

# Conspiratorial Framing

*Framing as a tool in the war on information*



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May 2018

*“Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions... Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense.”*

(Lakoff, 2004, p.XV)

## Abstract

This research aims to understand the frames used by conspiracy theorists by establishing a new pathway in media framing, or in other words a media framing micro-theory, called *conspiratorial framing*. The aims are accomplished through a critical analysis of the case of Alex Jones, a conspiracy theorist, and InfoWars, the media channel through which Jones operates. Through frame analysis, accomplished by implementing the methods of thematic content analysis and visual analysis then applying frame analysis to the results of those methods, this research explores the ways Jones and InfoWars give meaning to the events portrayed in the conspiracy theories perpetuated on InfoWars programs.

The qualitative data analysis in this research, constituted by thematic content analysis and visual analysis, uses open coding to extract themes from transcribed data while the methodological guidance of frame analysis, supplemented by theories regarding representation and reality construction, provides a theoretical background for this research. These methods and methodologies are applied to the empirical material of 14 YouTube videos. The thematic content analysis is applied to transcriptions of the videos, and the visual analysis is performed on the videos themselves. The 14 videos, published on YouTube between the years of 2011 and 2017, total about two hours of richly dense content.

This dissertation culminates in the development of the “conspiratorial framing” grounded theory, defined by the establishment of a typology of conspiratorial frames present in and extracted from InfoWars broadcasts. The conspiratorial framing typology that this research develops consists of five thematic frames, which are *fearmongering*, *disdaining institutions*, *nationalism*, *demonizing political others*, and *methods of validation*. This research not only contributes to media framing, but also, and arguably more importantly, to the broader fields of thought regarding media representation and the mediated construction of reality. By adding the new facet of conspiratorial framing to the current understanding of the media landscape—as defined by the complex web of intertextuality between not only different facets of media, but also media and the consumer—a better understanding can be gained of how information is presented, re-presented, and ultimately understood in this digitally mediated world. This focus on conspiracy theories as part of the mediated web of our digital world will ultimately help shine a light on the nature of truth, fact, and reality.

**Keywords:** Alex Jones, conspiracy theories, conspiratorial framing, fearmongering, frame analysis, framing theory, InfoWars, media framing, media representation, mediated construction of reality

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you, Steven Sampson, for taking the time to share your expert knowledge on conspiracy theories with me. You went above and beyond in our interview to help me, and I appreciate that. This thesis would not have been the same without your help.

Thank you to my advisor, Helena Sandberg, for providing me with your vast wealth of knowledge, as well as hours of your time and energy. Your knowledge, and your kindness, were invaluable to this thesis writing process.

## Contents

### **1. Introduction...8**

- 1.1 The Case of Alex Jones and InfoWars...9
- 1.2 Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions...10
- 1.3 Why this Research Matters...12
- 1.4 Disposition...13

### **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Outline...14**

- 2.1 Conspiracy Theories: Constitution and Causation...15
  - 2.1.1 Paranoia as a Product of Powerlessness...16
  - 2.1.2 Conspiracy Theories and Religion...18
- 2.2 Theoretical Outline...20
  - 2.2.1 Media Framing: A Brief History...20
  - 2.2.2 Media Framing and Power...21
  - 2.2.3 Mediation and Mediatization in Social Movement Organizations...22
  - 2.2.4 Common Threads Between Framing Theory and Conspiracy Theories...24
- 2.3 Transitioning from Theory to Methodology...27
  - 2.3.1 Constructing Reality...27
  - 2.3.2 Performing Politics and Discourse of Repression: An Analytical Precursor...29

### **3. Methodology and Methods...31**

- 3.1 Frame Analysis...31
- 3.2 Qualitative Analysis...33
  - 3.2.1 Thematic Content Analysis...33
  - 3.2.2 Visual Analysis...35
- 3.3 Selection and Sampling Procedure for Empirical Material...37
- 3.4 Limitations...39

### **4. Data Analysis...41**

- 4.1 Positioning Alex Jones and InfoWars in a Broader Media Landscape...41
- 4.2 The Framing Tools of InfoWars: Five Themes...42
  - 4.2.1 Fearmongering and Disdaining Institutions...43
  - 4.2.2 Nationalism...46
  - 4.2.3 Demonizing Political Others...47
  - 4.2.4 Methods of Validation...51

4.2.5 Calls to Action and PizzaGate...	54
4.3 Analysis in Explicit Reference to Entman's Frame Characterization...	56
4.4 The "They"...	58
4.5 Mainstream Media's Adoption of Conspiratorial Frames...	60
<b>5. Conclusion...</b>	<b>63</b>
5.1 A Typology Defined as a Tool in the War on Information...	63
5.2 A New Dimension to Media Framing...	65
5.3 Coming Full Circle...	68
References...	70
Data Sources...	75
Appendix 1: Coded Video Transcript with Codes...	76
Appendix 2: Concept Map...	81
Appendix 3: Images for Visual Analysis...	82
Appendix 4: Rose's Sites and Modalities...	87
Appendix 5: InfoWars Audience Demographic Data...	88

## 1. Introduction

It is no secret that conspiracy theorists not only question, but often distrust government and institutions. They will not be fooled into believing the notion that democratic governments are benign or pluralistic, and they “disdain the established institutions of channels of democratic politics” (Fenster, 2008, p.1). This sentiment seems to be gaining in popularity, or at least palpability, as evidenced by United States President Donald Trump’s cries of election rigging, voter fraud, a “Deep State,” and “The Swamp.”<sup>1</sup> This sentiment is nothing new—some authors trace conspiratorial thinking back hundreds of years to the 18th century and American Revolution (Wood, 1982), while others place its origins thousands of years ago in ancient Rome (Sampson, 2018). This research, however, does not center around the origin or constitution of conspiracy theories, but rather on the way conspiracy theories represent issues and phenomena such as politics, government, institutions, and ultimately, reality.

The research presented in this thesis is especially timely regarding the current state of politics in the United States. It seems that conspiracy theories, and the popularity of a primary perpetrator of conspiracy theories—a political faction deemed the “alt-right<sup>2</sup>”—are on the rise, and it can be argued that this increase in popularity not only correlated with, but contributed to, the election of Donald Trump, who consistently aligns himself with the alt-right. The focus of this research is not on the rise of the alt-right, but rather on a critical analysis of ways in which conspiracy theories themselves contribute to the media framing of the objects of conspiracy theories, which are often government and institutions. The aim of this research is to explore a new path in framing theory of what I call “conspiratorial framing” in order to understand how the issues at the center of conspiracy theories are framed, the narratives these frames evoke, and how those framing tactics are used in the “war on information.”

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Deep State” is defined by Google.com as “a body of people, typically influential members of government agencies or the military, believed to be involved in the secret manipulation or control of government policy.” The term “The Swamp” was coined by Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign, and it refers to members of the United States political establishment.

<sup>2</sup> The alt-right is an alternative form of far-right (extreme) conservatism that rejects mainstream Republican ideology and has a fringe and controversial reputation.



## 1.1 The Case of Alex Jones and InfoWars

This research centers around the case of popular conspiracy theorist and political commentator<sup>3</sup> Alex Jones and the media company that he owns: *InfoWars*. InfoWars' flagship program *The Alex Jones Show* is not only streamed online on the InfoWars.com website and YouTube, but is also a syndicated radio broadcast featured on more than 160 AM, FM, and shortwave stations in the United States between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., Monday through Friday with another InfoWars program broadcasting on Sundays. InfoWars has infamously earned the nickname “Mis-InfoWars,” exemplified by a 2017 Rolling Stone article titled “Alex Jones' Mis-Infowars: 7 Bat-Sh\*t Conspiracy Theories” (Killelea, 2017). This reputation has been earned through frequent inaccuracies and the perpetuation of unconfirmed suspicions.

