Chapter 10
The Counter-Elite: Strategies of Authority in Millennial Conspiracism

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1 Introduction

Think for yourself.
Do your research.
Open your mind.

As with certain forms of popular, non-institutionalised religion (New Age being the paradigmatic example), it is common for those writing about the conspiracist milieu to note a lack of formal structure. Such acephalic networks, it is claimed, are based in self-authority, and this is reflected in their frequent rejection of authority or institutionalisation (Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2004; Hanegraaff 1996; York 1995; Fergusson 1992). It is true that it is common for prominent figures in these milieux to reject formal leadership roles or authoritative titles, yet any impartial critical analysis of the field must acknowledge that emic appeals to individualism do not mean that said individuals are in fact free of social forces. Indeed, the growth of individualism as an ideal is itself the result of wider cultural and societal forces, including a capitalist economy and neo-liberal ideology.

In fact, it is clear that certain figures do function as authorities within the field of conspiracism. Individuals such as Alex Jones and David Icke (to take just two examples) have commanded large, international audiences for over twenty years. They, and others like them, can be observed to function as ‘gatekeepers’, validating and popularising ideas and individuals within the millennial conspiracist milieu, as well as synthesising the work of others into larger narratives. Olav Hammer refers to such an individual as a spokesperson, and identifies their importance as being to “perform a novel exegesis of the discourse, more or less subtly modify the received doctrines and rituals and then propagate them as authentic teachings” (2001: 36–37).
Regardless of an institutionalised mandate, “to be in authority is to have (or take) the right to speak” (Hammer 2001: 37). In a field where the hermeneutic of suspicion is taken to its extreme, the question of how such authority is gained and maintained demands serious attention. Appeals to individual authority notwithstanding, as Roy Wallis (1984) noted, charisma is not an innate individual quality, but a negotiated social relationship. Charisma is created in the interactions between leader and followers, in a ‘system of exchanges’. Significantly, this flows hierarchically: certain followers are given special attention by the leader, and these then mediate between them and the larger, less-invested audience, in turn imbuing the leader with greater authority. Of course, these individuals are deeply invested in the leader, so have a vested interest in maintaining the impression of the leader as authoritative.

This chapter considers the issues surrounding the construction of (socially mandated) authority in the (allegedly) individualistic milieu of conspiracism, and attempts to address several specific questions. These are: how can we conceptualise authority in non-institutionalised counter-cultural milieux such as conspiracism? How does an individual gain authority in a field in which power is demonised and autonomy fetishised? Trusting no-one, why trust anyone? What, if anything, can a better understanding of such strategies in the conspiracist milieu tell us about other contemporary religious formations, such as New Age or so-called Invented Religions—and vise versa?

Drawing on Max Weber’s (1964) concept of ‘charisma’, Matthew Wood’s (2007) description of multiple and relative “non-formative” authorities, and my own model of “epistemic capital” (Robertson 2016), I will argue that in this field authority is accumulated through a strategic mobilisation of a range of both mainstream and alternative sources of knowledge, drawing from traditional, scientific, channelled, experiential, and synthetic epistemic strategies. It is important to note that we do not see a rejection of science as an epistemic authority as such, but rather an appeal to a larger range of epistemic sources than is acknowledged by academic and governmental institutions, and to a significant degree, social norms. By presenting this broadened spectrum—and importantly, negotiating between the different strategies—Jones, Icke, and others thereby construct themselves as a ‘counter-elite’, the possessors of exclusive knowledge unobtainable through mainstream epistemic strategies. I argue that this mechanism of establishing authority through epistemic capital suggests a structural similarity that helps to explain the apparent relationship between conspiracism and certain forms of contemporary religion.

The chapter focuses on those conspiracy theories that also engage with millennial narratives, Christian or otherwise. Using Alex Jones and David Icke as case studies enables me to show similar strategies at work across a
broad spectrum of the conspiracist milieu. Jones is based in the USA, has a firmly Christian perspective and audience, and is politically right wing, with connections to the John Birch Society, the Libertarian, and Tea Party movements and, despite his continuing refusal to identify with the present-day Republican Party, President Donald Trump. Icke, on the other hand, is UK-based, although he boasts a considerable audience in the USA and Australasia, is politically left wing, and was a prominent figure in the Green Party in the 1990s, even being described as “the Greens' Tony Blair” (Taylor 1997). He is highly critical of religion of all kinds; nevertheless, his present thinking has developed from a Theosophical and millennial New Age lineage (Robertson 2013, 2016). Both, however, mix millennialism with large-scale conspiracy narratives of the type that Michael Barkun describes as “systemic”—that is, “with broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country ... or the world” (2003: 6). Furthermore, they share significant common terminology, despite their differences, including “global awakening” (that ever larger numbers are seeing through the manipulations of media and other institutions), “problem-reaction-solution” (how governments move their agendas on by creating false problems and then proffering their plan as a solution) and “sheeple” (the acquiescent masses who have yet to ‘wake up’). Moreover, as we shall see, the mechanisms through which they establish authority are identical.

