Network Apocalypse

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NETWORK APOCALYPSE

VISIONS OF THE END
IN AN AGE OF INTERNET MEDIA

edited by
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5. Baracknophobia and the Paranoid Style: Visions of Obama as the Antichrist on the World Wide Web

Amarnath Amarasingam

Abstract

This chapter explores the belief among certain subsets of the US population that Obama is the Antichrist depicted as setting the stage for the end of the world. First, I examine the apocalyptic fears and conspiracies surrounding the presidency of Barack Obama, placing it in historical and religious perspective. Second, I investigate how expressions of apocalypticism and conspiracism surrounding Obama manifest themselves on the Internet.

Conspiracism and apocalypticism in the United States do not begin with President Barack Obama, and they will not end with his administration. Many scholars have pointed out that these elements are deeply ingrained in American culture and often cannot be distinguished from each other (Boyer 1992; Lahr 2007; Strozier 1994). As Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons note, 'aggressive White supremacy, demagogic appeals, demonization, conspiracist scapegoating, anti-Semitism, hatred of the Left, militaristic nationalism, an apocalyptic style, and millennialist themes have repeatedly been at the center of our political conflicts, not on the fringe' (2000: 17). There have been dozens of books and articles written about black helicopters, the Federal Reserve, the Illuminati, Y2K, Area 51, and UFOs (Barkun 2003; Berlet and Lyons 2000: 323-44; Cowan 2003; Goldberg 2001; Tapia 2003; Wojcik 1997: 175-208). More recently, scores of individuals have come to doubt seriously the official story about what happened on 9/11 (Dunbar and Reagan 2005; Fenster 2008: 233-78; Mole 2006; Olmsted 2009: 205-31). The 9/11 Truth movement, as they have been dubbed, is divided into two camps: those who believe that the Bush administration either 'let it happen

on purpose' (LIHOP) or 'made it happen on purpose' (MIHOP). A 2006 Zogby poll found that 42 per cent of Americans believe that the US government and the 9/11 Commission concealed or refused to investigate key pieces of evidence that contradict the official story. An Ohio University survey similarly found that a third of Americans believe that the government deliberately carried out the 9/11 attacks or refused to stop them from occurring. Close to five million Americans (16 per cent) believe that secretly planted explosives brought down the Twin Towers (Manjoo 2008: 65-66). Such beliefs are spurred on through the Internet and the work of amateur film makers like Dylon Avery (of *Loose Change* fame). The Truth movement's attack on the 9/11 Commission report—written by two governors, four congressional representatives, three former White House officials, and two special counsels, taking two years to complete at a cost of $15 million—reminds us of another report in history that was slowly buried under an avalanche of absurdity.

When the Warren Commission released its 888-page report (and later, 26 volumes of supporting documents) on 24 September 1964, the number of people who rejected its findings was 31.6 per cent. Over one thousand conspiracy books have since been written on the subject, with some authors dedicating their entire life to uncovering a conspiracy. It does not seem to matter that the investigation into the Kennedy assassination was one of the most extensive and intensive in world history. For example, the FBI's investigation into the assassination produced an unprecedented twenty-five thousand interviews, and the submission of twenty-three hundred separate reports. Yet the most recent Gallup Poll, conducted in November 2003, 'shows that a remarkable 75 percent of the American public reject the findings of the Warren Commission and believe there was a conspiracy in the assassination' (Bugliosi 2007: xv). The recent documentary by Alex Jones, *The Obama Deception* (2009), declares Kennedy to have been our last real president. His assassination, carried out by the global financial elite, effectively transformed the presidency into a 'puppet post'.

A more recent survey of New Jersey voters showed that 21 per cent did not believe that Obama was born in the United States, 19 per cent believed that George W. Bush had prior knowledge of 9/11 and 8 per cent believed that Obama was the Antichrist. These numbers appear fairly low, but the results are more interesting when we look specifically at the interplay between demographics and beliefs. For example, 40 per cent of liberals, 50 per cent of African Americans, and 33 per cent of 18- to 29-years-olds thought that Bush had prior knowledge of 9/11. Similarly, 18 per cent of conservatives, 24 per cent of Hispanics, and 24 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds believed Obama to be the Antichrist (see Public Policy Polling 2009 for all results). As comedian Bill Maher, host of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, recently complained, 'Never underestimate the ability of a tiny fringe group

of losers to ruin everything . . . because in America, if you don't immedi-
ately kill errant bullshit, no matter how ridiculous, it can grow and thrive
and eventually take over, like crab grass or Cirque du Soleil' (YouTube
2009d).

This chapter has a twofold initiative: first, it will explore the apocalyptic
fears and conspiracies surrounding the presidency of Barack Obama, plac-
ing it in historical and religious perspective. I show that such anxiety fits
comfortably in the long history of right-wing populism that has long been
an intimate part of American culture. Second, I explore how expressions of
apocalypticism and conspiracism surrounding Obama manifest themselves
on the Internet. For many right-wing populists in the United States, the
Internet functions as a tool to fight back against the global elite and the
forces of evil.

Since it is assumed that the global elite and the forces of evil control the
traditional media, the Internet serves as an alternative avenue for populist
insurgency. As Timothy Melley has argued, the most recent surges in con-
spiracism not only attempt to tackle some specific political issue, social
organization or historical event; they are better understood as stemming
'largely from a sense of *diminished human agency*, a feeling that individu-
als cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be
able to control their own behavior' (2002: 62).

The Internet, as will be elaborated in the conclusion, allows individu-
als some sense of agency outside the reach of government, and outside the
reach of traditional media organizations. It functions as an inexpensive
way for them to expound deeply held beliefs that the mainstream media
tend to marginalize. Additionally, the Internet fosters what Cass Sunstein
(2007: 77) has called 'enclave deliberation', in which like-minded individu-
als associate and converse almost solely with one another. I begin with an
exploration of right-wing populism in the United States, before examining
how views of Obama, specifically, are developing online.

They Got It under Control:
Right-Wing Populism in America

The movements and worldviews discussed below are multifaceted and
evade simple classification. They are a cocktail of millennialism, conspir-
acy, patriotism and scapegoating. The search for the Antichrist at times gets
wedded to theories of the Illuminati and the New World Order. At other
times, it remains purely in the realm of religion. For example, one individual
I interviewed dismissed the 9/11 Truth movement and Illuminati conspiracy
theories as products of the irrational mind all the while convinced, based on
flimsy numerological acrobatics, that Obama was the Antichrist. Although
not a perfect term, 'right-wing populism' best captures the contours of these

varying worldviews (Berlet and Lyons 2000). Another reason for using the term is to rectify the common misconception that these worldviews need not be taken seriously, as they are merely the 'lunatic fringe' of society. As Berlet and Lyons make clear, 'right-wing populists are dangerous not because they are crazy irrational zealots—but because they are not. These people may be our neighbors, our coworkers, and our relatives' (2000: 3; see also Boyer 1992).