The increasingly subjective nature of reality and fact is perhaps no better exemplified than by the contrast between criticisms of InfoWars and the way InfoWars describes its own mission:

The manipulation of facts and the slow relentless war on reality is being waged on this landscape of the mind. When those who seek to control humanity can convince the world that what they say is true, we will rapidly descend into the most oppressive tyranny ever seen (InfoWars.com, 2018).

The idea of a war on information is implicit within this dynamic between InfoWars' nefarious reputation and the reputation InfoWars believes it deserves. While InfoWars describes itself as “wearing our bias—the truth—openly and proudly on our sleeve” (InfoWars.com, 2018), it is criticized by others as taking a “fact-free” and “paranoiac approach to news” (Beauchamp, 2018). As can be deduced from the title itself, the conspiracy theory content of InfoWars is used by Alex Jones as a tool in the war on information. This idea of a war on information has elbowed its way to the forefront of American politics and media as exemplified by phenomena such as the rise of attention around so-called “fake news,” “alternative facts,” ideological polarization, and a general disagreement on the very nature of truth, objective fact, and reality. InfoWars considers itself to be at the forefront of the fight for authority and power regarding not only information, but also policy. The influence that

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<sup>3</sup> Note here that Jones may call himself a journalist—the tagline on his Twitter page says “Fighting for Freedom & Liberty on the Frontlines of Truth Journalism” (Twitter.com, 2018)—but I believe “political commentator” better suits what Jones represents because he does not fit the objective description of a journalist.

political media has on policy-making has taken on a new level of salience as United States President Donald Trump forges staunch alliances with his preferred conservative media outlets.

As expanded upon later in this thesis, Alex Jones has personal contact with Trump—the White House even gave InfoWars a one-day press pass, which is unprecedented for such a fringe and controversial media outlet (Tani, 2017). The increasing influence of opinionated news media is further exemplified by the fact that Trump reportedly watches the conservative program *Fox & Friends* habitually, with evidence of the program influencing what the president says, constructing the president's reality, and possibly even influencing the president's decisions (Marantz, 2018). The strengthening of the fringe and alternative media landscape, highlighted by InfoWars' permanent link on Drudge Report<sup>4</sup> (something highly coveted among alternative right-wing media outlets), provides justification for this research.

## **1.2 Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions**

This thesis aims to understand the framing mechanisms used by conspiracy theorists in the “war on information” by developing a new pathway in framing theory, specifically media framing, called conspiratorial framing. The foundation of this new grounded theory is developed through the establishment of a typology of frames that exist within conspiracy theories perpetuated by InfoWars. This typology provides a base definition of what constitutes conspiratorial framing relative to the case of Alex Jones and InfoWars.

The presentation and subsequent reception of information is defined by the frames that act as a filter for that information. Therefore, through nuancing the way frames are understood by developing a conspiratorial framing typology, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the framing of information in media and how that information is trusted or not trusted and generally understood. By linking media framing with ideas and theories regarding conspiracies, this research posits that more frames are needed to describe the conspiracy theory aspect of media framing. Ultimately, this research contributes to an enhancement of

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<sup>4</sup> Drudge Report is a right-wing news aggregation website that features fringe and alt-right news media websites and links primarily to articles that push a right-wing agenda. Drudge Report can be accessed at <http://drudgereport.com/>.

the way reality is understood by approaching conspiracy theories through an analytical and conceptual framing theory approach.

Framing research has a long and in-depth history that, arguably, needs more nuance and detail—I would like to argue that this is where my dissertation can contribute. As outlined in the literature review and theoretical outline, framing theory’s long theoretical history has made little room for opportunities to hone in on specific aspects of framing. In other words, there is much research regarding general framing theory, but research lacks in areas of specific and methodical applications of this theory to defined subjects and ideas such as conspiracy theories. Hopefully, this research will inspire more pragmatic, applicable, and tangible framing research such as the study of frames in education, psychology, corporations, or advertisements, just to name a few examples.

The aims of this research are realized through the exploration of three research questions:

1. What frames exist in InfoWars’ mediated communication of conspiracy theories?
2. How do conspiracy theories, specifically those presented on InfoWars, contribute to the mediated construction of reality?
3. What can conspiratorial framing reveal about the conspiracy theorist’s views on politics, government, institutions, and “others”?

These questions are answered by researching the case of Alex Jones and InfoWars through a qualitative analysis of YouTube clips of InfoWars broadcasts. Since the digital revolution, conspiracy theories have been increasingly consumed via online media, making this digital research all the more salient and relevant. In accordance with this phenomenon, the methods used for analyzing this digital empirical material are a thematic content analysis and visual analysis. The thematic content analysis will extract themes from the empirical material, while the visual analysis embraces the visual nature of Jones’ broadcasts and allows for a more well-rounded and comprehensive analysis in relation to the digital nature of the empirical material. Conducting the analysis through of a lense of the frame analysis methodology is what will allow for the establishment of a conspiratorial framing typology.

This research transcends disciplines but is constituted primarily by theories based in media

and communication studies in the sense that virtually all conspiracy theories are consumed via different media texts<sup>5</sup>, allowing this research to take for granted the fact that digital and traditional mediation are the primary methods of consumption and communication for conspiracy theories. Critically analyzing Jones' media texts and pollinating the analysis with theories regarding framing, conspiracy, representation, and reality construction offers a fresh view into the nature of conspiracy theories and the way they frame their subjects.

It is important to note that the goal of this research is not to confirm or disprove any conspiracy theory, nor is it to pass judgements on conspiracy theories and theorists or posit "value judgements about what is sane, rational, true, or otherwise should have no place in the study of cultural meaning" (Robertson, 2015, p.12). That is not to say, however, that conspiracy theory research should not seek to understand the implications of conspiracy theories for democracies, social hegemonic structures, and reality construction. In fact, these issues are underlying in this thesis' ultimate, broader purposes. Statements in this thesis about general implications of conspiracy theories for broader societal issues and phenomena deduced from an empirical critical analysis should not be confused with subjective or personal value judgements.

### **1.3 Why this Research Matters**

This research satisfies Bent Flyvbjerg's requirements of "science that matters" (2001) and Sandra Harding's Requirements of "sciences from below" (2008) in the sense that the research focuses on a fringe group of society, which is that of conspiracy theorists. Although the typical profile of "sciences from below" deals with progressive, postmodern issues or groups, this research will offer a critical analysis of a more untraditional section of the United States population, but a section that is just as marginalized, ignored, chastised, and shunned as traditional subjects of "sciences from below," thus satisfying Harding's primary criteria for social science research. Flyvbjerg would agree with Harding regarding the justifications for this research, primarily for the practical implications, because this critical analysis offers a valuable understanding of how subjects of conspiracy theories are portrayed among a marginalized faction of American society—conspiracy communities.

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<sup>5</sup> This is aside, of course, from word-of-mouth communication. However, the mediated nature of today's society is what calls for this research to focus on the mediated aspect of conspiracy theory communication.

