

History of Rocketry and Astronautics

**Proceedings of the Fifty-Second History Symposium of
the International Academy of Astronautics**

Bremen, Germany, 2018

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AAS History Series, Volume 51

A Supplement to Advances in the Astronautical Sciences

IAA History Symposia, Volume 38

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AMERICAN ASTRONAUTICAL SOCIETY

AAS Publications Office
P.O. Box 28130
San Diego, California 92198

Affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science
Member of the International Astronautical Federation

First Printing 2021

ISSN 0730-3564

ISBN 978-0-87703-677-7 (Hard Cover Plus CD ROM)
ISBN 978-0-87703-678-4 (Digital Version)

Published for the American Astronautical Society
by Univelt, Incorporated, P.O. Box 28130, San Diego, California 92198
Web Site: <http://www.univelt.com>

Printed and Bound in the U.S.A.

Chapter 19

Why Some People Just Won't Believe It? Sociocultural Origins of Moon Landing Conspiracy Theories*

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Abstract

The Apollo 11 and subsequent lunar landings were some of the greatest, if not the greatest, achievements in astronautics history—in the words of Neil Armstrong, they were indeed a “one giant leap for mankind.” However, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there persists a sizeable minority of people who do not believe that lunar landings actually took place and subscribe to the so-called “Moon landing conspiracy theories.” Several different types of such conspiracy theories exist—from the most common one, which simply claims that no man has ever visited the Moon and that Moon landings were filmed in Hollywood, to other, more complex versions, which claim that astronauts have landed on the Moon, but saw “something,” which, in turn, forced the US government to hide all evidence and create a hoax. The goal of this chapter is to discuss the possible social and cultural reasons that enable the birth, spread, and popularity of these conspiracy theories. The structure and usage of Moon landing conspiracy theory narratives is analyzed. Furthermore, several groups whose members fre-

* Presented at the Fifty-Second Symposium of the International Academy of Astronautics, October 1–5, 2018, Bremen, Germany. Paper IAC-18-E4.3B.10.

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quently subscribe to Moon landing conspiracy theories (such as communists, libertarian fringe, UFO enthusiasts, and others) are discussed.

I. Introduction

The current world has become a dangerous place for science—there exist massive movements dedicated to “disproving scientific lies,” such as the anti-vaccination movement, the flat Earth movement, the intelligent design movement, and the anti-manmade climate change movement. In this day and age, scientific ideas are attacked, and scientific achievements are smeared and belittled. One such achievement, the Apollo 11 Moon landing, has also fallen victim. Conspiracy theorists claim this event never happened, that it was filmed in Hollywood (possibly in a basement) or in Area 51, and that a human foot has never been on any heavenly body except Earth. This is not a rare belief—one recent poll shows that about 7 percent of Americans believe the Moon landing never took place (Radford, 2013, 500). Though this is a great improvement (a poll taken in the 1970s showed that even 30 percent of people polled doubted the Moon landings were real [van Riper, 2003]), it is still a massive number worthy of consideration. Furthermore, other studies found different results—in the paper “Lunar Lies: The Impact of Informational Framing and Individual Differences in Shaping Conspiracist Beliefs About the Moon Landings,” it is claimed that up to 25 percent of US and European respondents doubt the Moon landing was real (Kruesi, 2009, cited from Swami et al., 2012, 72), which is a far higher number. In other words, the Moon landing conspiracy theories seem like a strong belief that is shared by a sizable part of the US and European population. Furthermore, the fact that there are also believers in other countries, such as Great Britain and Russia, shows that these beliefs are not only a local, but also a global phenomenon that has transcended the territory of United States of America. These conspiracy theories have also become part of popular culture—for example, there are at least two movies (comedies specifically)—*Moonwalkers* (2015) and *Operation Avalanche* (2016)—that deal with this conspiracy theory material.

Nevertheless, among the field of conspiracy theory research, Moon landing conspiracy theories are rather poorly researched and rarely analyzed. Though this is understandable—Moon landing conspiracy theory believers, unlike New World Order conspiracy theory adherents or antisemitic conspiracy theorists, rarely hold radical anti-government beliefs or are prepared to use lethal force against conspiracy-controlled government actors (as, for example, did Oklahoma City Bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols [Keeley, 1999, 113]) or racial minorities. However, Moon landing conspiracy theory research can help us

understand the widespread popularity of more radical and stranger conspiracy theories (such as the aforementioned New World Order conspiracy theory) and the rise and spread of anti-scientific ideas, such as the anti-vaccination movement.