Populism has been defined in a variety of ways (see, e.g. Canovan 1981), but it is generally thought to contain at least two core elements: a celebration of 'the people', plus some form of anti-elitism. 'The people' are always viewed as fighting back against the constant onslaught of the elites, who can varyingly be genuine social structures of oppression or ethereal forces difficult to pinpoint. As Berlet and Lyons note, right-wing populist movements are generally characterized by resistance to social change, fueled 'in a central way by fears of the Left and its political gains' (2000: 5). In Richard Hofstadter's seminal examination of the right-wing paranoid style in America during the 1960s, he similarly noted that there were three distinguishable fears that plagued many Americans: (1) there is a sustained conspiracy to undermine free capitalism and install socialism; (2) there has been a Communist takeover of government that has sold out national interests; and (3) Communist agents have infiltrated education, religion and the media to make it impossible for loyal Americans to fight back (1966: 25-26). If we attribute the amplified fear of Communism to the Cold War, it seems that there may be nothing new under the sun.

Right-wing populism, for the purposes of this paper, will be explored as a movement that is characterized by conspiracism as well as apocalypticism and millennialism. For some individuals, the two elements function separately, but, for most, they are intimately related, producing an extravagant anxiety about the one-world government, the Illuminati, Lucifer, the Antichrist, and the end times. As Mark Fenster notes, apocalypticism 'often echoes, and at times explicitly borrows, the theories of more secular right-wing conspiracy theorists; the lines between popular eschatology and reactionary, secular conspiracy theories can be blurry indeed' (2008: 199). However, for simplicity's sake, I will introduce them separately. Conspiracism is generally thought to be a form of scapegoating that 'frames the enemy as part of a vast insidious plot against the common good' (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 9). As Michael Barkun notes, the essence of a conspiracy theory is a sincere attempt to understand and explain evil. 'A *conspiracy belief* is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end' (Barkun 2003: 3). According to conspiracy theorists, events in the world are governed by design, not randomness. This emphasis on design, Barkun notes, often manifests itself in three principles that can be found to be part of all conspiracy theories: nothing happens by

accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected (2003: 3-4). As we will see below, the fears surrounding the rise of Obama are a mixture of older fears of the Federal Reserve as a cabal of secret bankers, of the Bilderberg Group/Trilateral Commission, Bohemian Grove, the Illuminati and the Freemasons. Obama, some argue, is nothing more than a Trojan horse, hand-picked by the global elite to enrapture the masses and sedate their revolutionary anger following the Bush administration.

Few secret societies have aroused as much suspicion as the Freemasons. The early Freemasons were craftsmen who were adept at carving stones on buildings such as cathedrals and castles. In order to keep out interlopers, 'they both guarded trade secrets and (with time) devised confidential verbal and physical signs that enabled one accredited mason to recognize another' (Pipes 1997: 59). The reason why non-craftsmen eventually came to join the Masons remains the subject of scholarly debate. However, it is known that by 1717 the Masons had founded a Grand Lodge in London, and that six years later, they had developed a constitution.

After a lodge opened in Paris in 1737, King Louis XV demanded that his subjects not associate with the group. The Vatican similarly issued several papal bulls against the organization. Around this time, the Freemasons began to splinter. For example, a Scottish Freemasonry developed, and an individual by the name of Giuseppe Balsamo founded an Egyptian Freemasonry, which may have played a role in the French Revolution. It is with this increasingly decentred chaos that conspiracy theories begin to be associated with the Freemasons. One argument put forth by some anti-Masons stated that 'whatever the innocence of specific members, the order as a whole might be guilty of insurgency or sabotage. There could always be a further, more hidden rank that manipulated all the others' (Pipes 1997: 61). The secrecy of the Freemasons began to be linked with other groups, such as the Knights Templar, the Philosophes, the Rosicrucians and the Jews. To make matters seem more ominous, conspiracy theorists began to look into the Bavarian Illuminati, which emerged around the same time.

The Illuminati scare can be traced to its 1776 founding in Bavaria by law professor Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830). Although completely ceasing to exist by 1787 and counting only three thousand members throughout its existence, the Illuminati would become the main ingredient of almost all contemporary conspiracy theories (Pipes 1997: 63). The teachings of the group, Hofstadter notes, 'seem to be no more than another version of Enlightenment rationalism, spiced with an anticlerical animus that seems an inevitable response to the reactionary-clerical atmosphere of eighteenth-century Bavaria' (1966: 10). They were initially suspected of having penetrated into France and causing the Revolution, and some in the United States feared that their country was next. The 1798 Alien Act, written with such fears in mind, stated that the president could expel any foreign national

thought to be involved in 'treasonable or secret machinations against the government' (Goldberg 2001: 6). As a secret society, the Illuminati were characterized by strict rules of membership and a model of governance whereby the leadership kept secret their purposes from the general members. In other words, what some anti-Masonic groups feared about the Freemasons 'became a deliberate strategy of Weishaupt's Illuminati' (Pipes 1997: 63). The Illuminati were far more influential after ceasing to exist than during their brief tenure. Already by 1797, the Illuminati were being accused of attempting to rule the world. In the United States and Canada, they were seen to be keen on destroying religion, installing communism and directing 'all evil forces'.

Although fear of the Illuminati and the Freemasons was present throughout the twentieth century, it made headway in the mid-twentieth century through the famous John Birch Society (JBS). Founded by Robert Welch in 1959, the members of this group expressed fears that both the United States and the Soviet Union were controlled by the same global cabal, and 'if left unexposed, the traitors inside the US government would betray the country's sovereignty to the United Nations for a collectivist new world order managed by a "one-world socialist government"' (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 177; see also Goldberg 2001: 37-50). When the Cold War came to a close, many thought it was simultaneously the death knell of the JBS. However, the Gulf War, George H.W. Bush's call for a New World Order, and the increased right-wing populism of the 1990s, kept the group active. As will be evident, many of the fears expressed by the JBS are present in the discourse surrounding the Obama administration.

The second element of right-wing populism is apocalypticism/millennialism (Baumgartner 1999; Fenster 2008: 197-232). As Berlet and Lyons note, 'The poisoned fruit of conspiracist scapegoating is baked into the American apple pie, and its ingredients include destructive versions of apocalyptic fears and millennialist expectations' (2000: 11). Apocalypticism is the belief in an imminent confrontation between the forces of good and evil, a cataclysmic event that will lead to epochal transformation. Millennialism can be seen to be a form of apocalypticism, in which contemporary Christians believe that when Jesus returns, he will reign for a period of one thousand years (a millennium). Millennialism often takes two forms: postmillennialists, on the one hand, believe that the millennium will be brought about by humanity, through social reform and the installation of Christian values in society, all working in accordance with the divine plan. Christ will return after this slow progression toward goodness and the gradual elimination of evil. Premillennialists, on the other hand, believe that Christ's return will *begin* the one thousand years of Christian rule. This belief assumes that humanity cannot save itself, that this 'inherently sinful world can be redeemed only through catastrophe and supernatural intervention' and that

leading up to the Second Coming of Christ, 'humanity will become increas-ingly evil' (Wojcik 1997: 35).