2 The Structure of Millennial Conspiracism

Millennial conspiracism can be understood simply as the discursive field (that is, all public appearances of these ideas, in print, speech or other media, whether popular or elite, and including all competing versions) where millennial ideas are found together with conspiracist narratives. I am here using ‘millennial’ to refer to all accounts of more-or-less immanent planetary change, whether for better or for worse. My use of ‘conspiracism’ is borrowed from Michael Barkun (2003), who uses it to differentiate between specific ‘conspiracy beliefs’ and the position that conspiracy is a primary motivating factor behind history, typically notions of an occulted ‘hidden hand’ operating behind the scenes of history for some specific end, usually presented as malevolent, although it needs to be remembered that malevolence is socially constructed, so one group’s malevolence may be another group’s beneficence (2003: 3). These are obviously highly simplified definitions, and I would direct readers who seek more clarification to my earlier work, where these are discussed at some length (for instance Robertson 2016). My intention with referring to millennial conspiracism is not to
reify a new category, but rather, as per the building block method (see Asprem, Dyrendal, and Robertson, this volume), to avoid the terminological vagueness of categories such as ‘religion’, ‘New Age’, and so on.

Millennial conspiracism is constituted through small networks, sometimes in a particular geographical area (often a handful of friends, sometimes consolidating into more formal discussion groups or other kinds of meetings) but more often on the Internet, into which individuals are drawn through personal involvement with books, podcasts, YouTube channels, web forums, social media pages, and (in the USA particularly) local radio and public-access television stations. As with many forms of popular new religion, these groups will consist of a relatively small number of committed members and a larger periphery of those approaching or retreating from the group, and probably a few who observe but never become actively involved. This may be particularly the case in millennial conspiracism, as the range of topics open for discussion—typically including paranormal/supernatural topics, the occult, alternative health, metaphysics, conspiracy, and millennialism—is so broad that many involved will have little in common with other members. Particular writers, speakers, and broadcasters act as spokespersons; focal points rather than de jure leaders with an official mandate. These smaller groups are combined into a larger milieu through members’ involvement with these prominent figures, through websites, social media, and in some cases, large public events. A little over six thousand people attended David Icke’s events at Wembley Arena in 2012 and 2015, and Alex Jones’ annual protests outside the Bilderberg group meetings attract significant crowds. These are relatively rare occurrences, however, and are not seen as necessary for engagement with the milieu.

In many areas of the millennial conspiracist milieu—though by no means all—we find a rejection of religion, and in almost every case, it is the institutional aspects of religion that are singled out for criticism. Very frequently, the term spirituality is used in preference, although there is little agreement in what the term refers to. It is almost always used in contradistinction with religion, and generally signifies the experiential and/or individual aspects over the institutional and/or doctrinal. Even in the more religiously conservative US examples, there is a strongly Protestant thrust to the discourse.

A rejection of hierarchical organisation is frequently noted as being a feature of the New Age field (Hanegraaff 1996: 351; Sutcliffe 2003: 12, 224–225). Melton identifies self-transformation specifically as a defining feature, which interestingly combines a millennial narrative of transformation with a narrative of individualism (1992: 18–19). Of course, as noted above, the appeal to individualism does not equate to individualism in fact, something previous studies of both New Age and conspiracism have tended to ignore. The various
attempts to establish structure in New Age parallel and prefigure the problems in attempts to model the structure of the conspiracist milieu. Both lack institutions or official leaders, formal creeds or proscribed rituals. The fact that this set of criteria is drawn from a Protestant Christian model of religion is not coincidental, which I will return to in my conclusion. The absence of these factors is not generally considered to be of central importance outside of the sphere of ‘religion’; one might, for example, point out that the feminist movement lacked these features, yet the reality of its effect of society would be difficult to deny.

None of the early studies that portray New Age as a movement convincingly identify what the core feature or features of the movement is. The nearest we get are vague notions of ‘immanent planetary transformation’—perhaps typical of the early post-Theosophical millennial milieu but hardly of its later “idiom of humanistic potential and therapeutic change” (Sutcliffe 2003: 10), or alternatively of ‘self-authority’, as discussed above. Hanegraaff (1996) sought to conceptualise New Age as a “commodified” version of Western Esotericism (515), but his four-fold definition includes “healing and growth” and “channeling,” which are by no means unique to New Age, and he also includes all forms of Neopaganism, despite their high degree of institutionalisation and clearly defined practice. However, he goes on to identify esotericism and New Age as examples of a marginalised third epistemological current in Western cultural history, which he identifies as “gnosis.” Gnosis, Hanegraaff claims, is neither faith (transcendent in source and requiring trust in institutions) nor reason (accessed through reason and senses and accessible to all), but a transformational personal revelation (519).

While I think the tripartite distinction is over-simplistic, the focus on multiple and competing epistemic structures later is significant. Dyrendal has more convincingly argued for understanding contemporary conspiracism as a contemporary form of esoteric discourse, and to show “the parallel ways in which knowledge, history, and agency are constructed” in conspiracism and esotericism (2013: 224). To do this, he compares conspiracism to esotericism using Faivre’s influential four-point definition: that a complex of correspondences forms an underlying structure of reality; that all life is interconnected; that by using ritual, meditation, or symbolism, human minds can access extra-mundane levels of being; and that individuals, and indeed, groups and even planetary bodies can experience ontological transformations (Faivre 1994: 119–120). In both conspiracism and esotericism, history is constructed as a war between competing groups in possession of elite, transformative knowledge (gnosis?) and a silent majority who do not possess it: the Sheeple.