The democratic implications for this research are arguably of the most value. With advanced, developed democracies all around the world starting to falter and show signs of weakness, this timely research can assist in understanding that phenomenon and, with further research beyond this thesis, remedying the dire situation by increasing our understanding of the frames that these alt-right, populist political factions often use. With far-right, extremist ideologies playing an ever-increasing role in the western world, this reality-focused research can be seen as vital for the preservation of free, just, liberal, democratic, and non-authoritarian societies.

#### **1.4 Disposition**

This thesis is constituted by three main chapters: the literature review and theoretical outline, the methodology and methods, and the data analysis. The literature review not only serves as a basis for intellectual positioning in the theoretical landscape for the topic of this thesis, but also as a basis for merging theories regarding conspiracies and framing. Since the primary goal of this thesis is to develop a new dimension of media framing called conspiratorial framing, establishing and defining connections between the two fields of study is imperative. This nuanced conspiratorial approach to framing theory established in the literature review and theoretical outline, and expanded upon in the methodology and methods section, is what provides an innovative approach to my data and valuable results from the data analysis that add a new and original contribution to knowledge.

The data analysis section presents, discusses, and analyzes the empirical material, serving as an introduction to the conspiratorial framing typology, as well as providing relevant context to the case of Alex Jones and InfoWars. The analysis presents the parts that constitute this thesis' typological definition of conspiratorial framing while the conclusion to this thesis serves as an opportunity to further and more broadly expand upon the analysis and its results. The conclusion can be seen as an analytical reflection process on the preceding base definition and identification of conspiratorial framing. Expanding upon the newly developed concept of conspiratorial framing in the conclusion can be seen as an "analysis part two" that will make sense of and contextualize the results of the analysis.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Outline**

There exists common threads within and between conspiracy and framing literature. Both theoretical paths share an intense focus on politics, power, and social mobilization. A prominent theme throughout framing theory literature is news framing, which is discussed later in order to understand how media framing plays into conspiratorial framing and vice versa, while a focus on uncertainty, powerlessness, and paranoia in conspiracy literature provides a sufficient knowledge base for the literature review. The common threads between the two fields of interest provide the necessary ingredients to develop a conspiratorial framing pathway within framing theory that defines the framing mechanisms of conspiracy theories and theorists in relation to the subjects of their conspiracy theories. These commonalities in the two separate subjects offer seamless connections between the different theories—it seems as if a new avenue of conspiratorial framing research was pleading to be explored. The goal of this literature review and theoretical outline is to do just that: analyze the connections between conspiracy theories and framing theory and begin to develop a new path within, or add new frames to, frame theory.

The literature on framing theory and theories regarding the nature and psychology of conspiracy theories is extensive and comprehensive, with both theories having been analyzed and defined in a variety of ways. The majority of conspiracy theory research, however, is consigned to two arenas of thought: what constitutes conspiracy theory and what causes conspiracy theory (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2008). It is this methodological history of conspiracy theories that provides justification for the structure of the literature review. The first section of the literature review seeks to map the progress of research and literature examining what constitutes and causes conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking, and the next section applies the same process to the relationship between conspiracy cultures and religion. Then, the theoretical framework establishes a knowledge base for the analysis, exploring the history of framing, specifically media framing, and how that history links to the history of conspiracy theory research.

## 2.1 Conspiracy Theories: Constitution and Causation

The term “conspiracy theory” was coined by social scientist Karl Popper in his 1945 text “The Open Society and Its Enemies” (Pigden, 1995), and as mentioned in the introduction, conspiratorial thinking has been traced back hundreds, even thousands of years. Most conspiracy literature and research treats *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as the cornerstone piece of conspiracy writing that serves as a manifesto for anti-Semites and the first widely distributed piece of written conspiracy. The reach, impact, and longevity of this text suggests that the spread of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking is not solely contingent upon new media. Conspiracy theory expert and Lund University professor emeritus Steve Sampson reinforces this idea as he points out that “media is not an actor, just like the internet is not an actor... the printing press had just as much influence as modern media today and could be passed around just like you can click your way through” (Sampson, 2018).

The vast majority of conspiracy theory research has focused on the causes of conspiratorial thinking and what characteristics constitute this kind of thinking (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2008, p.203). Political paranoia is the typical point of departure for the majority of conspiracy theory research. Hofstadter (1964) differentiates what he calls the “paranoid style” from clinical paranoia, establishing the groundwork for how political paranoia is discussed today. He defines the type of political paranoia that we know today as driven by spokesmen for the subjugated masses, where conspiracies do not target a single individual, but rather “a nation, a culture, or a way of life” (Hofstadter, 1964, p.4). Here, Hofstadter establishes a foundation for thinking of conspiracy cultures as social movements, or even social organizations. This work is built upon by authors such as Snow, Benford, Entman, and Cissel, who, as discussed later in the theoretical outline, expand upon the issue of the framing power of social movement organizations (SMOs). This collective struggle mentality that constitutes political paranoia results in a conspiracy theorist who sees his vehement political passions as “unselfish and patriotic,” which serves to “intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation” (Hofstadter, 1964, p.4). Hofstadter (ibid) then turns to a narrative of victimhood, detailing how contemporary right-wing political paranoia spouts warnings of disposition—how they need to take their country back from destructive and subversive powers such as communists and “cosmopolitans and intellectuals.”

Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) offer a more pragmatic approach to conspiracy theory research compared to earlier research, criticizing past research for being too narrow by only focusing on either “what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’ and whether such theories are methodologically suspect” or, as Sunstein and Vermeule point out in scathing fashion, “a smattering of work in sociology and Freudian psychology on the causes of conspiracy theorizing” (ibid, p.203). Sunstein and Vermeule (ibid) continue to go against the grain of previous research in their recommendation for mitigating the dangers of conspiratorial thinking, suggesting what they call “cognitive infiltration of extremist groups” in an effort to “introduce informational diversity into such groups and to expose indefensible conspiracy theories as such” (p.204). This pragmatic, action research approach is an effort to not only answer practical questions about how to curb damaging effects of conspiracy theories, but to encourage new paths and motivations in conspiracy theory research.

Stojanov (2015) and Werner and Neville-Shepard (2014) heed the call of Sunstein and Vermeule to engage in a path of action and pragmatic research regarding conspiracy theories in studies that aim to understand how to curb conspiratorial thinking. Stojanov’s (ibid) empirical research on vaccine conspiracy theories and theorists aims to understand ways in which conspiracy theorists’ beliefs could be influenced and ultimately reduced. Stojanov (ibid) and Werner and Neville-Shepard’s (ibid) studies produced somewhat contradicting results, as Stojanov found that trying to debunk conspiracy theories typically just reinforces them, while Werner and Neville-Shepard found that attempting to debunk conspiracy theories does have a reducing effect on the belief of conspiracy theories, but not always. Werner and Neville-Shepard did also acknowledge the possibility of reinforcement in response to debunking efforts. These two studies shed light on the dangerous aspects of Sunstein and Vermeule’s (2008) methodology: infiltrating and attempting to debunk conspiracy theory communities presents a serious risk of backfiring.

### **2.1.1 Paranoia as a Product of Powerlessness**

Conspiracy theories are the product of a complex web of social and political factors, and one primary factor is power. Conspiracy theories stem from a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness, and a need to understand a problem and correct it. Conspiracy theorists tend



to consider their actions as scientific—as Sampson puts it, the modern conspiracy theory was born with the enlightenment: “These conspiracy theorists are looking for this evidence and trying to connect the dots. They even have peer reviewed journals where they peer review themselves. They want to imitate science” (Sampson, 2018). This attempt to implement scientific techniques to understand conspiracies can be seen as an attempt to take back power from what conspiracy theorists would call the subversive elite who have influence, if not control, over the lives of the masses. This focus on “conspiratorial science,” if you will, legitimates conspiracy theorists at least to their own ilk. As discussed in the next section, conspiracy theories, the enlightenment (or the so-called “death of God”), and religion all have strong connections.