Christian apocalypticism and millennialism are based on many biblical sources, such as the books of Daniel and Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible, and the Gospel of Mark (ch. 13) and the book of Revelation in the New Testa-ment. Revelation, however, is by far the most influential text for apocalyp-tic and millennialist thinking. As Jonathan Kirsch notes, 'The idea that the world will end (and soon)—and the phantasmagoria of words, numbers, colors, images, and incidents in which the end-times are described in the book of Revelation—are deeply woven into the fabric of Western civili-zation, both in high culture and in pop culture' (2006: 2). Probably writ-ten toward the end of the first century CE by John on the Greek island of Patmos, Revelation takes the form of a letter that John wrote to a group of seven Anatolian churches that were being persecuted by the Romans. Rev-elation is, in a sense, John's way of offering encouragement and comfort 'by revealing the blessed future state of Christians who are faithful to the testimony of Jesus even at the cost of their own lives and by assuring the readers of the inevitability and imminence of the divine punishment of their persecutors' (Aune 2000: 1187).

Many Christians in the United States have found such sentiments rel-evant for the contemporary world. As Goldberg states, for believers 'the nation was created to perform the Lord's will and surely was chosen as the site of the Second Coming and God's future kingdom' (2001: 66). The United States, however, was currently awash in sin and 'had betrayed its calling and fallen away from the Lord. Its leaders had sacrificed national sovereignty to the Antichrist and sworn allegiance to Satan's New World Order' (Goldberg 2001: 67). In modern America, they argue, the signs of transgression are many: condom sales, rampant sexuality, pornography, abortion, Darwinism, popular music, the changing status of women, the New Age movement, the crime rate, television and homosexuality. Apoca-lyptic writers also point to the reign of science and the scientific method as promoters of 'the same false message of human self-sufficiency' (Boyer 1992: 236).

Believing that the United States was mired in sin, apocalyptic writers turned to biblical sources in order to track God's plan for the future. Above all, Revelation provided individuals with the most fodder for apocalyptic speculation:

> John writes of an angel who beckoned him to the 'door' of heaven to see 'things which must be hereafter'. Before him appears a succession of images of tribulations and calamities in sequences of seven. Earthquakes, storms, polluted rivers and seas, falling stars, locust, famine, and plague devastate the faithless but are only a prelude to the final battle. Satan con-fronts God and takes the shape of 'a great red dragon having seven heads

and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads'. On a base of ten king-doms, the dark lord elevates his heir, the 'beast' or Antichrist: 'And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they wor-shipped the beast, saying Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?' Joined by his coconspirator, the false prophet, the Anti-christ creates an economic system that requires every person to 'receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of the beast. . . . Six hundred threescore and six.' God pours out his wrath on those who accept the mark, while the faithful suffer through forty-two months of persecution. The physical return of Jesus brings redemption, and he leads the heavenly host to victory over the beast and false prophet (Goldberg 2001: 67-68).

Popularizers of end-time prophecy have been numerous in the United States, including people such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jack Van Impe and John Hagee. One of the individuals who first put apocalypticism on the best-seller lists in the United States was a charismatic preacher named Hal Lindsey (b. 1930). His book *The Late, Great Planet Earth* was published in 1970 and has sold over thirty-five million copies to date. Lindsey's great skill was to decipher the bizarre visions recounted in Revelation in a way that contemporary readers could understand them (Fenster 2008: 209-14). As Jonathan Kirsch notes, Lindsey's book, largely a restatement of John Nelson Darby's dispensational premillennialism, is distinguished by his 'undeniable genius for hot-wiring the book of Revelation to the geo-polit-ical realities of the contemporary world' (2006: 223; see also Boyer 1992: 80-112; Wojcik 1997: 37-59).

According to Lindsey, the Antichrist will be a politician who comes to power in the 'revived Roman Empire', the equivalent of today's European Union. As we will see, some of those who are convinced that Obama is the Antichrist point to this ingrained opinion as one of the main reasons why Obama's true identity has gone unrecognized. In *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey predicted that the Rapture would take place in 1981. When this did not occur, he provided a new prediction in *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (1980). In 1994, he provided yet another prediction in *Planet Earth 2000 A.D.* This time, it was not Communism but Islamic fun-damentalism that would be the final adversary of Jesus Christ (for more on Lindsey's methods of argumentation, see O'Leary 1994: 134-71).

Apocalypticism entered American politics on the back of an individual deeply inspired by Lindsey's *Late, Great Planet Earth*. Ronald Reagan was 'perhaps the first national figure outside of fundamentalist circles to openly and unapologetically affirm his belief in the imminent fulfillment of Bible prophecy' (Kirsch 2006: 226). Reagan was accustomed to seeing cosmic significance in worldly events. Following the 1969 Libyan coup by Muammar al-Gaddafi, Reagan remarked that it was a 'sign that the day of

Armageddon isn't far off. Everything's falling into place. It can't be long now' (quoted in Kirsch 2006: 226). Reagan's secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger, and his interior secretary, James Watts, among others, all read the book of Revelation along with Lindsey's book and eagerly awaited the end times. Reagan was so influenced by Lindsey's book that he wanted his military leaders to understand its significance fully. With Reagan's blessing, Lindsey was invited to brief the Pentagon on the 'divine implications' of their hostilities with the Soviet Union. Similarly, Jerry Falwell was asked to deliver the same message to the National Security Council. No other president in recent history has allied apocalypticism and national security with such ease or impenitence.

As Paul Boyer has written, 'The theological foundation for these wide-ranging reflections on contemporary global developments was the doctrine of *Antichrist*—the evil figure who will arise after the Rapture and rule for seven years (the Tribulation) before his defeat at Armageddon' (1992: 272). This scenario develops out of a handful of references in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. For example, believers point to the book of Daniel, where there is description of a 'little horn' that sprouts from the Beast, or to Revelation, where in chs. 13 and 17 the Antichrist is thought to be the beast that arises from the sea. Jesus' warning about false Christs in Mk 13.22 and St Paul's statement about a 'man of sin' in 2 Thessalonians are other examples. However, the actual word 'Antichrist' appears in only four verses of Scripture: 1 Jn 2.18, 22; 4:3; and 2 Jn 1:7 (see Fuller 1995 for discussion). As Boyer notes, 'From these brief and cryptic references evolved a vast body of belief and legend that took many forms throughout Christianity's two-thousand-year history' (1992: 273). Many individuals have been suspected of being the Antichrist, with popes heading the list. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy was also suspected by some apocalyptic writers. After his death, a few 'expected Kennedy to rise from his coffin, fulfilling the prophecy in Revelation that the Beast would miraculously recover from a deadly head wound' (Boyer 1992: 275). In the 1970s, Henry Kissinger was a suspect, as well as Ayatollah Khomeini (during the hostage crisis), Saddam Hussein (during the Gulf War) and Osama bin Laden (after 9/11).

