power but served its interests.

Have conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists gotten nastier? It’s worth recalling that the reactionary, violent impulse that we think of as characterizing contemporary conspiracism was always there: The John Birch Society of the 1960s and its hunt for secret Communists in the very top levels of government has been described by some historians as an [early ancestor of QAnon](#). And it’s also worth remembering that the historical friendliness between left and right conspiracism could be ethically murky. When Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck bomb in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring hundreds more, he said he was acting in retaliation for the Waco siege of 1993 and its aftermath — what he and many others in militia circles saw as the government covering up a deliberate massacre of its own citizens. Some liberal writers in the conspiracy scene defended him — some even went as far as to suggest he had been framed.

What does seem clear is that conspiracy theories have become less of a specialist interest and more of an unavoidable phenomenon that affects us all, whether in the form of anti-vaccination sentiments or election denialism. With both Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Donald Trump running for president, none of this seems likely to fade away anytime soon.

Michael Barkun, a scholar of religious extremism and conspiracy theories, describes conspiracy-minded networks as spaces of “stigmatized knowledge” — ideas that are ignored or rejected by the institutions that society relies on to help us make sense of the world. Recently, though, Mr. Barkun writes, in part because of the development of the internet, that stigma has been weakening as what “was once clearly recognizable as ‘the fringe’ is now beginning to merge with the mainstream.”

The story we've heard from our interviewees is that this mainstreaming process has had profound effects, fundamentally altering the character of both the theories themselves and those who claim to be adherents, by making conspiracy theories more accessible and more potentially profitable. It's these shifts that have left people like Mr. Lewis feeling so out of place in the spaces they once saw as their ideological homes.

The conspiracy scene, on left and right, immediately grasped the significance of the World Wide Web's arrival in the 1990s. For people who wanted to explore stigmatized topics, the liberatory potential was obvious, and most of the people we spoke to were early adopters. Mr. Lewis himself at one point had between 70 and 80 registered domain names.

And yet, despite pouring more effort into his passion than some people put into their jobs, Mr. Lewis never made much, if any, money from it. When I asked him about it, it didn't even seem to have occurred to him to try. This wasn't unusual; the biggest names in conspiracy culture before the internet — radio hosts like Bill Cooper and Mae Brussell — may have sold books and tapes but hardly built media empires. Making money seemed secondary to the principle of getting the truth — as they saw it, at least — out there, for like-minded people to debate and discuss.

Today's conspiracy theorists are different. Termed "[conspiracy entrepreneurs](#)" by academics, they combine the audience-growth strategies of social media lifestyle influencers with a mixture of culture war and survivalist rhetoric. They're active on various platforms, constantly responding to new developments, and most of them are selling their audience something on the side.

One of the first entrepreneurs to pioneer this approach was Alex Jones, who a recent court case revealed had [an estimated](#) combined net worth with his company of up to \$270 million. Before his name became synonymous with conspiracy theories, Mr. Jones got his start in Austin community access television in the 1990s — a scene that Mr. Lewis was intimately familiar with. But as Mr. Lewis and others tell it, Mr. Jones always possessed both an aggressive streak and a sense of showmanship that many of his contemporaries lacked, making him perfect for social media, where conspiracy theorists, like everyone else, are competing in an attention economy.

"The last thing I want to do is sit on a recorded video and say to you, 'In our day, conspiracy theories were kinder and gentler,'" said Ruffin Prevost, an editor at [ParaScope](#), a now-defunct site set up in 1996 that covered U.F.O.s, secret societies, and mind control, among other subjects. "But there is definitely a different tenor to how people go about this stuff now," he said. "It's almost like you've got to be strident and hard-core about whatever your thing is to have enough bona fides to capture that audience."

The belief that the incentives of social media had shorn conspiracy research of its serious, scholarly edge was a common theme. “The things that we’re describing are not really the same thing,” Mr. Green declared to me flatly, comparing the archival work and conferences that he had been involved with to the salacious videos of QAnon influencers. The scholarly work “is never going to have that commercial appeal,” he said. “You know, just like if I try to get somebody to watch a film by Ingmar Bergman, it’s much more difficult than to get them to watch a film by Michael Bay. It’s almost not even the same thing, right?”