The idea that a fear of “victimization and exploitation tend to produce paranoia” (Mirowsky and Ross, 1983, p.228) provides a sense of where conspiratorial thinking comes from. This powerlessness, Mirowsky and Ross (ibid) point out, incites “belief that important outcomes in one's life are controlled by external forces and other persons, rather than by one's own choice and effort.” They attribute this belief in external actors having a direct impact on their personal lives to low socioeconomic status and social marginalization. This line of reasoning stems from the idea that people from marginalized groups of society with low socioeconomic status do not have power or leverage in society, and this isolation graduates from “a sense of disconnection to a sense of persecution” (Mirowsky and Ross, 1983, p.228). Mirowsky and Ross (ibid) continue in their analysis that “Belief in external control, mistrust, and paranoia” leads to this isolation, and that “the individual descends from a sense of powerlessness or lack of control, to one of being used and abused and, finally, to one of being attacked.”

The idea of being under attack gives reason for conspiratorial thinking as it “enforces the regime of certainty” (Glass, 1988, p.294), and certainty seems to be what conspiracy theorists are in search of—certainty that their theories are correct, and certainty that they understand how the world works. Conspiracy theorists find power and consolation in the use of “reason, concept, rationalization” to “encircle the self in images of domination,” even when that reason is based in delusion, distorting “socially based interpretive frameworks” (Glass, ibid). This type of persecutory mindset is exemplified in most conspiratorial rhetoric, and as

exemplified in this thesis, the rhetoric present in InfoWars. As discussed later, InfoWars thrives on instilling fear in its viewers by peddling a narrative of persecution.

### **2.1.2 Conspiracy Theories and Religion**

Much of the literature and empirical research regarding conspiracy theories alludes to a religious aspect of conspiratorial thinking in a few different ways. First, conspiracy is addressed somewhat paradoxically, as conspiratorial thinking is not only based in religious culture, but also chastised by it. Birchall (2006), linking conspiracy theory to gossip, details the “scriptural injunctions against gossip” as religious heresy and highlights how “the etymological root” of the word gossip translates to “God-related (God’s sib)” (p.98). In these terms of gossip or conspiratorial rhetoric as religious heresy, “the tongue—speech communication—is at risk of betraying its owner at every step and must be kept in check” (ibid). Birchall’s focus on conspiracy, or gossip, rather, as nearly blasphemy is a different approach than other authors take when examining the relationship between conspiracy and religion, as most conspiracy theory research that involves religion understands conspiratorial thinking as a product or form of religion. For example, Bennett (2007) details how “divination purports to uncover occult influences behind the gritty flux of human affairs” (p.174).

Conspiratorial thinking, as well as religious cultural mentalities, are concerned with “tracking and interpreting signs” (Birchall, 2006). Put in other words, the pre-enlightenment social mentality attributed good things to the work of God, and bad things to the work of Satan. People had something to blame or thank for whatever they could not explain. Therefore, with the enlightenment and the subsequent so-called death of God came the birth of modern science and ultimately modern conspiracy. Instead of the Devil being the reason for, say, mental disorders, the blame is now placed on vaccines, for example, as an effort to control the population and make the public docile. As Bennett (2007) puts it, modern “conspiracism is concerned not with the ‘hand of God’ but the ‘hidden hand.’” Bennett (ibid) makes a more explicit link between conspiracy and religion, nearly labeling the racist conspiracy text mentioned earlier, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as the conspiracy culture’s Bible. Bennett’s comparative analysis between religious texts and conspiratorial texts highlights a common thread between the two of “all-encompassing explanations of past events” (p.174).

This idea of the conspiracy theorist's yearning to find a scapegoat is exemplified throughout this thesis' analysis.

Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer (2013) refine and enhance the idea of conspiracy as religion to conspiracy as a "quasi-religious mentality." The difference between Bennett's (2007) description of conspiracy theory *as* religion and Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer's (ibid) description of conspiracy theory as a *quasi-religious mentality* lies in the conspiracy theorist's adoption of certain religious techniques such as quasi-religious responses to uncertainty which fulfill a need to incorporate that uncertainty and indeterminacy in the solution to that uncertainty (p.10). Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer (ibid) further connect conspiracy theory to religion through the example of uncertainty by outlining how uncertainty generates "resistance to counter-examples and falsification; or that established CTs [conspiracy theories] offer scope for schism and intra-group division as do religious beliefs" (p.10). Sampson (2010) reinforces this last point with his expansion on schisms within conspiracy communities.

Another connection between conspiracy and religion lies within *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This is an example of conspiracy theories *about* religion. This conspiracy text addresses the religion of Judaism, and more specifically Jews themselves, and demonizes the religion and its followers. A common denominator of many conspiracy theories is that they blame a certain religion and that religion's people, generally Judaism and Jews, for whatever misfortune that conspiracy theory addresses, portraying these religious groups as embodying the "opposite of what is taken to be morally good" (Robertson, 2015, p.8). Examples include conspiracy theories about Jews controlling the banks and media, accusations of witchcraft, and satanists plotting the large-scale abductions of children (Robertson, ibid). This is an interesting transition from blaming a religious figure such as God or demons for misfortune to blaming misfortune on religion itself or a member of that religion.

Robertson (2015) takes the narratives of conspiracy theory *about* religion and conspiracy *as* religion and combines them with another narrative of conspiracy theory *within* religion. He builds on narratives put forward by authors like Bennett (2007) and Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer (2013) by pointing to Scientology as an example of conspiracy theory within religion.

Empirical research has focused on conspiracy theories used in religious milieu to explain certain phenomena such as the failure of the “world-affirming, cultic ‘New Age’”<sup>6</sup> to arrive (Robertson, 2015). Robertson’s (ibid, p.12) synthesis of conspiracy as, about, and within religion offers an adequate representation of conspiracy theory research based in religious studies, and he advocates for future conspiracy theory research to take the theoretical standpoint of religious studies in an effort to take a point of departure that does not involve judgements of truth and value judgements.

## **2.2 Theoretical Outline**

Since literature and research specifically regarding framing in conspiracy theories is virtually nonexistent, it is necessary to contextualize this new path in framing research with existing literature and research regarding conspiracy theories and framing theory by drawing connections between the two fields of study.

### **2.2.1 Media Framing: A Brief History**

Framing is almost exclusively propagated and experienced through the media. The exception to this is word-of-mouth communication. Otherwise, whether it is watching a soap opera, learning about issues on the news, or using social media, the majority of framing experiences are delivered by some form of media, be it television, radio, newspapers, books, the internet, advertisements, or even product labels.

Framing theory as we know it today was pioneered by Erving Goffman (1974) in his work titled *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. The existing body of framing research is lacking in the application of framing theory to the phenomenon of conspiratorial thinking and conspiracy cultures and communities. This gap in research comes as a surprise since conspiracy theories are commonplace in most cultures (Hofstadter, 1964) (Sampson, 2010) and their relation to basic societal structures such as governments and institutions is significant. Sampson underscored this point when discussing the bureaucratic, institutionalized nature of life in the United States by saying that he is “surprised there aren’t more conspiracy theories” (Sampson, 2018). Jolley and Douglas (2013) do draw a connection

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<sup>6</sup> The “world-affirming, cultic New Age” refers to a spiritual and divine revelation such as Christianity’s idea of the rapture, for example.

between conspiracy theory consumption and a lack of political participation or engagement, but this research focuses on the effects of conspiracy theories in relation to political engagement, rather than a critical analysis of the framing techniques of conspiracy theories that may have implications for that engagement.