Baracknophobia Online: Films, Forums and Facebook

Certain elements of the American population have come to distrust deeply those in power. Since he declared his intention to run for president, Obama has become the object of much of this suspicion (Friedman 2009). When he quotes Scripture, they think he is being crafty; when he is photographed in prayer, they think it political posturing. Such a sustained pessimism cannot be countered with fact or rational argument (see Stroup and Shuck 2007;

Zeleny 2009). What most take to be his charisma, his sincerity and his genuine concern for the future of America, is, for some individuals, a well-oiled façade, a sham designed to enrapture and hypnotize the masses, while truly devious plans are secretly unfolded. Beginning during the 2008 election cycle, the Internet began teeming with speculation about Obama and the New World Order, and about Obama and the Antichrist. As Kirsch notes, speculation about the identity of the Antichrist 'can be seen as a kind of Rorschach test for the anxieties of any given age' (2006: 12). E-mails circulated widely and amateur videos were posted on YouTube proclaiming strange personality and numerological resemblances between Obama and biblical statements about the Antichrist. A recent Google search of 'Obama' and 'Antichrist' yielded 2.4 million results.

Two Facebook searches of the same terms, as well as 'Obama' and 'New World Order', indicated the existence of over 200 and 137 Common Interest groups respectively, some with several hundred members. These search results indicate at the very least that there is a budding interest in the idea of Obama as the Antichrist. It does not, to be sure, show that millions of people subscribe to such beliefs. This section of the chapter will explore the online presence of anti-Obama sentiment in its varying forms. The Web sites, forums, and films discussed below were not chosen randomly but were selected based on the number of people they attracted, the popularity of their ideas (i.e. if the same beliefs appeared in several different venues) and frequency of user activity. In other words, examples were chosen if they showed some evidence of being a moderately active online community. For the sake of organization, I have divided the profusion of online content into two themes: (1) those who believe Obama will pave the way for the Antichrist, and (2) those who believe that Obama is the literal Antichrist.

Obama Is Part of the One-World Government and Will Pave the Way for the Antichrist

Those who believe that Obama is the literal Antichrist (see below) seem to be smaller in number than those who believe that he is only *paving the way* for the end times. Beliefs under this first theme vary widely among those who, for some reason, find Obama slightly scary, those who believe that Obama is a puppet of the New World Order (NWO), and those who believe that he is working for higher powers than the NWO (namely Lucifer). As one individual noted in the *Backwoods Home Magazine* forum discussion, which is dedicated to the issue of Obama as the Antichrist, there is just *something* about Obama that makes her fearful:

> The things the man said and his actions I found to be quite unnerving. Especially his speech in front of the stage with the pillars and the huge pictures of himself. There was a point during this speech where Obama

> paused to hear the crowds applaud and chant his name. The stance he took and the expression on his face were very Hitler like. This speech scared the hooey out of me when it was so obvious to me that he was so much absorbing and gaining so much energy off of the crowd's enthusiasm. It was truly freaky (BHM Forum 2008).

Following from this, there has been another document circulating around the Internet entitled, 'An Examination of Obama's Use of Hidden Hypnosis Techniques in His Speeches' (PennyPress n.d.: 1), which argues that Obama is 'not just using subliminal messages, but textbook covert hypnosis and neuro-linguistic programming techniques on audiences that are intentionally designed to sideline rational judgment and implant subconscious commands to think he is wonderful and elect him President'. Similarly, YouTube contains many clips attempting to prove that if Obama's 'Yes we can' speeches are played backwards, it clearly sounds like 'Thank you Satan.' Fortunately, many of the comments following these clips mock the intention of the creators, asking, for example, why they feel the need to play the speech backwards at all (YouTube 2009b).

A small poll conducted on Survivalistboards.com shows that while 50 per cent of respondents believe that Obama is not the Antichrist, 12.5 per cent believe him to be the literal Antichrist, and 37.5 per cent believe that he is a 'smaller' Antichrist. Opinions vary about the nature of Obama. For example, one commenter stated:

> You are giving him way too much credit. His puppet masters are the ones in power. He appears from nowhere two years ago, is groomed for the presidential office before he completed the first term of an unremarkable couple of years in the senate, then runs a campaign costing hundreds of millions of dollars, which were certainly not his bucks. He's a tool for the power elite to achieve their ends. He's nobody and certainly not an Antichrist (Survivalistboards.com 2008).

As we will see, Obama's quick rise to power seems to signal different things to different people. Also, for this individual, Obama is just another puppet of those who are really running the United States and the world.

Discussions of the NWO exist in both apocalyptic literature and secular conspiracy theories. Peter Knight, for example, rightly points out that individualism is one of the main reasons why such fears are so prevalent in the United States. As he argues,

> In part, the United States is a nation of conspiracy theorists because the influence of larger social and economic forces in determining the lives of individuals is often regarded as a paranoia-inducing encroachment on the self-reliance of individuals. So, for example, where other people might conceivably view the daily involvement of 'big government' in the lives of its citizens as the caring embrace of the welfare state, many Americans see

only surveillance, conspiratorial interference, and an erosion of individual autonomy (2002: 7).

Alternatively, this obsession with the one-world government is indeed closely tied to apocalypticism and millennialism. Apocalyptic writers, through a reading of the book of Daniel (ch. 7) and Revelation, have been mining geopolitical events looking for signs of the one-world government, and they have found many candidates. As Daniel Wojcik notes, the postwar system of international finance and commerce, the emerging global economy, the League of Nations, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Bilderberg Group have all 'been closely monitored by premillennialists and regarded by some as evidence of the coming of the Antichrist's one-world economy and one-world government' (1997: 16).

Such religious and secular reactions to the threat of the New World Order are at times indistinguishable. For some individuals, the attitudes are intimately intertwined. For example, a popular report written by Mel Sanger, an author and researcher of the end times, argues that Obama

> does not qualify as the Antichrist because his lineage is not of Jewish descent as is required not only from a biblical perspective but also his bloodline and lineage is not consistent with the Masonic Jews requirement for a final messiah who will head a world government and convince even Orthodox Jews that he is a descendant of the line of David. . . . However what is clear, is that Barack Obama will be another pawn in the global government agenda since as president of the United States he will facilitate policies that will move the world closer to global government (2008: 14).