Dismissing conspiracy theorists and belittling them seems not to have achieved much effect. It merely scares them away and locks them in an echo chamber of conspiracy theorist communities, where their beliefs might change and mutate into even more bizarre and strange forms. It seems that the correct way to fight and change these beliefs is, at least at first, to try to understand how they are formed and why they persist. Furthermore, it is wise to remember that although conspiracies are rare, they do, in fact, exist—from Watergate to online spying on their citizens by their own governments (Grimes 2016, 2), so it would be unwise simply to dismiss all conspiracy theories as mere paranoid delusions and all conspiracy theorists as paranoids. As Brian L. Keeley has noticed, it is actually not that easy to discern warranted conspiracy theories from unwarranted ones. (1999, 111). While many, if not most, conspiracy theories they believe (such as the Moon landing conspiracy theories) are false, some of their beliefs—albeit rarely—might turn out to be true. In other words, while understanding conspiracy theories is just the first step, it is a very important necessary step for any further actions.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold—both to define Moon landing conspiracy theories, and to try to explain possible reasons why they persist. In the first part, two different “kinds” of Moon landing conspiracy theories are described and defined in detail. In the second part, several various reasons for beliefs in these conspiracy theories are discussed.

II. The Definition of Moon Landing Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are rather strange phenomena. The definition of conspiracy theory—a belief that a group of persons acted or are acting in secrecy to achieve some malevolent end (Barkun 2003, 3)—does not show the double-sided nature of conspiracy beliefs. It should be noted this is not the only possible definition of conspiracy theory. For example, in his book *Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Michael Dentith argues for a more open definition of conspiracy theory that would include beliefs in non-malevolent or even benevolent conspiracies (for example, surprise birthday parties [2014, 40]). On the one hand, they seem to be something only the marginalized, the people on the outskirts of society, believe—in other words, they are what Michael Barkun calls “stigmatized knowledge” (ibid., 8), ideas and beliefs that are marginalized and kept out of “normal”

discourse. On the other hand, they also share unprecedented popularity among the masses—many people believe at least one of the more popular conspiracy theories, such as, for example, that JFK was killed by the Central Intelligence Agency or Mafia, that princess Diana was murdered, or that the US government recovered a crashed UFO and alien bodies at Roswell, New Mexico. In other words, “we all are conspiracy theorists,” and conspiracies have become a mainstay of public discourse (Fenster 2008, 2). It is incredibly strange that although what could be called “hard” conspiracy theory believers (that is, people who not only believe, but also create and spread conspiracy theories, or in other words, people who use conspiracy theories to build their identity) are a minority, “soft” conspiracy theorists (that is, people who believe in conspiracy theories, but do not believe in them “seriously”) comprise a rather significant portion of society (the journal *Sceptic* claims that number to be around 20 percent, or one out of five Americans [Shermer, Linse, 2018]). So, it is necessary to admit that at least some conspiracy theories have already infiltrated common discourse and to react accordingly, either by debating them, showing their flaws, or researching them as one would research any other social phenomena. One of the rather popular conspiracy theories is the so-called Moon landing conspiracy theory.

It would seem that definition of Moon landing conspiracy theories should be short and simple—that is, they are conspiracy theories claiming that humans have never reached the Moon and walked across its surface. However, the facts are somewhat more complex. As both Michael Barkun and Daniel Pipes have noted, there are certain different groups or clusters of conspiracy theories: that is, conspiracy theories that describe single events (which M. Barkun calls “event conspiracies” [2003, 6] and Pipe describes as “petty conspiracy” theories [1997, 21]), and conspiracy theories that describe complex systems of individuals or possibly organizations, for example, the Masonic conspiracy theories, the New World Order conspiracy theories, and other “grand” conspiracy narratives. Moon landing conspiracy theories seem to clearly fit the first type—the event or the petty conspiracy theory—because they describe a single event or a series of events (in this case, NASA Moon landings) as a result of conspiracy and conspiratorial actions. Nevertheless, Moon landing conspiracy theories can easily be incorporated into other conspiracy narratives, and become parts of “world conspiracies” or “super-conspiracies” They do not have to exist on their own—conspiracy theories tend to merge and form even bigger and more elaborate narratives, creating what M. Barkun named “superconspiracy theories” (2003, 19). Moon landing conspiracy theories are no exception—they can, and do, merge with other conspiracy theories as well. A great example would be conspiracy theories of Milton William Cooper. In works of Cooper, one can find a complex