An interesting suggestion for the structure of such acephalic groups is Gerlach and Hine’s SPIN, or “segmented polycephalous integrated network” (1970; compare York 1995). This model suggests a network of small groups.
THE COUNTER-ELITE

connected primarily through ideological common purpose rather than centralised institutional structures. Gerlach and Hine add that this common purpose must be

implementing some form of personal or social change; who are actively engaged in the recruitment of others; and whose influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which it originated. (1970: xvi)

The conspiracist milieu seeks both personal and social change, and indeed, as in Melton’s definition above, these are frequently conflated. As the cosmology is based around three parties—an oppressive conspiratorial elite, an engaged but beleaguered enlightened minority, and the much larger acquiescent and even unconscious majority\(^1\)—it is generally argued that societal change comes first and foremost from changing oneself, by waking up from the illusions of the media and the hegemony of the controlling elite. When a ‘critical mass’ of awakened souls is reached—the global awakening—the balance will be tipped and society will be forced to change paradigmatically.\(^2\) For this reason, conspiracists are always keen to recruit new people to the cause, although their open hostility to hegemonic ideology, and the reciprocal hostility engendered, means that they are fighting a difficult battle. Nevertheless, those within the milieu will often go to great lengths to challenge what they see as flawed information or argumentation that is going unchallenged in the public sphere, particularly on social media, where they have the opportunity to directly challenge such ideas unlike on mainstream media where the ideas would be mockingly reported second-hand, if at all.

To this degree, we might very well wish to see the conspiracist milieu as an example of a spin. However, the examples Gerlach and Hine give—Pentecostalism and the Black Power movement—have much more clearly definable aims in mind than conspiracism, which is typically taken to include a vast array of counter-hegemonic ideas from anti-war protests and anti-corporate power on one hand to white nationalism and anti-vaccine narratives on the other. It is hard, therefore, to see conspiracism then as a spin united by a common ideological aim, despite the other structural similarities.

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\(^1\) This tripartite division of society into the enlightened, the aware but corrupt, and the unconscious majority is often considered a defining feature of Gnosticism. It is encountered in a number of New Religious Movements, including the Nation of Islam and the Fourth Way groups based on the teaching of G.I. Gurdjieff.

\(^2\) This model enables writers such as Icke and Jones to engage in conspiratorial apocalypticism while at the same time ascribing to a more utopian millennialism. The night is darkest before the dawn, if you will. I describe this dialectical millennialism in more detail in Robertson 2016.
2.1 Non-Formative Authority

Another alternative to a model of religious authority based on institutions is that presented by Matthew Wood in *Power, Possession and the New Age* (2007), in which he constructs the 'New Age' field as a *non-formative network*. Non-formative here indicates that authorities in the field are unable to "shape people's and organisations' subjective identities and habitus" in a structured way (Wood 2007: 243). Developing Bourdieu's model of fields, Wood posits a spectrum of religious authority from the non-formativeness of New Age through somewhat more formative groups such as Spiritualism or Wicca, in which authorities are better able to "shape experiences and identities," up to fully formative religious institutions who are able to act formatively on communities at a national level (11).

By recognising "multiple and relative" authorities in the New Age milieu, Wood's model offers a welcome recognition that claims to self-authority are part of the field, but are by no means the full story. However, in ascribing formative authority to certain institutions, Wood oversimplifies the situation. While the leaders of religious organisations such as the Catholic Church would like it to be the case that their mandates carry such formative authority, this ignores the situation on the ground. Divorce is no less common in predominantly Catholic cities, and Poland has a high degree of heterodox belief and folk customs, despite the highest rate of identification with the Catholic Church in Europe. Much of what Wood identifies as formative authority then is in fact lip service; formally identifying as abrogating to an authority is not the same as doing so in practice. Meanwhile, there are certainly shared assumptions and practices in the New Age and conspiracist milieux that could suggest a degree of formativeness.

I would further disagree with Wood's conclusion that non-formative networks are typified by a lack of competition or habitus; that in non-formative fields, individuals "play the game of the field" to a lesser degree (Wood 2007: 71–72). Wood specifically states that tussles "for religious capital with one another that [involve] defenses and accusations regarding legitimacy" are a feature of formative fields (73). As we shall see, although authorities are multiple and relative, some nevertheless possess greater authority than others, and although often *sub rosa*, there is a great deal of competing for position within the field between figures such as Icke or Jones with a higher degree of authority, as well as within their subscribers. As with the systems Wood identifies as formative authority, the apparent non-formativeness of these networks is in fact an *appeal* to non-formativeness, rather than actual non-formativeness.

2.2 Two Conspiracist Authority Figures

The subjects of my case studies are certainly regarded as authoritative figures by many of their subscribers, and clearly exert a degree of power over them.
As I will show, except for the degree to which they can be considered “religious” (a debate that is of no importance here), both perfectly fit the spokesperson type as described by Hammer: their biographies are presented according to the rules of hagiography; their works are disseminated and taken as broadly authoritative in the milieu; their ideas are further elaborated upon by others, making them the point of departure in the development of new positions (Hammer 2001: 37).