As another individual commented on the Kitco Forums, Obama's presidency

> must happen to set the stage for a total collapse of our monetary system. In turn we will be sold out into the one world government and our Constitution will be thrown out with last night's trash. . . . We will be broke, along with the rest of the world, and the people will welcome with open arms the Antichrist who will rise up out of the ashes of despair to be our savior. . . . Then for a short time things will be pretty good, then *shift* big time like we have never seen before or ever again. I believe Obama is key to all this being able to happen in the coming years (Kitco Forums 2008).

One of the most extensive anti-Obama Web sites is an elaborate, rambling, inconsistent, and disorganized blog run by an individual named MoniQue, containing links to documentaries, Illuminati conspiracy theories, 2012 predictions (the end date of the Mayan long count calendar), the Birther movement, as well as information about Obama as the Antichrist. It would require several weeks adequately to peruse this site, so let us focus

on only a few key themes. Although I have placed this site under the first theme, it is in fact a medley of all of these subjects plus a dozen more.

On her Web site, MoniQue scolds those who believe Obama to be just another puppet of the NWO. She argues that the hierarchy places Lucifer at the top, followed by the Illuminati, and then the New World Order. She pleads, 'Don't be a fool. Do not underestimate Obama, as if he is just a typical puppet of the now . . . Lucifer has big plans for Obama' (MoniQue). She goes on to note that Obama is in fact part of the Illuminati, but is planning to overthrow them. Obama secretly despises the Illuminati, made up of rich and powerful white men, because of his narcissism and megalomania. The site also argues that Obama is a member of the Boule, an African-American counterpart to Yale University's secretive Skull and Bones fraternity, as well as a member of the Prince Hall Freemasons, a black counterpart to the Freemasons (YouTube 2007). MoniQue goes on to argue that 'men like Farrakhan, who is said to be a 4-letter Mason and . . . Rev. Wright, a 33 degree Prince Hall Mason, and Boule members Rev. Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and others . . . are in ecstasy waiting' for Obama's coup. They know not, according to MoniQue and her fans, that Obama, with the help of Lucifer, is planning a total takeover.

Of all the sources discussed thus far, however, *The Obama Deception*, a 2009 documentary by talk radio host and darling of the conspiracy community Alex Jones, has been the most influential. As of this writing, it has been viewed over four million times on YouTube, is also available on GoogleVideo and is recommended on most of the Web sites and forums discussed in this chapter. *The Obama Deception* has garnered over ninety thousand viewer comments on YouTube, and over thirty thousand ratings, giving it an average rating of four and a half out of five stars. The film begins with Alex Jones setting the stage for the rise of Obama: 'America, in 2009, was desperate for change. The past eight years had been a disaster . . . the elite were in trouble. The people were beginning to see through their façade, past their front man, and to the ruling elite behind the throne. . . . And then on to the scene came a man who promised change' (YouTube 2009c). However, the film argues, change is not possible in the United States, as the presidency is nothing more than a 'puppet post' behind which stand the global power elite.

The Bilderberg Group, frequently attacked by conspiracy theorists (with some dedicating part of their lives to following the group's every move), is again singled out in the documentary as responsible for rising oil prices and the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market. Another entity targeted is the Trilateral Commission, which supposedly executes the plans of the Bilderbergs through regional groups around the world. The regional assemblage that manages the United States is, according to the film, the Council on Foreign Relations. Under such conditions, 'even if Barack Obama was

the most wonderful person in the world, he was groomed and brought to power by the global elite to carry out their agenda' (YouTube 2009c).

According to Jones and others in the film, the objective of the global elite had been hampered by the 'disastrous' Bush administration. Americans had been on the verge of revolution, dissatisfied with their government and ready for change. The global elite had to rectify the situation, and they found in Obama the perfect tool. He had the ability to placate the masses once again; his charisma and his words would anesthetize feelings of anger and frustration. As the film states, 'Obama is the perfect Trojan Horse. He makes the people feel like they finally have a place at the table, even as he betrays them' (YouTube 2009c). The paranoia in the film often reaches new levels of absurdity. For example, the film points to Obama's transition Web site and interprets his plan to 'require 50 hours of community service in middle school and high school and 100 hours of community service in college every year' *not* as Obama's attempt to engage the youth or foster social capital, but as a fascistic plan to conscript all 18- to 24-year-olds in America into 'a paramilitary, domestic security force' (YouTube 2009c).

Obama Is the Literal Antichrist

As discussed above, the quest to discover the identity of the Antichrist has a long history. The belief that Barack Obama might be the Antichrist is very difficult to trace to any single source. The Web site About.com traces one of the origins of this belief to an e-mail circulated in early 2008. The e-mail reads:

> According to The Book of Revelations the Antichrist will be a man, in his 40s, of MUSLIM descent, who will deceive the nations with persuasive language, and have a MASSIVE Christ-like appeal . . . the prophecy says that people will flock to him and he will promise false hope and world peace, and when he is in power, will destroy everything. Is it OBAMA?? I STRONGLY URGE each one of you to repost this as many times as you can! Each opportunity that you have to send it to a friend or media outlet . . . do it! (Emery 2008 [emphasis original]).

If this relatively innocuous e-mail message is in fact the root of such beliefs, it has successfully engendered a cottage industry of speculation and paranoia on the Internet.

YouTube has become home to many amateur videos proclaiming (or mocking) the idea that Obama is the Antichrist. A search for 'Obama' and 'Antichrist' yielded about fifteen thousand videos, attempting to relate Obama to, among other things, the Bible Code, the book of Revelation, the Illuminati, the New World Order, and the year 2012. One of the most popular videos propounding that Obama is the Antichrist is entitled 'Jesus Gave Us the Name of the Antichrist' (YouTube 2009a), which has, as of this

writing, been viewed over six hundred thousand times and is referenced in dozens of other Web sites. The narrator of the video points to Lk. 10.18, which states, 'And he said unto them, I saw Satan as lightning falling from the heights (or heavens).'

The video notes that Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, and since Aramaic is the 'most ancient form of Hebrew' (which is false), it holds that we can translate the key terms in this verse into Hebrew to see what they really mean. The narrator notes that, according to the Strong Hebrew Dictionary, the word for lightning is '*baraq*'. Similarly, the word for heights is '*bamah*'. The narrator then points out that the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, waw, is often transliterated as a *u* or *o* and is mostly used as a conjunction. Thus, 'I saw Satan as lightning falling from the heights' (Lk. 10.18) would, in Hebrew, be 'I saw Satan as *baraq o'bamah*'. The video contains a disclaimer at the end stating that the narrator is simply pointing to the facts, not declaring that Obama is the Antichrist (for a thorough treatment and debunking of this popular viral video, see Heiser 2009).

