

**HONORS: The Moon Landing: An Analysis of Why People Believe It Was Faked**

Quintin Nelson and Kade Carlson

Communications, Penn State Altoona

COMM100N: Mass Media and Society

Dr. S. N. Mohammed

December 17, 2020

## **Abstract**

The Apollo 11 Moon landing was a great technological feat for the United States, but some still have yet to believe it actually happened. The present paper explores conspiracy theories and why people believe them. Gathering data from videos and articles of news sources, the motivations behind believers of 'the Moon landing was faked' theory were analyzed. It can be found that such people tend to mistrust the government and have stubborn social ties.

## **HONORS: The Moon Landing: An Analysis of Why People Believe It Was Faked**

The world is full of crazy, strange, and unusual things. Things that may or may not be easy to understand. Whether it is the mysterious secrecy of Area 51, the blurry images of a big-footed creature in the woods, or the unknown purpose of the Stonehenge, people seek answers. Some answers are a little more far out there than others, but it is part of our nature to want closure. According to Karen Douglas, “finding causal explanations for events is a core part of building up a stable, accurate, and internally consistent understanding of the world” (Douglas) But some explanations seem to fall under the idea that there is something dark under the surface. These explanations, called conspiracy theories, often fall into social or political discourse and are, according to Douglas, “explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups.” One of the most popular American conspiracy theories involves Area 51. The government claims that this compound is a testing ground for the US Air Force. However, information about it is highly classified and is kept under wraps. This has led many people to believe that it is the government’s headquarters for alien surveillance. The government, in this situation, stands as the powerful group, and the secret plot is the answer to whether or not aliens exist.

### **Questions and Methods**

This research paper is aimed at understanding the psychology behind the belief in the Moon landing conspiracy theory. What evidence do people stand behind and what makes them believe in it? This question will be analyzed using motivational methods behind conspiracy theory belief and communications theories.

The Moon landing conspiracy has a lot to teach about communication. To evaluate whether it followed previous studies of conspiracy theories, videos and articles were collected from two news stations on YouTube and four news articles. This data was chosen based on the ability to make a proper evaluation of the Moon landing conspiracy, and various theories on conspiracies and the role they play in communication. This data is also gathered from credible new sources that can further increase the strength of the evaluation.

## **Background on Moon Landing**

The Moon landing was a tremendously important moment in American history and for many reasons too. It was a part of the greater whole: the Apollo missions. These missions originated from a dream of President John F. Kennedy: to land on the Moon and return to Earth. But according to Discover News, there was more than meets the eye. “The 1960s were largely defined by global friction between the world's leading superpowers. While not engaged in direct armed conflict, the Soviet Union and the United States were each building an argument for supremacy. Each side made its case through technological advancement, political expansion, and proxy wars such as the Vietnam War. So, when President John F. Kennedy announced on May 25, 1961, America's intention to go to the Moon, it was more about showing up terrestrial enemies than exploring an extraterrestrial world” (DNews). As history shows, however, we won ‘The Space Race’ against the Soviet Union. According to NASA, “Apollo 11 launched from Cape Kennedy on July 16, 1969, carrying Commander Neil Armstrong, Command Module Pilot Michael Collins and Lunar Module Pilot Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin into an initial Earth-orbit of 114 by 116 miles. An estimated 650 million people watched Armstrong's televised image and heard his voice describe the event as he took "...one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind" on July 20, 1969” (Loff).

## The Moon Landing Conspiracy Theory

If researching American conspiracy theories, another popular theory that would come up is that the government faked the 1969 Apollo 11 Moon landing. Several isolated pieces of evidence that appear in videos and photos of the event that support this theory. Some include competing shadows, crosshairs from the camera appearing behind objects, and that the American flag appears to look like it's fluttering in the wind. In general, the idea is that "the United States simply hadn't yet developed the technology for such a mission" and used a set to fake it, according to EJ Dickson of *The Rolling Stone* (Dickson). Despite these theories, there is overwhelming evidence that the landing did, in fact, happen. According to Neil deGrasse Tyson, a well-known astrophysicist, said in an interview with Penguin Books UK that "if you wanted to fake the Moon landing, you would have to fake all of these documents... it just seems to me, that it is way easier to just go to the Moon" (Penguin Books UK).

The Moon landing conspiracies became popular through a former US Navy officer Bill Kaysing. Bill Kaysing was a technical writer for one of the Apollo manufacturers. He explained all the inside knowledge he claimed to have in his book *We Never Went to the Moon: America's Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle* (Knight). There are various reasons why the conspiracy theory gained lots of traction. Most importantly, there was a lot of distrust in America after "... citizens read the leaked Pentagon Papers showing that the Johnson Administration had been systematically lying about the Vietnam War" (Knight). Not to mention several reports that show "...a high probability that there had been a conspiracy to kill Kennedy..." (Knight). The combination of several government leaks led to vast distrust from the public and fuel to the flame for Kaysing's book about the Moon landings being fake. This is where gatekeeping theory favored Kaysing. He wasn't publishing this as a news story, but as a book. The only gatekeepers

that stood in his way were his editors, which allowed him to bring this conspiracy to the public. With no restrictions as to what he could publish it was only a matter of time before his conspiracy began to gain traction.