David Icke has to date published 21 books since 1990, and can sell thousands of tickets for speaking events lasting upwards of ten hours, with events that took place in 2017 in the UK, Iceland, Sweden, Ireland, Canada, France, and Slovenia. His website ranks in the top 2,600 in the UK and USA, considerably higher than many more traditional media outlets. While he and his infamous ‘reptilian thesis’—that the Illuminati, who rule the world in secret, are at their centre a race of shape-shifting reptilian extraterrestrials (Robertson 2013)—are frequently mocked in the media, particularly in the UK, a Pew Forum survey in 2014 suggested that some 4 per cent of the US population agreed with the statement “lizard people’ control our societies by gaining political power” (Williams 2013).

Alex Jones, once described by Rolling Stone magazine as “the world’s most influential conspiracy theorist” (Zaitchik 2011), reaches a huge audience through his syndicated weekday radio show and podcast (it is difficult to establish listening figures with great accuracy, but they certainly number in the hundreds of thousands daily). For many years, Jones had a parallel career as a documentary filmmaker, with some success, particularly with The Obama Deception (2009), which was timed to come out with Barack Obama’s election to the presidency of the USA. Jones is clearly enamoured with celebrity; as well as courting guests from the entertainment industry, including musicians Ted Nugent, Willie Nelson, and Billy Corgan, and actors Sean Young, Viggo Mortensen, and Charlie Sheen (whose infamous “tiger blood” meltdown/breakdown started on Jones’ show), Jones has had cameos in Richard Linklater’s movies Waking life and A Scanner Darkly, in both of which he tellingly plays a street preacher. But Jones’ influence on popular political discourse runs deeper than this; current and former politicians Ron and Rand Paul, Jesse Ventura, and more recently (now President) Donald Trump have all appeared on his show. Not only did Jones interview Trump twice during his presidential campaign, but Trump phoned Jones personally on the day of his election, and Jones was present at the inauguration. Indeed, US newspapers are now starting to notice that much of Trump’s rhetoric is highly reminiscent of Jones’ broadcasts, both in style and content. This puts Jones in an odd position vis-a-vis state power, an idea we will return to later.
Authority in the Millennial Conspiracist Milieu

Charisma, as conceptualised by German proto-sociologist Max Weber, is a quality or attribute that gives a person “specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (1964: 358). In attempting to classify religions according to their institutional structures, he identified three forms of authority: legal (or bureaucratic), traditional, and charismatic. The first two have much in common, inasmuch as they are relatively stable, impersonal, rational, and ‘worldly’. Charismatic authority, however, is described as personal, irrational, and unstable (Adair-Toteff 2005: 191). On the breakdown of charismatic authority due to the leader’s death or disgrace, the group establishes either traditional authority (in which a successor takes over the former leader’s position, often following a power struggle) or bureaucratic authority (in which institutions and regulations ‘routinise’ and codify the leader’s teachings). Alternatively, they may simply collapse.

The charismatic person is “specifically extraordinary,” and their followers are devoted to them personally (Weber 1964: 140). This devotion, in Weber’s description, is produced as a result of the leader’s heroic acts or ‘miracles’ (140, 656). In Weber’s terms, these magical acts establish that the charismatic leader has been chosen by god:

> a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual is treated as a leader. (328)

It is important to note, however, that Weber’s charismatic person does not passively gain authority, but specifically claims leadership. This is significant, because although both Jones and Icke are prominent figures, neither presents themselves as a leader—explicitly, at least. Indeed, such formal authority is explicitly rejected by both. However, a second aspect to Weber’s formulation is that the leader’s charisma must be recognised in turn by others. As Bromley notes, these followers “may also advance those claims on behalf of the leader” (2014: 104).

Indeed, this is what we see happening. Although both Icke and Jones formally deny leadership, they nevertheless go to considerable lengths to establish the miraculous abilities with which their followers can make their leadership claims for them. Specifically, both Jones and Icke present themselves as prophets, pointing to previous successful predictions to bolster their authority,
although neither would use the term explicitly. The following transcript is from the July 25, 2001 broadcast of the Alex Jones show, which Jones and his supporters frequently cite as an example of Jones’ successful prophesying:

America is the shining jewel the globalists want to bring down, and they will use terrorism as the pretext to get it done ... Call the White House, tell them we know the government’s planning terrorism, we know Oklahoma City and the Trade Center were terrorism, we know the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to blow up airliners ... If you do it, we’re going to blame you, ‘cos we know who’s up to it. Or if you let some terrorist group do it, like the World Trade Centre, we’ll know who to blame.3

Here, Jones suggests that there will be an immanent (though not date-specific) ‘false-flag’ attack (that is, one carried out by one power under the guise of another) on the USA, to be blamed on Osama Bin Laden, which may involve blowing up planes. Jones does not, however, predict that it will involve the World Trade Center, however, but mentions it as an example of a previous false-flag attack, specifically the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Three months later, a series of attacks did happen for which Bin Laden was blamed, but that is the extent to which Jones can be said to have been correct. No timescale was given by Jones. No planes were blown up. In fact, Jones’ prophecy was a failure unless one already considers the 9/11 attacks to have been a false-flag operation, and therefore it is a logical fallacy to use this prediction as evidence that 9/11 was a false-flag attack, as Jones and his supporters frequently do. According to the authoritative account, and the majority of Americans, Osama bin Laden ordered the 9/11 attacks, in direct contradiction to Jones’ statement.