Another popular video, viewed over two hundred thousand times, is entitled 'Is OBAMA the ANTICHRIST?—12 of 19 Characteristics Are Met!' (YouTube 2008). The video explores 19 supposed characteristics of the Antichrist and argues that Obama met 12 of them even before taking office. The video is filled with vague associations, misinformation and simplistic analysis. To take just three examples, the video proclaims (with reference to biblical verses) that the Antichrist will be: (1) a 'stern-faced' king (Dan. 8.23) (according to the video, many have commented that Obama has a somber, stern face); (2) a 'lawless one' or 'rebel' (2 Thess. 2.3) (the video notes that the Secret Service has given Obama the codename The Renegade); (3) seen 'standing in the Holy Place' just before he takes office (Matthew 24) (the video shows pictures of Obama at the Western Wall as evidence). The video concludes by stating that it is 'too early to tell' for certain whether Obama is the Antichrist.

The quest to discover the identity of the Antichrist is matched in dedication by the effort to identify the 'Beast' whose name is symbolized by the number 666 (Kirsch 2006: 82-84). A clip posted on Dailymotion.com, a video hosting service based in France, has attempted to crack this code and has been growing in popularity (Dailymotion 2009). It approaches the issue through the use of numerology and Gematria (the Hebrew system of assigning numerical value to words and phrases). The video points to '7 Strange Coincidences' related to Obama, which are, as the video notes, likely to be mere coincidences, but factual nonetheless. I will recount two of these here: (1) Barack Hussein Obama, according to the video, has a Gematria value of 501, which is the 'same value for Judgment and End of Days'. Barack in Arabic means 'blessed'; Hussein in Arabic means 'handsome'; and Obama is an African word meaning 'leaning'. The video notes that

when the Gematria values of blessed (246), handsome (268) and leaning (152) are added together, the sum is 666. (2) Obama's name is indeed found in the Bible Codes, which are 'equal-distance-letter-spacing sequences' that look for patterns of letters within the Bible text (Dailymotion 2009). When the name 'Obama' is placed in the Bible Code using the text of the King James Bible, his name supposedly appears in the text of Rev. 13.1, one of the most prominent verses dealing with the Antichrist.

One of the most frequented Web sites arguing that Obama is the Antichrist is run by Kenneth Alex Randolf, a fifty-six-year-old former lawyer living in Seattle. Randolf's blog has been featured on CNN, and his other Web site is extremely popular among those concerned with the issue of Obama as the Antichrist (Randolf 2008). His Web site recounts the idea, discussed above, that Obama's name adds up to 666, and he believes that Obama is 'the prophesied political leader that will bring Tribulation (God's trial of humanity) that ends with Armageddon (World War III)' (Randolf, personal communication, 10 September 2009). Randolf notes that he has taken a serious look at other political leaders in the past, but none has fit his beliefs about the Antichrist prophecy until Obama came on the scene. One of the main factors leading him to believe that Obama is the Antichrist is the fact that none of the 'experts' in the area (i.e. Hal Lindsey, John Hagee, Oral Roberts *et al.*) believe this to be the case. According to Randolf, these experts, and nearly all millennial dispensationalists, are under the false impression that the Antichrist will 'hail from the former Roman Empire (Western Europe) and will lead a coalition of European nation states' (Randolf, personal communication, 10 September 2009).

This, according to him, is the main reason why Obama has not been recognized as the Antichrist. Unlike many others discussed in this chapter, Randolf does not believe that Obama is deliberately leading the world toward destruction. As he told me, 'I don't believe that the Antichrist believes he's the Antichrist because he does not believe in the concept or in the religion that produced the concept.' Just as Jesus did not become Christ until after 'his forty days in the desert and his contest with temptation . . . Obama will not become the Antichrist until he faces and fails the modern day equivalent of the forty days and temptation by evil' (Randolf, personal communication, 10 September 2009).

Randolf also adheres to the belief that the rise of Obama is related to the McNaught comet of 2007. The McNaught comet was the brightest comet seen from Earth in forty years, and it reached its perihelion (brightest phase) on 12 January 2007, 'close to' the time that Obama announced his candidacy for president (10 February 2007). Some believe that the McNaught comet is in fact the Mabus comet prophesied by Nostradamus (1503–1566) and thought to herald the advent of the so-called third Antichrist. John Hogue, the preeminent world expert on Nostradamus, wrote that many of

his fans have asked him to write about the relationship between Obama and the Antichrist. Hogue, who calls himself a rogue scholar, is the author of over fourteen best-selling books on the prophecies of Nostradamus. As he writes in his new online book *Nostradamus and the Antichrist: Code Named MABUS* (2008: 9), Nostradamus believed that there were three Antichrists, not one. The first two are likely Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler (2008: 18-54). Nostradamus gave a code name for the third Antichrist: Mabus (2008: 55-66). As Hogue writes,

> Though his true name is occulted, his destiny is made clear. World War III begins when Mabus dies an untimely death. The passing of this man will unite a hundred nations in a war against what Nostradamus calls the Eastern kings secretly allied in opposition to the West. They would use piracy (hijacking?), ambush and subterfuge to wage war. Know the war has begun when hollow mountains of a great New City (yet to be built in Nostradamus' day) at latitude 4455 in an unborn country he called Americh or Amorica, will be attacked by a fire in the sky. The hollow mountains crafted by man will be seized and plunged into the boiling cauldron of their own debris clouds. After this happens we will be living in the days of the last Antichrist (2008: 13-14).

Although the precise identity of the Antichrist is not known, one thing is clear: Mabus does not live through the world war he ignites, a conflict that will last twenty-seven years. For Hogue, many individuals in the twenty-first century come close to qualifying as the third Antichrist—Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush *et al.*—and he is ultimately unsure whether Obama fits the bill. He begins the chapter on Obama by stating that, although he does not believe Obama to be the third Antichrist, he must explore it as a scholarly endeavor. He writes: 'Don't blame me, my readers made me do it. They badgered me in hundreds of letters trying to perform anagrammatic acts of "lexicon-striction" thrusting the surname of Barack Hussein Obama down an anagramming veggie blender to slurry up an Obama "Mabus"'. (2008: 190). One of these attempts, also found on Randolf's Web site, argues that Mabus may be an anagram of Obama's full name with 'literary symmetry'. The first letter of his first name is *B*, the second and third letters of his middle name are *US,* the fourth and fifth letters of his last name are *MA*. Putting these letters together produces BUSMA, which is a simple anagram of MABUS. This kind of mix-and-match millennialism, what Barkun (2003: 18) calls 'improvisational millennialism', is characterized not by an adherence to secular or religious worldviews but by a 'relentless and seemingly indiscriminate borrowing'. Thus, the simultaneous use of astronomy, Nostradamus, and the New Testament produces not dissonance but a sense of holistic truth with multiple sources pointing to the same reality.

