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## COM 101: The Theory Behind The Practice

8 November 2005

**Dear Kenya,**

In early August, a set of tapes Marilyn Monroe recorded for her psychiatrist surfaced--and interest in the conspiracy theories surrounding her death resurfaced. Despite the fact that her death was ruled a suicide in 1962, decades later conspiracy buffs still bandy about fantastical scenarios concerning what really happened to the movie starlet. Some theories that have been circulating for the last 40 years include a murder by government agents designed to keep Monroe quiet about an affair with John F. Kennedy and a mob hit to avenge Kennedy for his crusade against organized crime by exposing his philandering ways.

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### The Agony and the Conspiracy



You don't have to be Oliver Stone or an *X-Files* junkie to enjoy a good conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are often used as a way to make sense of a world full of mysteries. When a situation lacks



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But it's not all about academics. Kenya has the

an explanation, we are likely to create one to put our enquiring minds at ease.

But in a world where truth is often stranger than fiction, how do we know whether the stories we hear are fact or fantasy? Some clues can be found from the source of the story. Is the storyteller reluctant to divulge information? Does the storyteller rely on the obscure and the improbable to make a point? Does the proof given for a theory include inconsistencies? Then there's a good chance that your source may be a conspiracy theorist.

(Source: Goldzwig, Steven R. (2002). Conspiracy Rhetoric at the Dawn of the New Millennium: A Response. *Western Journal of Communication* 66(4).)

### **Jonestown: Mass Suicide and Mass Conspiracies**

It's common for us to feel the need to make sense out of a tragedy that seems inexplicable. The mass suicide of over 900 men, women, and children in Jonestown is one such tragedy that defies reason--and without a credible explanation, incredible theories spring up in its place. Many wondered how something like that could have happened, especially because so many children were involved.



Rebecca Moore, who has done extensive research on Jonestown and its aftermath, put conspiracy theorists trying to make sense of the tragedy into three categories:

- *professional conspiracists*, including writers with a penchant toward finding conspiracies everywhere and "have developed a reputation among followers of knowing what is really happening";
- *Internet conspiracists*, who rely on the Web to spread their stories and are "a subcategory of professional conspiracists since their meat and potatoes is exploiting rumors, innuendoes, and wild stories"; and
- *non-professional conspiracists*, whose arguments appear more credible because they focus on the facts known about Jonestown rather than attribute looming external forces to the incident.

Was Jonestown a mass suicide or a mass murder? We may never really know what happened with Jim Jones and his followers, but we can be sure that conspiracy theories about Jonestown will live on.

(Source: Moore, Rebecca. (2002). Reconstructing Reality: Conspiracy Theories about Jonestown. *Journal of Popular Culture* 36(2).)

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## Conspiracy.com



Almost immediately after TWA flight 800 crashed in 1996, the World Wide Web was filled with stories attributing the explosion to an accidental misfire of a navy missile. Because some Web sites included different kinds of evidence, including an anonymous memo and video, to bolster these claims, the theory gradually gained credibility and spread from the Net to news networks.

(Source: Miller, Shane. (2002). Conspiracy Theories: Public Arguments as Coded Social Critiques: A Rhetorical Analysis of the TWA Flight 800 Conspiracy Theories. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39(1).)

## Random Facts of Senseless Communicating: Other Conspiracy Theories

Is the cornerstone of a major world religion based on a fallacy? According to Holger Kersten and Elmar R. Gruber, authors of *The Jesus Conspiracy*, the Christian tenet of Jesus dying on the cross has been disproved with the discovery that the Turin



Shroud--which is believed to have covered Christ during his death--is a fake. The authors hypothesize that Jesus did not actually die from crucifixion, but Paul of Damascus spread the story in order to further Christianity.

Ever since a large silver object crashed into the desert in Roswell, New Mexico, wild alien stories have flown around in their conspiratorial saucers. Although the government made an official statement claiming that what crashed on July 2, 1947 was a balloon, conspiracy theorists have told amazing tales of UFOs and alien autopsies that have made Roswell synonymous with extraterrestrials and the unknown.

Music lovers are no strangers to conspiracy theories, particularly when their heroes meet an untimely death. Musicians such as Elvis, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Tupac Shakur, and Kurt Cobain all have fantastical stories about their death circulating, which, along with their music, help keep them alive.

## Quick Communication Quote of the Week

"If I appear in every story that you tell, how can you say that I don't know you well?"



-"The Drifter" by David Poe  
from *The Late Album*

**Stay Tuned!**

In the next issue: Does bias in reporting influence voter behavior? According to a recent study of the conservative-leaning Fox News Channel, the media's slant has little effect on what actually goes on in the voting booth.



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