After Goffman (1974) pioneered framing theory, Entman filled his shoes with his framing research—primarily news and media framing. Entman’s research primarily focuses on the power that news framing affords media, which has paved the way for a bulk of research of the same ilk. Entman (1993, 2004, 2007) characterizes four primary functions of media framing: “problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgement, and remedy promotion.” The framing foundation laid by Goffman, and a focus on media and media power by Entman, catalyzed a flood of media framing research and literature as we know it today. Much of that research places framing in the broader context of media power. In this school of thought, framing is an ingredient to agenda setting and priming, all of which contribute to media power. News framing is essentially evoked, as exemplified in the case of news coverage of the Gulf Crisis (Iyengar and Simon, 1993), when qualitative features of news have an effect, or some sort of influence, on public opinion (Iyengar and Simon, 1993, p.366). There exists a focus in empirical news framing research on not only media’s ability to influence public opinion, but more specifically on the effects framing has on the audience’s inclination to attribute responsibility or place blame regarding specific events. According to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), the “attribution of responsibility” frame is one of the most common frames evoked in the media, followed by frames of “conflict, economic consequences, human interest, and morality frames, respectively” (p.93). This “attribution of responsibility” frame exemplifies why framing and conspiracy theories are so compatible, as conspiracy theories seek to place blame and framing can result in the attribution of blame.

### **2.2.2 Media Framing and Power**

In the extensive empirical and non-empirical media research on the role of media framing power, framing is an implicit factor regarding media power discourses. Although relatively few texts make power the explicit focus of framing research, with exceptions such as Entman (2004 and 2007) and Carragee and Roefs (2004), an implicit focus on power in nearly all framing research provides a sufficient and effective knowledge base for understanding how

the power of media framing fits into the broader narrative of conspiratorial framing. Power is not only afforded *to* the media *through* framing, but also projected *by* the media *via* framing. This phenomenon of using news framing techniques to project power is commonly seen in political rhetoric on government foreign policy. These power projections facilitated by the media include the “promotion of patriotic rallies around presidents when America appears under attack” and provide “little room for any but official, government-sanctioned interpretations” (Entman, 2004, p.2). Entman (2004) points out how the media gives power to whoever they give a voice to, or whoever’s frames they perpetuate. For example, he shows how intense media coverage of opposition to the Iraq war had a strong effect on former president George W. Bush’s foreign policy actions (p.3).

The idea that the media has a considerable effect on real-world events depending on what the collective media mind decides to give coverage to is a well-researched idea that includes aspects of not only framing but also agenda setting and priming (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Entman later clarifies this phenomenon labeling it as the media’s “distribution of power” (2007), that is, the media’s power lies in distributing dominant frames to favor certain parties or social groups in addition to the power of the media itself to frame issues. The media’s power to pick and choose narratives is then linked by Entman (2004) to the concept of media bias, which goes hand-in-hand with the concept of framing. Entman (2004) combines the concept of framing and media bias into a single idea of framing bias and points out that the concept of media bias is curiously underrepresented in media framing research.

### **2.2.3 Mediation and Mediatization in Social Movement Organizations**

Two other theoretical ideas that seem underrepresented in media framing research are mediation and mediatization. Although under-researched regarding explicit research, mediation and mediatization are implicit in most media framing research, as mediation is an intrinsic part of media framing and mediatization can be considered the product of media framing. The theoretical base of mediatization has been largely contributed to by empirical works by Stig Hjarvard, and compounded by Nick Couldry. Hjarvard (2008) uses mediatization to understand media’s influence on culture, and more specifically media’s influence on social and cultural change. This work adds to the larger connections between social movements, media, and conspiracy theories, as exemplified as Hjarvard’s (ibid)

definition of mediatization as an agent of social and cultural change—in other words, mediation and mediatization are, according to Hjarvard, tools for media and social movement organization (SMO) framing. Couldry's (2008) work on mediation does the same—he looks at how the digital mediation of storytelling by SMOs has impacts on democracy.

Couldry (2008) and Hjarvard's (2008) focus on the social transformations afforded by mediation portrays mediation as the integration of media into institutions or organizations, and Couldry (ibid) details how mediation is, at its core, a method for the “transformation of societies through a linear media logic.” Couldry (ibid) identifies mediation as a way to understand “the inputs (what are media?) and the outputs (what difference do media make, socially, culturally?)” (p.375) of media. Scheufele (1999, p.114) links Couldry's (ibid) theoretical interpretation of mediatization regarding inputs and outputs to framing theory, outlining the stark connection between the two fields of thought through his methodological frame analysis approach. Here, Scheufele (ibid) talks about understanding media frames through inputs, processes, and outcomes similarly to Couldry's “input-output” process of understanding mediation.

This work on mediation and mediatization and its relation to SMOs lays the groundwork for the continued theoretical analysis that lies ahead, which focuses on the idea of conspiracy cultures and communities as SMOs. First, it is important to explicitly relate the idea of SMOs to media framing. SMO framing relates to media framing in two primary ways: SMOs and media both use similar framing tactics to construct realities around particular issues and construct particular narratives, and media compounds the framing power of SMOs by perpetuating, and ultimately reinforcing, SMO frames through news media coverage. In other words, media can frame SMOs and the social issues they pursue, therefore reinforcing or altering the reality around those social events.

This relationship between news frames and SMO frames is empirically examined by, among other authors, Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) in their study of media framing of civil liberties conflicts. They posit the idea that traditional media framing, as opposed to what they call “propaganda” (p.567), tends to be more subtle due to journalistic norms of common values and ethics which curbs what Entman (2004) would call “framing bias.” They do

acknowledge, however, the fact that all media has a framing effect and that pure objectivity is impossible. Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (ibid) then build upon the work of Iyengar (1991), detailing how media can affect the perception of issues that SMOs advocate for because media “declare the underlying causes and likely consequences of a problem and establish criteria for evaluating potential remedies for the problem” (pp.567-567). This is later expanded upon by Benford (1993) as detailed in the next section.

Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley offer a practical example of the power of media framing regarding social issues and SMOs in the form of news coverage of poverty: that coverage can either frame poverty in a way that “emphasizes the responsibility of the poor themselves” or blames “social, economic, or political forces” (Iyengar, 1991 in Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997, p.568). This same example can be applied to welfare coverage, where welfare is framed as either continuing the cycle of poverty, or as a tool to lift people out of poverty (Gamson and Lasch, 1983 in Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997, p.568).

#### **2.2.4 Common Threads Between Framing Theory and Conspiracy Theories**

Conspiracy theories can be seen as the ultimate framing tools since attempts to discredit conspiracy theories and theorists “also legitimate them” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Using language that is dictated by an opponent reinforces the ideas evoked by the frame in which that dictation rests (Lakoff 2004, p.3). Therefore, the act of simply participating in conspiracy theory discourses, no matter how valid the counter argument to these theories are, may only act to reinforce that conspiracy theory. What’s more, the act of persecutory dialog with conspiracy theorists (i.e. “you are crazy,” “you are wrong and uneducated,” you do not understand reality”) only serves to reinforce the “us against them” mentality where conspiracy theories thrive, in which existing hegemonic ideologues and discourses are seeking to silence and subjugate the minority.