By far the most vitriolic anti-Obama Web site is beastobama.com, run by the notorious Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), an independent Baptist

church in Topeka, Kansas. The WBC Web site derides Obama as a 'fag enabler in chief', as 'worse than a Dateline pedophile' who had an 'atheist whore' for a mother and a 'deadbeat Muslim' for a father. The WBC, run by Pastor Fred Phelps (famous for coining the protest slogan 'God Hates Fags'), has long been monitored by the Anti-Defamation League and other groups for hate speech as well as for their picketing of military funerals. Beastobama.com presents a 30-minute documentary putting forth a 'Bible-based' argument why Obama is the Antichrist. In the documentary, one individual at a WBC protest states, 'God hates fags, God hates fag-enablers, and God hates baby killers. Therefore, God hates Antichrist Obama' (beastobama.com). For the WBC, Obama's unwillingness to decry the 'fag agenda' or to put a stop to abortion means that he is working against Christ (literally, anti-Christ). The media love affair with Obama, they argue, keeps the nation enthralled and blind to reality. As one individual states in the film:

> Satan is energizing the fag juggernaut that we know as the international media and entertainment industry to present a sparkling, sanitized coronation of his son the Antichrist. . . . To the men of the world, the Antichrist isn't some fire breathing, ugly monster. To the men of the world, the anti-Christ is beautiful; the anti-Christ is clever, brilliant, a smooth orator. The Antichrist is a friend of the world (beastobama.com).

Like the beast rising out of the sea in the book of Revelation (13.1), the Web site notes that Obama has risen from the sea of 'troubled humanity' and has captured their imagination: 'Barack Obama is the Antichrist, and is leading doomed America to her final destruction and the destruction of the world! We're not talking some vague, nebulous postulation; we're talking plain, straight Bible talk backed up by an overwhelming amount of real evidence' (beastobama.com). As Kirsch notes, such rhetoric is reflective of the ways in which the book of Revelation is being read in the contemporary world, and used as a 'potent rhetorical weapon in a certain kind of culture war, a war of contesting values and aspirations' (2006: 17).

Conclusion: Why the Internet Matters

There has been much hype surrounding the social significance of the Internet. Scholars have looked to cyberspace as a haven for finding new ways in which individual identity, community and ritual are expressed and experienced in the contemporary world. Apparently, on the Internet we can be different people, experience things we could never hope to experience in real life, help in the creation and perfection of collaborative knowledge and engage in participatory media. Scholars have however tended to get carried away when discussing the utter uniqueness of the Internet. As Douglas Cowan has noted, often what we think of as virtual reality is nothing

more than an electronic version of real life: 'Shopping online is not a visit to a "virtual store," but represents little more than choices made from a catalogue one accesses electronically' (2005: 258). In other words, not all online activity is unique and worthy of being studied as if it is so. For example, virtually no Muslims, one would presume, would declare themselves a *hajji* after completing a virtual *hajj* (Bunt 2000). Similarly, the experience of watching a lecture or a sermon online is relatively indistinguishable from watching one on television.

Such critiques are indeed significant for our current purposes: right-wing populism is obviously not a product of the Internet. However, cyberspace has become enormously important, practically and symbolically, for contemporary right-wing populists. The relationship between the Internet and the *persistence* of right-wing populism can be understood in two ways: first, the ease with which blogs, forums and Web sites are created has given rise to an alternative media, existing outside traditional sources of information, and varying in size and reliability (Atton 2004; Dartnell 2006). This alternative media gives voice to individuals who feel left out of the dominant media discourse. In this way, the Internet comes to have great symbolic significance. Second, since the online presence of individuals is largely driven by choice, the information and communities with which they interact tend to be less varied (Slevin 2000: 90-117; Manjoo 2008). Individuals, in other words, are more able to interact with people who share their ideological or sociopolitical worldviews instead of just spatial propinquity. The Internet simultaneously enables and fosters the development of networks among individuals separated by vast physical distance but connected by ideological proximity (see Sunstein 2007). Such interaction, combined with their activities in alternative media platforms, has the potential to foster a subcultural communal identity. Let us deal with both of these elements in turn.

As alluded to in the introduction, right-wing populism is best understood as a symptom 'of a larger and more mainstream set of anxieties about human agency' (Melley 2002: 58). As social reality only increases in complexity, conspiracy theories and apocalypticism tend to offer a strange kind of comfort, drawing in disparate social events under a grand 'master narrative' that the believer has succeeded in deciphering. Understanding the intricacies of this world system is necessary, as people are all merely characters in a much larger stage play, the plot of which very few comprehend. As discussed above, fears of such large-scale control are characteristic of modern conspiracy theories and apocalyptic beliefs. Disparate threads—the book of Daniel, Revelation, the Illuminati, Freemasonry, Nostradamus, etc.—are seamlessly and effortlessly woven together into an elaborate tapestry of paranoia that is nearly impossible to disprove.

Melley (2002: 60) and others have pointed to three characteristics of recent right-wing populism that allow us better to understand such beliefs

while also providing some hints about why the Internet has been particularly significant for these movements. First, conspiracies are viewed as enormously difficult to detect and 'marvelously efficient'. Indeed, the perpetrators of this grand deception are often seen to have supernatural capabilities. Second, conspiracy theories allow individuals easily to conceive of the relationship between themselves and the larger world. Following from this, the third characteristic understands conspiracy as a 'structure that curtails individuality, or that is antithetical to individualism itself' (Melley 2002: 60). The second and third elements are most significant for our purposes. Right-wing populism, rising out of a sense that the individual is under attack, is deeply concerned with self-protection, with guarding the agency of the individual against the onslaught of the social order. As Melley argues, 'by making diverse social and technological systems enemies of "the self", the conspiratorial views function less as a defense of some *clear* political position than as a defense of individualism, abstractly conceived' (2002: 61).

This *agency panic* is closely tied to issues of trust, authority, and epistemology. Far from being the product of clinical paranoia, right-wing populism expresses a fundamental distrust of those who produce knowledge and 'develops from the refusal to accept someone else's definition of a universal social good or an officially sanctioned truth' (Melley 2002: 64). Much of right-wing populist identity comes from this belief that they are privy to certain kinds of knowledge that the rest of society is unable or unwilling to see. They are the embattled vanguards of a fight that the rest of the world does not even realize is taking place. They consider themselves to be the protectors and purveyors of what Barkun has called 'stigmatized knowledge', which are 'claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error' (2003: 26). For many right-wing populists, stigmatized knowledge has a hint of truth *by the very fact* of its stigmatization. In other words, it is believed that the conspirators have used their power to ensure that such information is kept hidden from the public.