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that Jones is actually urging his listeners to call the White House in order to prevent the prophesied attack from happening. If no attack had happened, then Jones could still claim to have been correct. In other words, the reason given for why the prediction didn’t pan out is that its accuracy enabled the group to divert it before it occurred, a common strategy for avoiding cognitive dissonance, sometimes referred to as ‘prevention’ (Robertson 2016: 8).

Jones has not tended to suggest a supernatural source for his prophesying; rather, he is the type of prophet who, according to Barkun’s typology, “reads the signs of the times” (2013: 17). In my own epistemic typology, I would refer to Jones as accumulating *synthetic knowledge*, that is, knowledge that is produced

through connecting disparate and often circumstantial items together to produce a bigger picture. He does refer to his ‘intuition’ or ‘gut feeling’ on occasion, but again, with the caveat that he has been doing what he does for so long that he has begun to understand how ‘they’ think. Recently, however, Jones has been more openly acknowledging his Christianity, and along with it, suggesting that Infowars (and the presidency of Donald Trump) is part of God’s plan. Perhaps in times of increased political turmoil and semiotic arousal (Landes 2011), Jones feels he can (or must) lay his cards more clearly on the table.

Icke, on the other hand, does claim direct supernatural mandate, openly and frequently, although the exact nature of that supernatural mandate has changed significantly over time. Until mid 1993, he claimed his authority came entirely from highly evolved supernatural beings, whose origin was unclear but who had responsibility for the solar system, at least. Such beings were known as Masters or Mahatmas in the Theosophical tradition, and were initially conceived of as highly developed humans, though the idea had developed to include extraterrestrials by the early twentieth century. Icke’s Masters (who he called, in characteristically populist style, “the Guys”) included Jesus (or at least, his cosmic aspect, “the Christ Spirit”), Lao Tzu, Socrates, and Rakoczi, a figure identified in the writings of Alice Bailey as “Lord of Civilisation,” charged with establishing the “Age of Aquarius” (1972 [1944]: 232; 1957: 667).

These messages came first through channelers including Betty Shine, Deborah Shaw, and Derek Acorah (well known to the British public through ITV’s Most Haunted series). The earliest of them seem to paint Icke not so much as a prophet, but rather a spiritual saviour figure being predicted by these channelled entities. This may have been the impetus behind Icke’s well-known (and frequently mocked) statement that he was “the son of God” during a BBC television interview with Terry Wogan in 1991.

From 1993, however, Icke claimed to have direct communication with the Masters, manifesting initially in a stone circle in Peru, and following an Ayahuasca trip in Brazil in 2003, with the Godhead itself. This is perhaps unsurprising; as Bromley notes, charismatic figures who present themselves as divine need to maintain significantly higher levels of charisma, and the groups that form around them tend to be tightly structured and highly controlled (2014: 105–106), for example Aum Shinrikyo or Heaven’s Gate. Icke has always

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5 On Most Haunted, Acorah would allegedly channel spirits who were haunting buildings. In 2005, a number of newspapers ran stories claiming that he had actually been fed the information by the show’s producers, with a number of the names he had channelled being accusations of fakery in anagram form (Nevin 2005).
sought a wide audience, however, as shown by his frequent public talks, media appearances, and publishing output. However, Icke may also have wanted to claim this epistemic capital for himself due to his frequent fallings-out with his channelers, most significantly Deborah Shaw. Most of Icke’s 1992 book *Love Changes Everything* was channelled by Shaw, who had moved in with Icke and his family, and with whom Icke fathered a daughter. Today, Icke has no contact with Shaw or their daughter, and *Love Changes Everything* (a work heavily influenced by Theosophical ideas) remains out of print and is seldom acknowledged in his later work.

However, like Jones, Icke is also a ‘synthetic’ prophet, frequently styling himself “the dot connector.” Icke makes frequent claims that contemporary news stories were predicted in his books; two recent examples are that he publicly named Jimmy Savile and Edward Heath (both now dead) as paedophiles long before the claims came to public attention in Operation Yewtree from 2012. Closer inspection once again reveals that these prophecies are not quite the successes they purport to be. Edward Heath was implicated in several investigations while alive, though he was never charged. It has recently emerged that these accusations were based entirely on eye-witness testimony that can be shown to be at best in contradiction with the historical record, and at worst entirely fabricated. Similarly to the Satanic Ritual Abuse cases of the 1990s, these are sometimes produced using now-discredited hypnotic memory regression techniques, and frequently amplified by selective reporting by the press. On the other hand, Savile has been acknowledged as one of the UK’s worst sex offenders by the police post-mortem, but despite Icke’s frequent claims to the contrary, Icke only named Savile after his death, and significantly, after an *ITV* documentary that exposed Savile as a serial paedophile on October 3, 2012 (*ITV* 2012). Not one accusation against Saville can be found in his books or videos prior to this date.6

Questions of legitimacy aside, in both cases, these appeals to successful prophecies are part of a conscious program to gain authority. Both Icke and Jones have made many more failed predictions than successful ones, but using a technique I call “rolling prophecy,” their success rate can be exaggerated (Robertson 2013). Rolling prophecy requires a regular and frequent output of prophetic material, enabling a process of constant reconsideration and selection. Failures will be forgotten, whereas apparently successful prophecies are emphasised. I say *apparently* successful as there will typically be some massaging to make them seem more successful than they actually are, as demonstrated above by Jones’ self-proclaimed prediction of 9/11 or Icke’s identification of Saville. Icke continues to mention the channelled messages from Rakoczi,.