mythology of entwined conspiracy theories including New World Order Conspiracy Narratives, Illuminati conspiracy theories, and UFO conspiracy theories. However, his mega-narrative also includes elements of Moon landing conspiracy theories. In “MajestyTwelve,” Cooper claimed that Moon landing was filmed in an Atomic Energy Commission secret test site and in a secured, guarded sound studio at Walt Disney Studios (1997). Furthermore, he claimed the Apollo program (“All names, missions, landing sites, and events in the Apollo Space Program”) echoed occult rituals and symbols of the Illuminati (ibid.). What we see here is a complex narrative that incorporates many different conspiracy beliefs, a sort of modern mythology that has incorporated Moon landing conspiracy theories within itself.

Furthermore, as is common with conspiracy theories, a closer inspection reveals that Moon landing conspiracy theories are groups of rather different beliefs, that could be placed in two larger, distinct groups:

1. The “fake landing” group—conspiracy theories that claim men have not reached Moon.
2. The “fake recording” group—conspiracy theories that claim men have reached Moon, but for some reason the recording of Apollo 11 (and possibly other) astronauts strolling across lunar surface is somehow, for some reasons, fake.

Although both of these groups of conspiracy theory adherents agree the Apollo 11 Moon landing recording is not real, they strongly disagree on the very nature of the Moon landings and the NASA space program itself. Furthermore, Moon landing conspiracy theories are rather unique among conspiracy theories because of other reasons as well. Conspiracy theories, at their core, are explanations and narratives not only about evil, as M. Barkun (2003, 16) and Dieter Groh (1987, 14) suggest, but also about power—they claim there exist, or once existed, powers capable of manipulating human lives and history. They claim that certain groups have an incredible amount of power and are using that power nefariously (for example, most anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic conspiracies claim that these groups have both infiltrated governments and other various organizations and are using their influence within these organizations to influence the world events). Conspiracy theories also frequently describe (usually imagined) constellations and structures of power, where one group of conspirators (that might be real organizations, such as the Bilderberg Group and Trilateral Commission, or completely fictional, such as David Icke’s Babylonian Brotherhood or M. W. Cooper’s MajestyTwelve) are influencing other, weaker groups, or where several groups of conspirators are working together to achieve some other malevolent goal. In other words, conspiracy theories claim that some groups have some

(usually secret) powers and are using them for their own reasons. Moon landing conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are narratives not only about power, they are also narratives about weakness and inability. They are narratives of inability because they claim that though the US government paradoxically had enough power to fake Moon landings and fool the world, it also, at the same time, lacked power to actually put the man on the Moon. Thus, in these conspiracy theories, NASA and the US government are shown rather paradoxically—as both incredibly powerful and capable of fooling the Soviet Union and the whole world, but also, at the same time, as incredibly incompetent—not only in these narratives is the US government forced to fake the Moon landing, but the perpetrators are shown to be incredibly incompetent, because they have left “obvious signs” in the footage for conspiracy theorists to find.

However, to better understand Moon landing conspiracy theories, we must first discuss the two types of Moon landing conspiracy theories in detail.

III. “Fake Landing” Conspiracy Theories

It is rather easy to define the “fake landing” conspiracy theories—they are beliefs that the Apollo 11 Moon landing never happened (or, to be more precise, never happened on the Moon), the US astronauts have never visited Earth’s satellite, and that the Moon landing was somehow faked by conspiracy involving the US government, NASA, and other possible actors (such as Stanley Kubrick, Walt Disney Studios, or others). This is a far more popular conspiracy theory group—as was already mentioned, possibly almost as much as one-fifth of Americans believe some variation of this theory. Furthermore, this form of Moon landing theories is most frequently propagated through mainstream media channels. One example would be the documentary *Room 237*, in which one of the theorists claims Stanley Kubrick left signs alluding to his work and involvement on the fake Moon landing footage in the movie *Shining*. Another example could be the Fox television documentary *Conspiracy Theory: Did We Ever Go to the Moon?* These theories rest on several basic assumptions: first, they claim that in the 1960s, technology was sufficiently advanced to simulate and record Moon landing hoax; and second, that the US government and NASA used these technologies to record a simulated Moon landing and pass it as the “real thing” (van Riper 2003, 500).