It is when examining issues of agency panic and stigmatized knowledge, that the significance of the Internet can be fully grasped. As Robert Campbell notes, 'The Internet is a medium ideally suited in some regards to the populist, emotional, eclectic, and assertive style of the American tradition of apocalyptic prophecy' (2004: 242). Cyberspace is also the quintessential form of participatory media, where any individual, regardless of education or expertise, can create Web sites, dialogue with others in forums or message boards, and produce viral video clips that may be viewed by millions of people (Keen 2007; Burgess and Green 2009). The Internet holds symbolic value for right-wing populists because it lacks gatekeepers and is free of

the checks and balances that these individuals view as diminishing an individual's autonomy. As Alex Jones states in *The Obama Deception*, the global elite 'are bringing in classical, hardcore tyranny in the US, *but we have the Internet*, we've grown our numbers, the alternative media has exploded—that's why they are trying to move in, and shut down, and regulate, and tax the web. But, it's too late for them' (YouTube 2009c [emphasis added]). According to Jones, the alternative media have allowed them to organize under the radar of the global elite and mobilize a grassroots resistance.

For right-wing populists and other social movements, the Internet is invaluable as a resource for disseminating views, bonding like-minded individuals and fostering a sense that they are part of a subcultural resistance movement fighting a war on behalf of an unaware public. As Laura Stein has noted, 'The mainstream media often systematically distort, negatively cast or ignore social movement viewpoints' (2009: 750). These movements are often denied access to the mainstream media, as their perspectives are considered part of the irrational 'fringe'. Alternatively, when they *are* given access, the message frames used are such that they undermine or mock the message of the movement. The Internet, then, allows social movements to bypass media gatekeepers and communicate directly with their constituency. According to Alex Jones and others, the Internet 'levels the playing field' between themselves and the resource-rich media conglomerates, by allowing them 'greater speed, lesser expense, further geographical reach and relatively unlimited content capacity' (Stein 2009: 750). As Kenneth Randolf notes,

> There is no doubt in my mind that the spread of messages that would otherwise be rejected and ridiculed by mainstream media is a fundamental Internet function. The subject of Obama as Antichrist is a prime example of just such a message. The Internet is full of Obama as Antichrist messages, information, Web sites, and blog sites, while the mainstream media is relatively silent on the subject and treat it much as they would an uncorroborated report that Martians have landed in Brooklyn (Randolf, personal communication, 11 September 2009).

In addition to alleviating some of the agency panic that characterizes contemporary right-wing populism, the Internet also fosters ideological or sociopolitical networks—a kind of closed 'community' reinforcing their own beliefs and biases. Craig Calhoun notes that, *inter alia,* the Web facilitates the development of cultural and sociopolitical enclaves, where individuals, more than is possible in their real-life neighborhoods, migrate toward people and information with which they have an ideological similarity. He writes:

> What computer-mediated communication adds is a greater capacity to avoid public interaction of the kind that would pull one beyond one's immediate personal choices of taste and culture. Discussion groups may

> transcend the spatial community, thus, but they do so precisely by linking people with similar interests, not by forging links among people sharply different from one another (1998: 385).

Farhad Manjoo concurs: 'Instead of getting together with people who are close to us physically, now we can get together with people who are close to us ideologically, psychically, emotionally, aesthetically' (2008: 54; see also Sunstein 2007: 46-96 on 'enclave deliberations'). Thus, in addition to its integral religious and conspiratorial roots, the Internet must be viewed as one of the main social forces contributing to the persistence of right-wing populism.

As Blanchard and Horan (1998) point out, virtual communities are not uniform. They distinguish between what they call a *physically based virtual community* and *virtual communities of interest*. The former, as the term suggests, is a more traditional physically based community that merely provides electronic resources for its members. For example, a group dedicated to combatting alcoholism, while meeting regularly in person, may also decide to maintain an online forum, a mailing list or a bulletin board for its members. The second type of virtual community 'is geographically dispersed with members participating due to their shared interests in a topic and not their shared locations. . . . The members of these communities might never meet each other, and their interactions might be limited to just that topic or community of interest' (Blanchard and Horan 1998: 295). Participating in this second type of online community—posting on forums and message boards, creating viral videos, responding to comments, blogging and the like—tends to foster an increased connection to other members of the online community while also solidifying one's membership in it. As Barkun notes, 'The validation that comes from seeing one's beliefs echoed by others provides a sense of connection for otherwise isolated individuals' (2003: 20).

It should be evident however that the nature of these virtual communities of interest casts doubt on the potential of the Internet to rectify fully the agency panic felt by many right-wing populists. Although the Internet has allowed many *individuals* to express their views and acquire somewhat of an online following, *at the group level* they are fully conscious of the fact that they hold worldviews that are not a part of the mainstream. In other words, as a group, they are still very much a subcultural movement seeking a voice in mainstream politics. We must bring to mind what Richard Hofstadter said long ago:

> The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular political interest—perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of their demands—cannot make themselves felt in the political process. Feeling that they have no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious fully confirmed (1966: 39).

The potential of the Internet, then, may be limited to disseminating information, providing a venue for the marginalized to have a voice (which may then be largely ignored or ridiculed), alleviating some agency panic at the individual level and fostering or enhancing a subcultural group identity (Mitra 2001; Mitra and Watts 2002; Smith 1998; Sunstein 2007).

Aside from these important contributions, the Internet has proven that it increases the ease with which grassroots organizing can take place, allowing for the logistical coordination of geographically dispersed groups and individuals (see, e.g. Shirky 2008). However, with the notable exceptions of Alex Jones and the Westboro Baptist Church, many of the individuals and online communities who propound apocalyptic beliefs about Obama do not take their fight to the street. For them, the Internet allows some alleviation of agency panic through their part-time, after-work, leisurely interaction with viral videos, forums, message boards, and blogs. It is evident, as Calhoun has written, that social movements existing entirely on the Internet encounter very little success; 'the Internet matters much more as a supplement to face-to-face community organization and movement activity than as a substitute for it' (1998: 382). Kenneth Randolf, for example, admitted as much when he mentioned to me that many people, influenced by his Web site and blog, have contacted him with the question, 'What do we do now?'

Thus, the Internet can be enormously influential in disseminating information nationally and globally, but, as Calhoun states, the Web 'is most empowering when it adds to the capacities of people organized outside it' (1998: 382). However, when I asked Randolf whether he planned to take his views 'onto the streets', he argued that the streets of the twenty-first century are on the Internet: 'if done properly and if the circumstances are just right, it's clearly possible to reach hundreds of millions of people on those "streets". In terms of cost-effectiveness, time consumption, overcoming language and cultural and national barriers, there are no better "streets" to be active on' (Randolf, personal communication, 13 September 2009). Randolf is optimistic, but it remains to be seen whether the rallying cries and slogans of socioreligious movements can be heard when shouted solely, or even primarily, from within the dark alleys of cyberspace.

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