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6 If any reader can point one out to me, I will be most grateful.
including at his live events throughout 2015 and 2016, but significantly these later references omit the failed prophecies detailed in earlier works, including widespread earthquakes and the eruption of Washington's Mount Rainier in 1991. So, rolling prophecy has allowed both Icke and Jones to minimise their failures and amplify the successes, creating the impression of themselves as much more successful prophets than in reality, and therefore creating charismatic authority.

3.1 The Internet and Authority
How well, then, do these charismatic strategies function in the Web 2.0 era? As Erica Baffelli notes, the Internet offers new possibilities for “the role and perception of authority” (2011: 119). Indeed, the oft-noted distinction between religion online (in which traditional hierarchical structures are reproduced in an electronic form) and online religion (with a high level of interactivity and more open structures) mirrors the apparent distinction between institutionalised or traditional religions and the more loosely structured milieu of new religions (Helland 2000). But there are differences; how, for example, would charismatic leadership emerge in an environment that lacked any physical relationship?

It may be that use of the Internet makes rolling prophecy a more viable strategy than in previous decades. Multiple posts may be produced daily—and unlike traditional journalism, with no serious editorial oversight—yet all remain accessible should any turn out to have been correct, and moreover can be edited should details turn out to have been inaccurate. Significantly, these articles, images, and videos can then be instantly shared via social media, potentially giving them a broader audience than they originally had as they are removed from their original context.

It is often claimed that the use of the Internet, particularly social media in the Web 2.0 era, breaks down the traditional separation between producer and consumer; in this case, between religious leader and religious convert. In her work on Japanese new religions, however, Baffelli suggests that the Internet can actually enhance the leader’s image as “untouchable, distant and above all charismatic” (2011: 127). By moving to predominantly online interaction, the leader (or their subordinates) is better able to control their image, and rather than humanise them, actually minimise the exposure of their problematically human bodies and emotions. The leader in effect becomes “perfect, immaterial, semi-divine, only occasionally manifesting ... in a material sense” (128). The Internet therefore can actually strengthen the charisma of the leader by enhancing the ‘magical’ qualities, while limiting the possibility of risk of personal interaction and public appearances by placing the leader at one step removed from their followers. They are more available in terms of time, while being less...
available as a material body. Such online authority may, ironically, strengthen the ability for the charismatic persona of the leader to be maintained while appearing to do quite the opposite. Despite seeming on the surface very different, then, the Internet is in fact a powerful tool for enabling traditional charismatic structures to be maintained.

Icke and Jones both demonstrate this. Although Jones’ call-in shows claim unvetted “open phones,” one doesn’t have to listen for too long before hearing him literally screaming at a caller who dares to criticise him. A clear example was his appearance on the BBC’s magazine show Sunday Politics, hosted by Andrew Neil, to discuss the Bilderberg Group, who were meeting in the UK that week. His response to the mocking interview is to talk over the presenter and other guest, and the show fades out with Jones screaming “Liberty is rising! You will not stop the Republic! Humanity is awakening!”

A tight reign is also kept on Icke’s online forums by his staff. Although there is a great deal of stress put on free speech, those repeatedly criticising Icke are frequently removed. To be fair, Sean Adl-Tabatabai, Icke’s former webmaster and later co-organiser of his failed Internet TV channel, The People’s Voice, seems to have been responsible for this censorship. That the relationship between the two became highly rancorous and even litigious does not seem to have dissuaded Icke’s critics, however. Given the situation, replacing Adl-Tabatabai as moderator with his son Gareth was unlikely to be seen in a positive light.

4 “Cointel Shills”: Competing for Capital

Using Icke and Jones as case studies make plain the difference between the predominantly right wing and Christian conspiracism of the USA and the predominantly left wing (but increasingly less so) and ‘spiritual’ conspiracism of the UK. It may be that the difference stems from which aspect of political discourse has been marginalised in each case. Certainly, both US libertarianism and UK socialism present utopian visions of the future, rather different language notwithstanding. However, they also allow us to see that there is indeed competition for the capital of the field, contra Wood (2007).

Icke has been highly critical of the right-wing and Christian rhetoric he encountered in conspiracist discourse during the 1990s. He is alleged to have told a Christian Patriot group, “I don’t know which I dislike more, the world controlled by the Brotherhood, or the one you want to replace it with” (Barkun 2003: 108).

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It is certainly interesting then that he and Jones have worked together on multiple occasions.

Jones initially considered Icke a “con-man,” and implied that he was a counterintelligence agent sent to discredit more sober researchers by promoting the reptilian thesis, which he referred to as the “turd in the punchbowl” (Ronson 2001). However, Jones has since apologised, and Icke was a frequent guest on Jones’ syndicated radio show between 2005 and 2014. This is a clear example of both men putting their differences aside to capitalise on the authority of the other in somewhat different circles.