## **The Three Motivations to Believe a Conspiracy Theory**

There are three general motives that would make someone believe a conspiracy theory: existential, social, and paranoid.

### **Existential Motivation**

As Karen Douglas outlines in *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, an existential motive results from a “(need) to feel safe and secure in their environment and to exert control over the environment as autonomous individuals and as members of collectives”. People who fall into the existential motive category tend to believe things that will warp reality into a comfortable basis. If someone is feeling upset over a global pandemic, they may convince themselves that the pandemic is a government trick. This is a casual explanation that warps reality but leaves the person in a comfortable spot: that the pandemic isn’t really happening. This type of thinking weaves into uses and gratifications theory, which is “a psychological communication perspective that focuses on individual use and choice by asserting that different people can use the same mass medium for very different purposes”, according to Hanjun Ko’s article *Internet Uses and Gratifications: A Structural Equation Model of Interactive Advertising* (Ko). In general, the uses and gratification theory is an explanation for why certain people only like to view certain types of media. For example, Republicans probably aren’t watching lots of Democratic news channels. People who enjoy the Pittsburgh Steelers are probably not watching the Dallas Cowboy football game. People consume media that fits their beliefs. In terms of

conspiracy theories and the existential motivations behind a belief in one, people who feel uncomfortable with the ‘truth’ explanation of an event will tend to align themselves with a belief that does make themselves comfortable. They will stick with that, especially in the types of media they ingest.

### **Social Motivation**

A second motive behind conspiracy belief is a social motive. Douglas again outlines that “causal explanations, conspiracy explanations included, are also informed by various social motivations, including the desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group”. This type of motivation is more of a ‘group mentality’ than the previous, focusing on shifting the blame onto others to protect one’s social grouping, rather than protecting oneself. For example, in the light of a losing election, a political party may spread the word that an opposing party’s member said something bad during a debate. While the truth lies in the fact that the ‘awful speech’ was just taken out of context, the party will spread this conspiracy theory in the hopes to protect their group. This also ties into the type of media people chose to encase themselves in. Cultivation theory, as Eman Mosharafa states in *All You Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory* as a reference to television, “the theory proposes that the danger of television lies in its ability to shape not a particular viewpoint about one specific issue but in its ability to shape people's moral values and general beliefs about the world” (Mosharafa). In general, television and media can mold people. For example, if someone consumes media with lots of swearing in it, they may find themselves adapting their vocabulary to match that of said media.

### **Paranoia Motivation**

The third motive is paranoia. This is a broad term that, as Richard Hofstadter states in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, comes in-between clinical and metaphorical paranoia, but in general views history as a “conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power” (Hofstadter). According to Hargrove Stempel in *Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories*, socially marginalized groups and consumers of non-mainstream media are more likely to fit into the paranoid style and believe in conspiracy theories (Stempel). This theory is a placeholder for those types of people who believe in conspiracy theories out of paranoia. Whether it is a psychological disorder or if a certain group of people is more likely to be paranoid and seek answers, paranoia is the blurred line between existential and social motivations.

## **Data**

### **This Morning Interview with Martin Kenny**

In an interview with This Morning, published on YouTube, Martin Kenny shared his opinions of the moon landing and how he believes it was faked. One of the first things he discusses is how “we had no way of verifying anything we are told” (This Morning). He explains that everyone saw the moon landing but have no way to prove or check that it did, indeed, happen. When it was suggested that an overwhelming number of documents and information had to be forged to make the moon landing fakeable, Kenny replied with information pertaining to the very few amounts of people who have gone beyond low-Earth orbit. Kenny then went to conclude that the only way to decide if the moon landing happened was to analyze the data gathered from the mission. However, he says that “(this data) was not only released, but NASA destroyed it” (This Morning). He also quotes NASA astronaut Donald Pettit, who said “...go to



the Moon in a nanosecond, the problem is, we don't have the technology to do that anymore. We used to, but we destroyed the technology and it's a painful process to build up again" (This Morning). Kenny additionally makes the point that we have no idea what the Moon is made of. He says that anybody could buy a commercial camera and take close up pictures of it, despite the fact that the Moon is 238,900 miles away. He says some people have pictures of the Moon "showing it sometimes translucent, you can see through it, right. Sometimes it's got something that's called a lunar wave... we don't know what that is. It's a mystery" (This Morning).