This idea of attempting to debunk or debate conspiracy theory serving as a reinforcement to conspiracy theory is exemplified in empirical research by Ana Stojanov (2015). Stojanov (ibid) used “information about the conspiracists’ motives and the fallacy in their reasoning” (p.261) in an effort to reduce conspiracy beliefs, but her findings were in line with the argument that Lakoff (2004) presents as this was not “effective in reducing general



conspiracy theory beliefs” (p.261). Empirical research findings from a similar study by Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014), as mentioned earlier in the literature review, provided different results: their research looked at debunking conspiracy theories in mediated echo-chambers and found that efforts to debunk conspiracy theories were not completely futile, but rather occasionally effective in decreasing belief in conspiracy theories.

The role of framing regarding social issues is a common theme throughout framing theory literature. A focus on the social implications of framing, specifically through a focus on framing techniques of SMOs, can be applied to the idea of conspiracy cultures as SMOs. There exists a correlation between the “frame alignment” (Snow et al., 1986) of “social mobilization organizations” (ibid) and the frame alignment of the individuals participating in, or at least interested in, those movements. In other words, the individuals that make up SMOs share common frame mechanisms and triggers, indicating shared values and opinions. Although conspiracy communities are not traditional SMOs, they share the same principles: a group of like-minded individuals who come together to share ideas and use their collective power to employ social mobilization techniques against an omnipresent and subversive invisible hand of suppression that is against the masses and in favor of the few.

The power of the social mobilization of conspiracy theorists lies partly in their ability to establish and promote frames. These conspiracy frames are carried out through, among other things, the use of language, which is produced by, but also effects, mentality (Lakoff 2004, p.3). For example, the language and mentality of “misfortune” or “victimhood” used by such marginalized groups evokes a different frame than language like “injustice” or “wrongdoing” (Snow et al., 1986). Conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones clearly promote language such as the latter, while ridiculing language of the former. This framing tactic expels a notion of helplessness and highlights the need to mobilize and take collective action—exemplified by parts of the analysis detailing calls to action on InfoWars—to correct the injustices and wrongdoings of the nefarious actors that constitute most conspiracy theories. Therefore, it can be deduced that these conspiratorial framing tactics not only promote certain mindsets and discourses, but real-life action. Lakoff describes how the framing tactics of collectivized mindsets can translate to real-life action with an analogy he calls the “strict father model” (Lakoff, 2004, p.6). According to this model, political conservatives in the United States feel

the country should resemble a strict father in the sense that it should be a moral authority and offer protection from danger and support in the pursuit of success. Therefore, when conservatives use analogies regarding America being an “adult<sup>7</sup>,” this translates to real-life action on aggressive foreign policy, the reduction of social welfare programs, and tax cuts to force stricter budget and deficit regulations (Lakoff, 2004).

The framing power of collectivized mindsets, be it an SMO, a political party, a particular faction of society, or an online conspiracy community, is part of the puzzle that gives conspiracy theories and theorists like Alex Jones their media power. An SMO’s primary method for achieving progress is through framing a certain issue in a certain way, devoting “considerable effort to constructing particular versions of reality, developing and espousing alternative visions, and attempting to affect various audiences’ interpretations” (Benford, 1993). Stuart Hall echoes this sentiment regarding the ability of groups, specifically the media, to set frames and ultimately alter the perception of reality. Hall says, regarding the representations of protests in Ireland:

The true meaning of it will depend on what meaning people make of it. And the meanings that they make of it depend on how it is represented. The meaning of an event in Northern Ireland does not exist until it has been represented (Media Education Foundation, 1997).

This idea of true meaning depending on representation offers insight into the reasons why some individuals can get wrapped up in improbable, even outlandish, conspiracy theories. For example, Alex Jones’ representation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks<sup>8</sup> gives meaning to, or alters the meaning of, that original event. Jones uses rhetorical techniques to frame 9/11 as an event not perpetrated by 16 foreign terrorists who flew planes into buildings under the direction of Osama Bin Laden, but rather by the United States government who placed explosives in the buildings to conduct a controlled demolition in order to gain public support to expand American foreign power and to suppress dissent at home (Sampson, 2010). As

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<sup>7</sup> Lakoff (2004) provides an example of this rhetoric in a line from former United States President George W. Bush’s 2004 State of the Union address. Bush said, “We do not need a permission slip to defend America.” Lakoff describes how this rhetoric plays into the strict father model: America is the world’s most powerful country and therefore the moral authority, or strict father, of the word and does not need permission to invade another country to defend American self-interests.

<sup>8</sup> See *Smoking Gun Evidence That 9/11 was an Inside Job* in Data Sources for Jones’ take on the 9/11 conspiracy theory.

described in this next section, this mediated representation of events—in this case, the mediated representation of conspiracy theories, and the subsequent conspiratorial construction of reality—constitutes the reality in which the conspiracy theorist lives.

## **2.3 Transitioning from Theory to Methodology**

Here, the methodological approach of social constructionism is combined with the theoretical approach of presentation, representation, and performance of politics, serving as a transition from the theoretical outline to the methodology section while the end of this section provides a preview, if you will, to the analysis. In order to understand the construction of reality and the way presentation and performance are part of that construction, it is useful to examine theories behind the mediated construction of reality and the performance of politics relative to InfoWars simultaneously. Although performance is relevant to the case of Alex Jones and InfoWars, it is not the primary focus of the analysis. The performance of politics is still, however, part of InfoWars broadcasts and it is useful to understand performance in relation to this case study in order to provide context around InfoWars. The representation and construction of reality, however, is of much relevance to this analysis.

### **2.3.1 Constructing Reality**

Reality perceptions are heavily influenced by what Couldry and Hepp (2017) refer to as the “media manifold,” which describes the intertextuality between and within media and media consumers, and the way all different facets of media and media consumers are connected and have implications for each other. What is seen at the top of a social media news feed, how internet search engines prioritize search results, and the power of rules and guidelines for internet platforms all affect the way reality is constructed for the media consumer. This idea of the media manifold can be seen as a digitized, 21st century version of the more traditional idea of social constructionism. The relationship between social constructionism, the mediated construction of reality, and representation is illustrated through the following ideas of Burr (2003), Hacking (1999), Hall (1997), Blumer (1969), and Berger and Luckman (1966).

Social constructionism research has produced no single, all-encompassing definition, but Burr (2003) sums up the idea of social constructionism by describing it as taking for granted the knowledge that makes up reality interpretations (pp.2-3). This summary can be seen as

building upon Blumer's (1969) take on symbolic interactionism which emphasizes knowledge as being constituted of "social interaction that one has with one's fellows," and this knowledge is "handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p.2). Essentially, this thinking posits that reality is constructed through interactions with not only other people, but with physical objects, categories, institutions, and the mechanisms for which these things are understood (Blumer, *ibid*, p.2). Berger and Luckman (1966, pp.70-71) further compound these previous takes on social constructionism by focusing on the role of institutions:

All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any activity that is repeated frequently becomes cast into pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto*, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern. Habitualization further implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort.

Here, Berger and Luckman root the concepts at the core of social constructionism in the nature of human behavior, outlining how humanity's habitual nature leads to the establishment of institutions and is what constitutes institutions. In other words, Berger and Luckman posit the idea that reality is a construct that is the result of human nature.