Jones stayed silent when Icke publicly fell out with a frequent Infowars guest, Jesse Ventura, former Governor of Minnesota, in 2011. Icke was interviewed for Ventura’s cable show, Conspiracy Theory (co-produced by Jones), but was unhappy about the tone of the questioning, during which Ventura implied, predictably, that Icke was “in it for the money,” and the eventual edit used, which Icke thought made it appear that he was avoiding answering. Icke later called Ventura “one of the most monumental egos and uninformed people it has been my ‘experience’ to encounter,” and “one of the most arrogant and ignorant men I can ever remember looking in the eyes” (Icke 2011).

Icke has similarly remained silent on Jones’ open support for Donald Trump, although he has been highly critical of Trump himself, and of any attempt to affect change through the political system. Nevertheless, his frequent collaborator Richie Allen (whose daily radio show/podcast is sponsored and hosted by davidicke.com) has been quite vocal in his criticism of Jones and others associated with him, such as Paul Joseph Watson. For example, on the January 4, 2017 episode, Jones is described as having become a Neocon, and is accused of producing the very partisan and Islamophobic material he formerly accused mainstream outlets such as Fox News of producing, and which Jones used to claim was part of a plan to destabilise the USA, introduce martial law, and advance globalism. Guest Kevin Barrett suggests that Jones has chosen to change his oppositional position in order to grow the profits of the Infowars operation in the Trump presidency—in other words, for money. Jones has absolutely had to adapt his rhetoric given his present connections to the White House. Rather than accuse the president of being a puppet of conspiratorial powers, Infowars’ criticisms of government policy now pits the president as struggling against the globalist interests of the ‘deep state’—essentially civil servants and other unelected officials. This rhetoric is highly reminiscent of the anti-elitist discourse during the UK “Brexit” referendum in 2016, but this can be ignored when it doesn’t suit, for example when Trump places his own

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unelected officials in power, or when the UK’s own High Court Judges came under fire for agreeing with European judges in questioning the legality of Brexit.

The battle over capital is not only between producers, but between producers and their audience. Both Jones and Icke have been accused of being a “shill,” defined by David Clarke as “someone who deliberately promotes a public impression of themselves as an independent or objective researcher while secretly pursuing a hidden agenda” (2015: 133). Conspiracist website Before It’s News published a piece on August 2, 2016, claiming that Alex Jones’ trip to Europe was in fact his escaping the USA, after helping the government “to spark a civil war in Texas” during the Jade Helm military exercises. Jones’ alleged role was to incite veterans and patriots into armed confrontation with the military and police, thereby giving the impetus for increased security measures. Jones on the other hand, claims he was in Europe to chart the collapse of the European Union and the increasing austerity measures. Blogger Timothy Fitzpatrick accuses Jones specifically of working for both Cointelpro (the 1956–71 CIA program of counter-intelligence and propaganda) and Hasbara (the Israeli Public Diplomacy program). This is also an example of a number of deeply unpleasant websites alleging Jones to be working secretly for Israel, pointing out that his ex-wife and a number of his colleagues are Jewish, using familiar anti-Semitic language and imagery.

Very often, criticisms of prominent conspiracist figures revolve around financial gain. The claim that the millennial conspiracist figure is “only in it for the money” (and perhaps, by implication, a shill) is a frequent one. Jones himself is often singled out for this, not infrequently with the added implication that those funding him are Jewish. If the individual is aiming to make money, it is assumed therefore that their honesty is impugned. It is particularly interesting then that Weber states that the charismatic leader must reject economic gain, as it is too worldly, writing “Pure charisma is specifically economically alien” (1964: 142, emphasis in original). It is a strange accusation: one would not criticise a dentist or baker for wanting to put a roof over their head. Somehow the conspiracist speaker must give the impression of being a wandering

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11 This ugly aspect of conspiracy discourse has always been present, although its size is often exaggerated by those who seek to marginalise conspiracy discourses. Certainly, however, anti-Semitic rhetoric becomes more apparent at times when issues of race and immigration come to the fore (see Jackson, this volume), and it is undeniable that it has become particularly visible of late, in both the USA and Europe.
ascetic, holding out a bowl for alms. This may be a hangover of a Protestant Christian idea of saintliness: the charismatic figure must reject the world. More likely, however, is that conspiracist discourse is predicated upon such a fundamental rejection of societal norms that any sort of economic activity is shunned. It is also a logical result of conspiracism's *cui bono* solution to evidence for conspiracy.¹²

4.1 *Epistemic Capital*

In the conspiracist milieu, I suggest, subscribers do not see such prophesying, intuition, and dot-connecting as inherently magical, reacting with wonder. Rather, they identify with such activities, and the reaction is of recognition. In perhaps 50 per cent of cases, according to my fieldwork (2014; 2016), subscribers have experienced such phenomena for themselves, or similar anomalous experiences. The charismatic figure here is one who does acts that are seen by their audience as commonplace, yet repressed. The miraculous act may therefore not be the prophesying and so on, but the act of going public with it.