This conspiracy theory came into being seven years after the Apollo 11 Moon landing, in 1976—it was Bill Kaysing’s self-published book *We Never Went to the Moon: America’s Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle* (Van Riper, 501). In the 1980s, Flat Earth Society members also accused NASA of staging fake Moon

landings to dupe people into believing that Earth is not flat, but a globe (Shadewald R. J., 1980). However, instead of being forgotten, with time these theories became only more popular, with additional works, such as Ralph René's *NASA Mooned America* (1994), James Collier's video *Was It Only a Paper Moon?* (1997), and Bart Sibrel's video *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Moon* (2001) (Van Riper 203, 501)

Proponents of this conspiracy theory use many different arguments—some more popular are:

- Astronauts, for example, Buzz Aldrin, have declared that they have never been to the Moon and that NASA faked Moon landing (Evon 2018).
- Stars should be visible on Moons sky, however, in the recordings, the sky is black.
- The American flag should not blow in the wind, because there is no wind on the Moon.
- The astronaut footprint on the Moon's surface looks different than the boots on astronaut suit (Evon 2018).
- The radiation levels in outer space are too deadly for humans, and astronauts should have died during their flight.
- The fact that crosshairs appear in front of some objects in photographs of the Moon landings proves that these photographs were faked (Swami et al., 2012, 74).
- The environment of space would quickly render any photographs unusable, which means that photographs of the Moon landings must have been faked (ibid.).

These arguments can be rather easily disproved—for example, astronaut quotes used by conspiracy are taken out of context (Evon 2018), there are no stars visible in the lunar sky, because the Sun's light is overwhelming them (Swami et al., 2012, 73), the American flag moves in the video not because of the wind but because of inertia, and the astronaut suit contains over-boots which a footprint that looks identical to the famous lunar footprint photo (Evon, 2018). However, disproval of these arguments has not stopped people from believing these conspiracy theories—they are still widely believed among the general population.

IV. “Fake Recording” Conspiracy Theories

These conspiracy theories differ from the first kind—while the first, “fake landing” type of conspiracy theories are only concerned with the Apollo pro-

gram's Moon landings, in "fake recording" conspiracy theories, the Moon landing itself is merely part of a larger narrative. This second type of conspiracy theories also claims Moon landing footage is fake—however, they usually do not deny the Moon landing itself, but only the footage (in other words, these conspiracy theorists claim that men have landed on the Moon, but for some specific reasons, the recordings of the landing were replaced with a hoax). As noted by A. Boudoin Van Riper, while the first type of theories (claiming that American astronauts never went to the Moon) are far more popular among the general population, the second type of theories is far more frequent among the so called "core believers," that is, the people who actually collect, analyze, and publish Moon landing conspiracy theory narratives (2003, 501). Unlike the common population, who usually are content merely to disbelieve that astronauts landed on the Moon, members of this group more frequently tend to claim that astronauts *have* landed on the Moon, however, the *actual* landing, for some reason or another, was secret, and the general public was deceived by the US government's hoax. In other words, here the "fake Moon landing" is actually a part of a greater and more intricate narrative.

Several examples of this second type of conspiracy theories may be provided: for example, William Brian claims that astronauts have landed on the Moon, however, they also found remains of an alien civilization on Earth's satellite, evidence of which was then ruthlessly suppressed by the US government (Van Riper 2003, 501). David Percy, on the other hand, agrees that television broadcasts of Apollo missions were fakes, but he believes that the real Moon landing was achieved by a shadowy and secret "black space program" (*ibid.*, 501).