### **BuzzFeed Interview with Matthew Real**

In an interview with BuzzFeed, published on YouTube, Matthew Real discusses his reading, research, and opinions on the moon landing. He mentions that the government had a motive to fake it: The Soviet Union. He then outlined several phenomena and information that made him believe something wasn't right. The first piece of evidence Real mentions relates to the 'Van Allen Belts'. "the Van Allen Belts are these radiation belts... its radiation and would tear up the human body. NASA was having a really hard time trying to figure out how to safely send someone through the Van Allen Belts" (BuzzFeed). Real also mentions that several people have gone missing or were killed, concerning the Space Race, including several Cosmonauts and Gus Grissom. He then describes a few photos of the Moon landing where there are crosshairs, fixed to the camera, that appear to be behind objects within the photograph. He suggested that the equipment was superimposed onto the picture as a result. Real also mentions that some photos have 'competing shadows', where the shadows from two objects head in different directions. Real believes that this is the result of several light sources, allegedly set lighting. Real also says that "the easiest way to prove that we've been to the Moon, is to show people the things on the Moon. However, everyone insists we do not have telescopes big enough to see the (stuff)

we put on the Moon” (Buzzfeed). Real, in conclusion, also mentions that if the videos of the astronauts walking on the moon are sped up, it looks like they are walking normally on Earth.

### **Popular Mechanics Article with Interviews with Jarrah White and Bart Sibrel**

This article, written by Eric Spitznagel, follows several conspiracy theorists and discusses their ideas and opinions. The first, Jarrah White, took extreme measures to record as much film as possible during the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon landing. “I always have my video recorders ready to tape everything. I have one machine set to record ABC or SPS or Network Ten or whatever, another machine set to record the other networks, and probably a third machine to catch anything that overlaps with the other two” he said (Spitznagel). The reason was that White claims that they give inconsistent or strange statements on occasion. He also claims to have recorded Gene Cernan, an Apollo 17 astronaut, saying “I didn’t go to the moon... not to go home” (Spitznagel). Even though this phrase about Cernan’s feelings of ‘not wanting to die in space’, White found hesitation in the recorded statement.

The second interviewee was Bart Sibrel, who is known for his 2001 documentary *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Moon*, a film that claims the landings were staged. He is also known for confronting Buzz Aldrin, an Apollo 11 astronaut, and being punched in the face. However, Sibrel claims that “if someone said I did not walk on the moon when I really did, that would be like throwing a feather at me. Why would throwing a feather at me make me so violently angry that I’d punch somebody in the face?” (Spitznagel) Sibrel had also asked the article’s publisher to make not of his case. In this short section, Sibrel mentions the ‘competing shadows’. He also mentions that “what the United States government is claiming is that they sent

astronauts one thousand times farther than they can send them today, with fifty-year older technology, and on the very first attempt, with all of NASA containing one-millionth the computing power of a cell phone” (Spitznagel).

### **The Conversation Article and Bill Kaysing**

This article begins by explaining who Bill Kaysing is. Bill Kaysing was a technical writer for one of the rocket manufacturers that worked on the Apollo missions. In 1976 he wrote a book called *We Never Went to the Moon: America's Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle*. This created a conspiracy theory that the Moon landing was a staged effort put together by NASA. Bill Kaysing claims there is clear evidence such as crosshairs etched into cameras, or a mysterious letter C visible on rocks nearby. Kaysing's theory began to take hold in a time when there was major distrust in the country. Several scandals began during this time such as the Watergate Scandal and government papers that implied a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. The Moon landing conspiracy was one of the theories that began a new kind of conspiracy theory that reinterprets publicly available information rather than uncovering suppressed information. There were also a couple of films involved that helped the conspiracy theory's cause. Those were *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Capricorn One* (Knight).

### **VOA News Article**

This article explains the evidence people had to prove the moon landing was fake. The flag “rippling in the wind” was one of the major pieces of evidence. However, this can be explained by the bending of the metal frame that was holding the flag. Some theorists claim the camera did not capture any of the stars. However, this was due to the camera's aperture. These conspiracy theorists have also caused bad blood with many of the astronauts. The astronauts

claim that the conspiracies are an insult to the 400,000 Americans who helped get America to the moon (Schwartz).

### **Space.com Article**

Many people were skeptical because of the technological aspect of the moon landing. There were several movies such as the James Bond movie *Diamonds Are Forever* that brought the moon landing conspiracy into the mainstream. Several famous scientists such as the Mythbusters debunked the hoax live on TV to educate people. Allard Beutel, a NASA spokesperson also recited several pieces of evidence supporting the Moon landing to the Washington Post. Some people argue that airing debates about the Moon landing gives the conspiracy credibility and can be dangerous just like anti-vax campaigns that compromise children and people with weak immune systems (Howell).