Hacking (1999) breaks path from the more traditional views of social constructionism, criticizing the obsession around the term, and even criticizing the term itself. Hacking (*ibid*) adds nuance to the understanding of social constructionism while likening the field of thought to "cancerous cells" that "once seeded, they replicate out of hand" (p.3). Hacking has a point, as social constructionism has become such an abstract, arbitrary, and ambiguous term that it has become problematic as exemplified by the fundamental paradigm at question at the heart of the science wars<sup>9</sup>: the idea arguing "scientific results, even in fundamental physics, are social constructs" (Hacking, 1999, p.4). Here, Hall's (1997) work on representation can be seen as abiding by Hacking's criticisms of social construction, taking a more narrowed, focused, and slightly pragmatic view of social constructionism through a focus on representation. Hall's definitions of representation can be understood as a pragmatic product of social constructionism, as perceptions of representations are based on the knowledge we

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<sup>9</sup> The "science wars" outline the contrast between social sciences and physical sciences and their validities, among other things. See Hacking (1999) or Flyvbjerg (2001) for more on the science wars.

have and our methods for interpreting that knowledge and represented information. Hall (ibid, p.16) illustrates this idea with the following example:

The figures in the painting *stand in the place of*, and at the same time, *stand for* the story of Cain and Abel. Likewise, the cross simply consists of two wooden planks nailed together; but in the context of Christian belief and teaching, it takes on, symbolizes or comes to stand for a wider set of meanings about the crucifixion of the Son of God, and this is a concept we can put into words and pictures.

The frames used in InfoWars broadcasts play a similar role as the representations of Cain, Abel, and the cross in Hall's (1997) example—the things Jones says do not exist in a vacuum, and current knowledge and experience is what allows one to give meaning to his frames and dictates the narratives evoked by those frames. The aforementioned depictions of the social construction of reality and the relative role of representation in that construction serves as a foundation for framing as an actor in the construction of reality and that construction's role in the meaning making of frames and vice versa.

### **2.3.2 Performing Politics and Discourse of Repression: An Analytical Precursor**

The performance of politics is a piece in the reality construction puzzle that can be examined in relation to the political performance on InfoWars through supplementing political performance theory with Goffman's (1956) theories of presentation of self. Goffman's focus on "the individual that presents himself before them" is especially relevant to Jones' political performance, as the individual "may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them" (p.15). Jones seems to abide by the latter as exemplified by his rhetoric and framing methods outlined in the analysis section. Jones uses framing mechanisms as part of his methods of presentation of self in an effort to define himself, the InfoWars program, and the claims, ideas, and conspiracy theories presented on InfoWars. Essentially, Jones presents himself and his program in a manner that influences his audience's formulation of the meaning of that presentation. Jones does this by "expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan" (Goffman, ibid, p.15).

Alexander (2010) describes the pragmatic outcome of Jones' particular political performance as having outcomes for the situating of such performers in the civil sphere. Alexander (ibid) would classify Jones' angry and intense rhetoric as a subject, or victim, of "discourse of repression" (p.10), meaning Jones' conspiracy theories, diatribes, and polemics can be perceived as "antidemocratic qualities preventing persons from being allowed inside the civil sphere or at least from being fully so and certainly from being allowed the privilege of representing the civil sphere in the state" (p.10). The application of this idea of discourse of repression to the case of Alex Jones and InfoWars is paradoxical: the accusatory and conspiratorial nature of Jones' rhetoric and his inclination for personal attacks makes him a persecutor of individuals who, in his opinion, practice discourse of repression, while at the same time making himself a perpetrator of discourse of repression. The idea of discourse of repression is further outlined by Alexander (2010, p.10):

If people are viewed as out of control, impulsive, dependent and subservient, dishonest and secretive, and prone to conspiracy rather than open and as selfish rather than generous—then they do not deserve civil membership. Indeed, civil societies must defend themselves against such persons, for they would damage the capacity for thoughtful and mutual cooperation upon which the very possibility of dispensing with hierarchical power depends.

Jones sees himself as a fighter of this idea of discourse of repression, as he constantly touts his Libertarian<sup>10</sup> ideals, a radical commitment to free speech, and vehement opposition to any act resembling censorship. However, it is his say-anything, no-holds-barred, cross-any-line rhetoric that also makes him a subject of discourse of repression which is exemplified by his fringe and ostracized status. This idea is implicitly expanded upon in the analysis section as Jones' rhetorical framing techniques, or in other words the framing mechanisms that constitute his rhetoric, are outlined and analyzed.

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<sup>10</sup> Libertarian is defined as a political affiliation in the United States that is against any form of government interference or regulation. Google.com defines Libertarian as "a person who believes in free will."

### **3. Methodology and Methods**

The focus of this research is not to understand what constitutes a conspiracy theory, nor is it to understand what causes a conspiracy theory—these questions have already been well established, well researched, and, arguably, answered. My methodological focus, rather, is to narrow in on a specific phenomenon: conspiratorial framing. This narrow focus is part of what validates this research and provides a new and valuable contribution to knowledge.

The methodology of frame analysis, in this case, is self-serving: The use of this methodology in the analysis serves to further develop the methodology itself. That is to say, this research is valuable in the sense that the data analysis not only implements frame analysis and draws conclusions from that analysis, but ultimately adds to methodological and theoretical framing concepts.

#### **3.1 Frame Analysis**

The methodological purposes of this thesis are “to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks” of conspiracy theories “for making sense out of events” (Goffman, 1974, p.10), as frame analysis allows for the identification of the basic elements that define the “principles of organization that govern” (ibid, p.10) those events—events that include conspiracy theories, and events that conspiracy theories are constructed around.

Scheufele (1999), however, criticizes the “theoretical and empirical vagueness” (p.103) around framing theory research, which can partly be attributed to the fact that the methodology of qualitative frame analysis is often based on the interpretation of the researcher. He then presents a more structured methodological approach to remedy this perceived problem in the form of “a process model of framing, breaking important links down into inputs, processes, and outcomes” (p.114). Nisbet (2010, in D'Angelo and Kuypers, p.52) builds upon Scheufele's (ibid) structured framing methodology by pointing out that, in more extensive studies, after establishing the frame typologies of empirical material the researcher can make meaning of those frames by using “focus groups, sophisticated experimental designs, and survey research techniques to specifically test these frames along with the types of frame devices that instantly trigger their underlying meaning.”

For the scope of this research, however, it is up to the researcher to identify typologies of frames within the empirical texts and make a subjective determination regarding the meaning of those frames. The scope of this research also does not allow for “sophisticated experimental designs,” but rather allows for a research model that makes use of qualitative data analysis and the application of appropriate methodologies such as frame analysis and reality construction. Scheufele’s (1999) work developing framing into a structured methodological process is, however, of use to this research in the sense that his methodology “serves as a tool for theory building” (p.104). Entman’s (1993, 2004, 2007) characterization of frames as constituted by four functions—problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgement, and remedy promotion—further guides the analysis in a structured model similar to that of Scheufele’s (ibid).

Frame analysis can be seen in this research in the form of the development of a conspiratorial aspect of framing theory through a conspiratorial framing typology identification that is the product of a visual analysis and an inductive-deductive combination of thematic content analysis. In an effort to understand the processes of framing in the empirical data, this research seeks to uncover “the speaker’s interpretation or construction of their experience” (Bazeley, 2013, p.146). This approach from Bazeley (ibid) allows for a more abstract interpretation compared to Scheufele’s (1999) structure by dismissing any goals of developing a “true” understanding of the data, but rather that the interpretation of the data “makes sense given the conceptual framework of the coder” (Kvale, 1996 in Bazely, 2013, p.148). Although coding, or “fracturing,” of data is criticized for leading to loss of larger context (Bazeley, p.144), the codes and subsequent themes are applied to the “whole ‘meaning unit’” (Bazeley, ibid), which can be seen as justification against the idea of coding as “fracturing” and detrimental to context.