As is seen from these examples, the "fake recording" conspiracy theories are more complex—they contain more different elements, such as UFOs, shadowy space programs, etc. However, the line between "fake landing" and "fake recording" conspiracy theories is actually really thin. As Viren Swami notices, there is evidence that conspiracy theories form a monological belief system, that is, a certain framework of thoughts and beliefs that makes assimilation and incorporation of new and fake conspiracy theories easier (Swami et al., 2012, 72). In other words, a person who believes one conspiracy theory is more likely to believe other conspiracy theories, both actual and fake, even if those conspiracy theories are contradictory. It looks as though conspiracy theories depend on some sort of epistemological structures that make incorporation of other conspiracy theories both easier and more likely. However, this also means that as person learns more new conspiracy theories, their former beliefs may mutate to accommodate their newfound beliefs. This is the spot where "fake landing" conspiracy

theories can easily turn into “fake recording” conspiracy theories. The step is a rather easy one—both types of conspiracy theories use the same kind of arguments (already previously mentioned) to prove their point. The main difference is the aforementioned “point.” For the conspiratorial mindset, it is even possible to hold two types of incompatible beliefs at the same time (for example, the beliefs that US astronauts never landed on the Moon, and the belief that they landed on the Moon and found the remains of ancient alien civilization) at the same time, because neither of these beliefs is a concrete belief—they are more beliefs in possibilities, or beliefs that it could have happened or the other way around—they are “soft, liquid” beliefs. Furthermore, a conspiracy theorist’s beliefs may also change significantly and drastically during his or her lifetime—one example could be already mentioned Milton William Cooper. In his book *Behold a Pale Horse*, Cooper claimed that all Apollo missions were observed by Unidentified Flying Objects and that the United States and the Soviet Union succeeded at establishing a joint base on the lunar surface (1990, 221–222). However, in his later text, *MajestyTwelve*, Cooper showed radically different views—now he claimed that no human has ever left Earth’s atmosphere, and that astronauts and cosmonauts who tried were cooked alive by cosmic radiation.

V. Reasons for Beliefs in Moon Landing Conspiracy Theories

As was already mentioned in previous sections, Moon landing conspiracy theories are very popular among the general public. There may be several different reasons for this popularity—however, since Moon landing conspiracy theories differ somewhat from other conspiracy theories, reasons for their popularity may differ from the reasons that make other conspiracy theories popular.

One must remember that conspiracy theories are explanations of the world. Conspiracy theories explain the world, the relationship between different parts of the world, and the powers that control and influence the world (the value of these explanations is a completely different question). However, their purpose and function do not explain their popularity and longevity, because there are (usually) other possible explanations that do not involve conspiracies. Furthermore, while some conspiracy theories achieve incredible popularity (as, for example, the JFK assassination conspiracy theories or the New World Order conspiracy theories), others wallow in obscurity and never leave the circle of hardcore believers. Thus, it seems there might exist certain additional elements that make certain conspiracy theories popular and appealing among the population.

One possible explanation why some conspiracy theories become more popular than others was proposed by Dieter Groh in his paper “The temptation of

conspiracy theory, or why do bad things happen to good people?” In this paper, Groh argues that the main reason people believe in conspiracy theories is to explain evil and injustice witnessed in the world—that is, unsatisfying aspects of reality are explained as the work of evil and secretive groups, so called “conspirators” (Groh 1987, 1). This explanation views conspiracy theories as a form of theodicy, as a way to explain the dark and troublesome aspects of the world, such as death, suffering, and pain. In these cases, “conspirators” function as manicheistic evil powers, akin to demons and devils in Abrahamic religions, responsible for the injustices suffered by the conspiracy theorist or some other people the conspiracy theorist identifies with. In this case, some conspiracy theories become more popular than others because they are better at explaining “bad things happening to good people,” in other words, in explaining the world’s misery and injustices suffered.

However, though some conspiracy theories may be explained this way, not all can. Moon landing conspiracy theories, for example, cannot be explained this way. The Apollo 11 Moon landing mission, unlike 11 September or the death of Princess Diana, was not sad or horrible, it was incredible, and, in the words of Neil Armstrong, “one giant leap for mankind.” So, it seems that Groh’s explanation, though applicable to conspiracy theories explaining the death of John Kennedy, the rise of Soviet Union, or the French Revolution, is insufficient to explain these particular conspiracy theories, and different explanation is required.