What typifies the field in this instance is that charisma is established through the accumulation of *epistemic capital*. That is, “the way in which actors within the intellectual field engage in strategies aimed at maximising ... epistemic profits, that is, better knowledge of the world” (Maton 2003: 62). To put it another way, epistemic capital refers not to what or who you know, but how you know. For many, science is the epistemic standard most often appealed to, although in practice tradition and personal experience are far more drawn upon in everyday life. Yet, within the millennial conspiracist milieu, science is relativised and takes an equal standing to other less often appealed to standards. As with esotericism, experience, channelling, intuition, and synthetic (dot-connecting) knowledge are considered to be equally important.

As noted above, Icke has made frequent appeals to channelled communications with spiritual and/or extraterrestrial beings, and both he and Jones make frequent use of synthetic knowledge. Taking Icke’s 2013 book *The Perception Deception* as an example, and opening at a random point, he references Leslie Gilbert in *Burke’s Peerage* (269–270), former editor of *Vanity Fair* Tina Brown’s book *The Diana Chronicles* (270), an unnamed and undated column from the *Independent* (271), “research by a Melbourne teacher and his senior students” (271), the *Daily Mail* (272), unsubstantiated testimony from one of the original “satanic panic” accusers, Arizona Wilder (273–276), blogger Stewart Swerdlow, and the 1998 Wesley Snipes superhero/vampire movie, *Blade* (277). He does not differentiate primary from secondary sources, prioritises personal testimony.

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¹² I am indebted to Asbjørn Dyrendal for this observation.
without providing any supporting material evidence, and gives great authority to anything that supports his thesis while ignoring or dismissing that which does not (confirmation bias). Pages 425–446 make the point that education trains people not to think; it is telling then that Icke will cite a teacher and their students as evidence when it suits his argument. Likewise, the chapters on science and the media: a Daily Mail column or a scientific paper is fine, so long as it agrees with Icke.

It is not the case, as is sometimes polemically claimed, that conspiracists typically reject science outright, however. In fact, many in this milieu make firm and frequent appeals to the authority of science. However, it is relativised; the scientific impossibility of interstellar travel is trumped by the experience of meeting extraterrestrials, for example. It is also used selectively: when one paper supports one of Icke's theories, it is hailed as proof, but when fifty papers suggest otherwise, they are dismissed as evidence of the close-mindedness of "mainstream science" (at best), or a conspiracy, at worst. When a guest appears on Jones' show, their scientific credentials will be played up: when the scientific majority disagrees with Jones (such as regarding climate change), we will be told that universities train people to toe the line. Epistemic capital is accumulated through the strategic mobilisation of each of these epistemic strategies, rather than an outright rejection of mainstream strategies. This makes these fields highly inclusive, varied and adaptable.

Conspiracist figureheads such as Icke and Jones gain and maintain authority through the accumulation of epistemic capital, by demonstrating their ability to access a range of exclusive sources of knowledge. It is not that they possess social capital alone—that they know something that you do not—but rather that they can know something you do not. They claim access to a broader range of sources of knowledge than the typical person, and this appears miraculous and gives them charisma. Prophecy through channelled, intuitive, or synthetic knowledge demonstrates that the leader has access to elite knowledge.

This approach to authority in popular movements offers a more sophisticated take on the concept that both challenges the need for explicitly 'supernatural' charismatic acts on the behalf of the leader, and also helps to explain how leaders' occasional failures, both personal and in terms of prophecy, may be dismissed as relatively unimportant. The leader is not seen as divine, nor as infallible; rather, they have access to sources of information that their followers and critics do not.
As such, they are constructing themselves as a ‘counter-elite’: rather than an elite defined by the control of economic capital, one defined by epistemic capital—an epistemocracy, perhaps. This clearly echoes Marxist critiques, but focused on the seizing of the means of knowledge production. Not only are counter-epistemic strategies the means to liberation, their suppression is the very tool by which the possibility of said liberation is restricted. The leader is seen as demonstrating the very thing their subscribers consider to be repressed by the controlling power, however they identify it. Yet the constant appeals to individualism inherently undermine any potential efforts toward institutionalisation.

As Taves and Kinsella note, it is unlikely that such organisational structures, with multiple and relativised authorities competing over the epistemic capital of the field, are anything new: rather they have “historically coexisted alongside and interpenetrated with ‘official’ religious organisations” (2013: 87). A potential development of the ideas in this chapter is that such dynamics are in no way confined to the sphere of religions, official or otherwise. Indeed, this model may help underline that, when stripped of their magical veneer, there is nothing exceptional about the development of religious movements. More, the model of epistemic capital might allow us to better place such groups in relation to the broader field of knowledge they are located within. Millennialism and conspiracism are both based on appeals to counter-hegemonic epistemic strategies, so while the content may differ (at least inasmuch as we tend to see one as essentially religious and the other as essentially secular), the underlying epistemé are the same.

Charismatic authority is particularly associated with the first generation of organisations, and with contemporary conspiracist culture dating predominantly from the late 1960s, it is unclear how it will develop through its second and third generations. Certainly, as Icke reaches his 60s and Jones is increasingly aligned with the mainstream political system than ever before, we may begin to see institutionalisation of these movements, despite the apparent lack of organisation and unabating appeals to individualisation.

Open your mind.

References

Icke, D. 2013. *The Perception Deception, or ... it’s all bollocks—yes all of it, the most comprehensive exposure of human life ever written*. Isle of Wight: David Icke Books.