In the minds of many conspiracy theorists, Mr. Jones and his imitators don’t deserve the title. In his 2017 book, “Trumpocalypse Now!: The Triumph of the Conspiracy Spectacle,” Kenn Thomas, a towering figure in the world of 1990s conspiracy, termed the recent crop of opportunists looking to profit from the hard work of researchers “conspiracy celebrities.” And the conspiracy celebrity in chief, Mr. Thomas said, was Donald Trump, who referred to conspiracy theories he hadn’t researched and didn’t understand. To the world at large, it might seem as if we’re living in a time in which conspiratorial thinking is ascendant. But in his foreword to Mr. Thomas’s book, Robert Sterling, editor of a 1990s and 2000s countercultural conspiracy blog called The Konformist, argued otherwise: “If this moment is a victory for the conspiracy culture,” he wrote, “it is a Pyrrhic victory at best.”

“There’s a few different stories we can tell about what happened,” Douglas Rushkoff, a media theorist and author, told me. Conspiracy culture up through the ’90s was dominated by what could be called a “radio sensibility.” Fringe topics were mostly discussed on late-night talk shows. There were guest experts, and listeners could call in, but the host still functioned as a (lenient) gatekeeper, and the theories themselves conformed to a narrative format. They were, for the most part, complete stories, with beginnings, middles and ends.

In the digital age, he said, sense-making had become a fragmented, nonlinear and crowdsourced affair that as a result could never reach a conclusion and lacked internal logic. There were always potential new connections to be spotted — in the case of the 2020 election, for instance, two imprisoned Italian hackers, or a voting machine company founded by Venezuelans. This lack of satisfying resolution meant the new theories had no natural stopping point, he said, and their perpetual motion eventually brought them to a place that was “much more strident” — “even amongst the left.”

The new “born-digital” conspiracy theories, like QAnon and the Great Reset, are constantly looking forward by necessity. Attaching themselves to the fast-paced flow of current events and trending topics is a matter of survival on social media, which can also explain why those who perpetuate them rarely stay focused on unpacking just one event: The Great Reset theory, for example, began by alleging that the Covid-19 pandemic had been deliberately engineered by the global elite, but soon expanded to encompass climate change, economic inflation and local traffic schemes.

Some academics have argued that even when conspiracy theories warn of dark and dystopian futures, they are fundamentally optimistic: They are assertions that humans are ultimately in control of events, and humans can stop whatever terrible catastrophe is coming around the corner. But perhaps the problem is that human beings are no longer really in control of the conspiracy theories themselves. Even when Q, the anonymous figure who sparked the QAnon movement, stopped posting, the movement's adherents carried on.

Before we had even spoken over Zoom, Mr. Lewis sent me a 2022 Medium article written by Rani Baker that he said summed up a lot of his feelings about the topic. It was titled ["So When, Exactly, Did Conspiracy Culture Stop Being Fun?"](#) It was a question he said he had been struggling with too.

When I asked Mr. Lewis if he had become more moderate over time, he was ambivalent. He said he maintains his skepticism about power and the state, but he's less dogmatic these days — perhaps because he's gained a new appreciation for the destructive power of uncompromising narratives. His thinking on Sept. 11, in particular, has evolved, from what truthers call MIHOP (Made It Happen on Purpose) to LIHOP (Let It Happen on Purpose) to today, when he allows it might have been something very different: an event foreseeable in the abstract, but as a horrific consequence of decades of U.S. interference in the Middle East, not a government's deliberate attack on its own people.

But from Mr. Lewis's perspective, asking if he had moderated his views wasn't quite the right question. For him and many of the others we spoke to, the paranormal and the parapolitical had been their passion and their home for their entire adult lives, places where they had found friends, ideas and ways of theorizing about the world that fascinated and excited them. They were used to their interest in these topics making them outsiders. Now they found themselves living with one foot in and one foot out of the current conspiracy scene, which had become increasingly popular, ubiquitous and dangerous. As they saw it, it wasn't that they had rejected conspiracy culture; conspiracy culture was leaving them behind.

As we wrapped up one of our interviews, Mr. Lewis told me that he finds himself increasingly returning to listening to old broadcasts of his to see if he can make sense of when that turning point began.

"I keep trying to imagine," he said. "Like, I think of the time before, and I think of the time now, and it's like, yeah, where did the transition happen? Were there milestones along the way? Were there signs, portents, that we could have recognized?" He trails off and pauses. "And I don't have the answer to this, but that's kind of where my mind keeps going."

Annie Kelly is a postdoctoral researcher working on conspiracy theories at King's College London and the University of Manchester. She is also the British correspondent for the podcast "QAnon Anonymous."

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How QAnon and Jan. 6 Ripped the Conspiracy Theory World Apart

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