Another possible reason could be general distrust of the US government. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the general public lost a great deal of trust in the US government—the Vietnam War, the bombing campaign against Cambodia, and the Watergate scandal, as van Riper noticed, have eroded people’s trust in the US government and the president (2003, 500). This knowledge that presidents (specifically, Richard Nixon) used their power for selfish gains and lied to the public might have created a climate of doubt and distrust where all US government achievements become targets to doubt. However, it is doubtful this climate of distrusts was enough to provoke the widespread popularity of Moon landing conspiracy theories. It might surely strengthen it; it is doubtful it is enough to cause it. Furthermore, as was already mentioned, these beliefs are no longer common in only the United States but have become a global phenomenon.

Another possible explanation might be political—in this case, Moon landing conspiracies are believed, because they align with certain political ideas and strengthen them, or because believing Moon landing conspiracy theories legitimize some other beliefs these people have. For example, Moon landing conspiracy theories are popular in Russia and among communist sympathizing leftists for a rather simple reason—if Americans have never landed on the Moon, that means

the Soviet Union was the rightful winner of the space race. However, this explanation also fails, because there are far more Moon landing conspiracy theorists than there are communists. Furthermore, some famous conspiracy theorists who are rabidly anti-communist (for example, Milton William Cooper), still subscribe to Moon landing conspiracy theories. Moon landing conspiracy theories are also popular among libertarian-leaning US inhabitants. For example, in 2009, American Patriot Friends Network also claimed the Moon landing was a hoax created to distract public attention from the Vietnam War (American Patriot Friends Network, 2013). As one can see, people of different political persuasions subscribe to these conspiracy theories.

The third, and most likely possibility, is that there exist some certain epistemological and psychological elements that make people more susceptible to conspiracy theories. As V. Swami has noticed, it seems that a person who believes one conspiracy theory is far more likely to believe other conspiracy theories (the so-called monological belief system) (Swami et al., 2012, 78). Furthermore, V. Swami's research shows that at least in case of Moon landing conspiracy theories, there are correlations between belief in these theories and certain personal characteristics of believers: for example, belief in Moon landing conspiracy theories directly correlated with openness to experience and believe in other conspiracy theories (ibid., 76). There also seemed to be an association between Moon landing conspiracy theories and extraterrestrial beliefs and New Age beliefs (ibid., 77). This means that a person who believes the Moon landing never happened is also more likely to believe aliens visited Earth or crystals can heal various diseases and vice versa. This seems to imply there is a certain worldview that holds scientific understanding of the world in disregard and searches for different explanations instead. As was mentioned, this worldview may even incorporate conspiracy theories that contradict one another. This forces one to consider conspiracy theories not as a collection of different beliefs, but as a form of counter-knowledge directly antagonistic to the scientific worldview. This may be possible because someone considers science something strange and foreign, thus distrusts it and chooses an easier, simpler explanation instead.

VI. Conclusion

Moon landing conspiracy theories seem to enjoy surging popularity in America and Europe. These conspiracy theories can be grouped into two types—conspiracy theories claiming US astronauts never landed on the Moon, and conspiracy theories that claim, though astronauts have landed on the Moon, recordings of Apollo Moon landings are for some reasons fake. These conspiracy theo-

ries are somewhat different than other conspiracy theories—first, these conspiracy theories show conspirators to be not only incredibly powerful, but also at the same time weak and incompetent; second, conspiracy theories frequently explain unpleasant events, such as disasters, celebrity deaths, etc. (however, the Apollo Moon landing is obviously not such an event); third, Moon landing conspiracy theories not only do exist on their own, but also are incorporated into other, grander conspiracy theories as part of the narrative.

There may be several reasons for the popularity of these conspiracy theories. Some of them might be political—people distrustful of the US government, whether right wing or left wing, could find it hard to believe in NASA scientific achievements, because all government achievements seem doubtful to them. Communists and Russia sympathizers could also be interested in these conspiracy theories, because believing these conspiracy theories allows them to claim the Soviet Union (and, by extension, Russia) won the space race. But the political explanation alone seems insufficient to explain the popularity of these conspiracy theories. It seems more plausible that Moon landing conspiracy theories have become popular thanks to a conspiracist worldview that is distrustful of all official, whether scientific or not, explanations—in other words, they are piggybacking on the popularity of other conspiracy theories. This new anti-scientific, anti-privileged knowledge, pro-conspiracist worldview can make even previously obscure conspiracy theories popular, and transport them from the fringes of stigmatized knowledge into everyday discourse—which quite possibly is what happened to the Moon landing conspiracy theories.

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