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Mistrust and Existential Motivations**

When analyzing the data, a common theme that can be assumed is that believers have a general mistrust of the government. In the interview with Martin Kenny, you can see the sheer mistrust in the way he discusses his reasons he believes. He frequently says phrases along the lines of “we (have) no way of verifying anything we’re told” and “we don’t know what it is” (This Morning). He goes as far as saying that we have no way of knowing what the Moon is made of, or even if it’s real. It is very clear that to convince Kenny, he must have been there himself. It can be concluded that he does not trust what NASA says. In addition, since the Apollo missions were both scientific and politically driven, it can be assumed the United States government is not trusted as well.

Matthew Real also hints at mistrust in the government. He mentions Gus Grissom, one of the original astronauts selected for the Apollo missions. According to the Washington Post, a fire in the Apollo 1 cockpit occurred during a preflight testing procedure on Jan. 27, 1967 (Washington Post). The fire killed Roger Chaffee, Virgil “Gus” Grissom, and Ed White II. According to Real, Grissom was “publicly critical of NASA’s success and ability to reach the Moon. They needed him quiet” (BuzzFeed). Real believes they purposely caused the fire to prevent any discrepancies about the landing. Note that he openly admits that NASA did this on purpose.

This mistrust of the government, as outlined by The Conversation, wasn’t rare around the time of the Moon landings. With the Watergate Scandal and the JFK assassination, it was quickly becoming clear to the public that they didn’t always get the whole picture from the government. With all of this in mind, it can be concluded that people who mistrust the government feel unsafe in their environment. Control and security have been compromised. One may ask ‘if the government lied about this, what else are they lying about?’ This question heightens with the fact that the Apollo missions were politically motivated too, and even more so since it was a race against the Soviet Union. Approximately 28% of Americans believed that the Moon landing was fake in a 1976 poll (Dickson) compared to only about 5-10% of Americans who believe it was fake today (Knight). In the case of the 1970s, it was difficult for the American public to believe the proof of the government. Moreover, it was easier to find proof against the Moon landing that was spread by Bill Kaysing. People who wanted to fill gaps in the unknown became far more likely to believe the conspiracy theory because of this mistrust.

All of this ties into the existential motivation mindset. People who believe these theories out of mistrust feel insecure in this country. They will warp their reality to find this mindset, including believing that their already ‘untrustworthy’ government is up to no good.

### **Confirmation Bias and Social Motivations**

The more data that is gone through the more it becomes clear that most believers in the Moon landing fall for a high level of confirmation bias, picking up on every piece of evidence without searching for any sort of refutation to strengthen their beliefs.

This can be seen in the various videos and articles in the data. Martin Kenny tended to avoid questions and information, such as the fact that to fake the landing, thousands of documents and engineering hours would have needed to be faked as well. Kenny replied with an off-topic piece of evidence.

Others, such as Matthew Real and Bart Sibrel, use photographic inconsistencies as part of the basis for their arguments. Some inconsistencies, such as the lack of stars in the pictures and the ‘missing photographer’ in the reflection of a helmet, have been debunked and scientifically explained. Despite the fact, however, they do not accept these as true.

Confirmation bias like this occurs mostly when humans have some sort of irrational attachment to a given topic (Casad). United States citizens harbored consistent feelings of betrayal as secrets of the government continued to get leaked. Americans most likely attached that feeling of betrayal and lack of trust to the Moon landing conspiracy theory and stuck to it. The same thing can be said for the Russians. A recent poll found 57% of Russians do not believe that the Moon landing happened. It has become a sense of national pride, as they had lost the Space Race. “No one wants to feel themselves a loser nation. So, this denialism is not so much

revenge, but it brings some calm to people...” (Luxmoore). The Moon landing conspiracy has stuck around 51 years after the Apollo missions because of confirmation bias.

This ties into social motivations. While the exact social belonging or group mentality each person belongs to cannot be concluded, it is obvious there is a strong social connection to this theory. The Russians, however, can be traced to their national pride and disgrace behind losing the Space Race.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it was found that people have several motivations for believing the theory. Some people showed signs of mistrust, whether it was towards NASA directly or towards the United States government. This mistrust comes from the political affiliations and issues between the believer and the government, or the Apollo missions themselves and the Soviet Union. This proves that mistrusting believers have existential motivations, as they feel uncomfortable with their reality, that is, that they see the government as a liar.

It was also found that some people show signs of confirmation bias. Most signs of this came to the surface as the denial of scientific evidence. Whether the evidence was based on the landing as a whole or as simple as an explanation for a strange occurrence, some believers will simply deny it. This proves that denying believers have some type of social ties that make their opinions fixated to such a degree, which are signs of social motivations.

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