Applying frame analysis to the thematic data codes is an ideal methodology for this specific conspiracy theory research, as this process understands the mechanisms of framing in the sense that “framing adds contextual information to a factual account” (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014, p.175). Conspiracy theories, usually, do just that: they take a factual account (for example, planes hitting the World Trade Center on 9/11) and they add their own context to that factual account (the United States government perpetrated the attack). This combination



of factual account and subjective contextualization are two ingredients that constitute conspiracy theories. This is also what makes media framing analysis such an applicable methodology to this research, as this same phenomenon is seen in journalism. Cooper (2006, in Shoemaker and Reese, 2014, p.175), describes how “Journalists weave their factual description of events into a coherent storyline, however nuanced or complex, in order to produce a competent news product.” This description is eerily similar to the process of conspiracy theory narrative building, where storylines, supplemented by factual information, are constructed in order to produce what subscribers to those theories perceive as a competent product. These connections are made explicit in the section of the analysis that focuses on frames as “elements of perceived reality” that assemble “a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p.164).

### **3.2 Qualitative Analysis**

This case study relies on the general strategy presented by Yin (2014) that guides case study research by a reliance on theoretical propositions, following “the theoretical propositions that led to” this case study (p.136). The theoretical proposition in this case study is that conspiracy theories frame their subjects in a negative light, and this proposition has led to a qualitative frame analysis of the empirical data in order to extract thematic content within that data. Yin’s case study justification stems from Flyvbjerg’s (2006) defense of case studies, where he defends case study research against criticism that, among other things, cases are “black swans” (p.224) in the sense that case studies are unrepresentative of wider trends. This thesis’ research is in line with Flyvbjerg’s (2006) and Yin’s (ibid) case study justifications in the sense that, when compared to general literature on conspiracy theories, Jones’ InfoWars is representative of common conspiratorial mindsets and conspiracy theories including theories regarding 9/11 and government and institutional manipulation of the general population.

#### **3.2.1 Thematic Content Analysis**

The specific method for thematic content extraction in this thesis is adopted from Seale’s (2012) instructions on what he calls “thematic content analysis” (p.367), which is a step in the qualitative data analysis process. Thematic content analysis is extremely useful for this research because its purpose is to understand broader themes and contexts “across the data set” to “focus on what a phenomenon, event or social interaction ‘looks like’ to the

individuals of interest (their lived experience)” (p.367). In this case, the individual of interest is Alex Jones and InfoWars. This method fits the purposes of this thesis since this method is intended to facilitate the development of “concepts from the themes” with the subsequent step of building up “theory from the concepts” (p.367). In this case, the “concepts from the themes” are the five thematic frames that constitute conspiratorial framing, while the “theory from the concepts” is the development and analytical application of the conspiratorial framing micro-theory.

The specific coding techniques used in this qualitative data analysis are open coding and in vivo coding—in vivo meaning that I am truthful to and stay close to the data and that I sometimes use words verbatim from the transcript as codes—in order to “avoid too early interpretation which could result in misinterpretation” (Seale, 2012, p.372). Open coding allows for a systematic, line-by-line, sentence-by-sentence analysis that “ensures that each part of the data is treated the same way, and thus that representative data and also new and unexpected themes may be captured” (Seale, 2012, p.370). After a thorough development and refinement of concrete themes, the theoretical framework of framing theory, specifically media framing, is applied to these themes. This will allow for the meaning making of the codes in the established methodological and theoretical landscape, providing for an analytical conclusion rooted in framing theory.

A concept Seale (2012, p.368) presents that is important to keep in mind for the data analysis is “theoretical sensitivity.” Having performed a literature review before undertaking the research, coupled with extensive previous knowledge and personal opinions regarding Alex Jones and InfoWars, it is important to be aware of any preconceived notions, implicit and explicit, regarding the empirical material. However, my theoretical sensitivity should be enhanced by an immersion in the data. It is important to note the difference between theoretical sensitivity gained from pre-analysis literature immersion and familiarity with the research subject, and theoretical sensitivity gained from a deep immersion and strong engagement with the empirical data as an objective researcher.

The theoretical sensitivity gained from performing the literature review has made a combination of inductive and deductive coding the most appropriate option. After performing

an extensive literature review, general themes or ideas regarding conspiratorial rhetoric and thinking became very apparent. These general themes were political paranoia, religion, nationalism, and legitimizing. The idea of political paranoia within general conspiratorial rhetoric was developed into the thematic framing themes of *fearmongering* and *disdaining institutions*, and a focus on religion was implemented into the *demonizing political others* thematic frame. The general sense of nationalism throughout conspiratorial rhetoric and research was kept verbatim as one of the five thematic frames of the analysis. Legitimizing became a sub-theme, or category, under the *methods of validation* frame—as exemplified in the analysis, Jones expands upon the scientific legitimization of conspiracy theories discussed in the literature review to include other methods of validation such as nuance, prestigious contacts, and insider information. The process of developing these deductively determined themes into more refined inductively determined themes is what classifies this qualitative analysis as an inductive-deductive combination.

This inductive-deductive combined approach allows for the use of “broad, deductively determined codes to home in on the data, and then inductive coding to explore this in more detail” (Seale, 2012, p.371). Using these general themes in the initial coding process is an effective method for initial data immersion while leaving space for further refining and development of those themes. After all codes were collected, they were grouped into categories using concept maps<sup>11</sup> then operationalized in order to turn more abstract ideas into more concrete ideas (Seale, 2012, p.375). This process allowed for the primary theme refinement and development as well as the creation of new themes that were not realized beforehand. After digesting these themes further with concept maps to generate more solidified themes, the themes were then analyzed through the pre-established theoretical frameworks and methodologies in order to develop a better understanding of the meaning behind the themes in relation to conspiracy theories, media framing, and reality construction.

### **3.2.2 Visual Analysis**

The thematic content analysis is supplemented by a visual analysis, as Jones’ physical movements and visual supplements are part of his rhetoric. Hansen and Machin (2013) aid the visual analysis with their guidance on semiotics and the denotations and connotations of

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 2 for an example of the concept maps that I developed.

images. This visual analysis is also guided by Rose's (2001) suggestions of a focus on representation in the ocularcentrism of western culture (p.3), as "looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined" (Jenks, 1995 in Rose, 2001, p.7). Rose's (ibid) guidance on analyzing images based on their sites and modalities,<sup>12</sup> primarily the social modality and the site of the image itself, combined with Hansen and Machin's (ibid) visual analysis techniques, will allow for the analysis to produce insights into how the visual framing tactics on InfoWars contributes to the overall framing methods. The visual is an important aspect of InfoWars broadcasts, as these images offer insights into the way Jones interprets the world and displays it "in very particular ways" (Rose, 2001, p.6). By analyzing the visual aspects of InfoWars broadcasts, an understanding will be offered of the "scopic regime" (Rose, 2001, p.6) of the broadcasts as it relates to the mediated construction of reality through visual framing techniques.

The semiotics of Barthes, presented by Hansen and Machin (2013), takes the lead in the visual analysis in order to extract the ideas and values (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.175) that are behind the composition of InfoWars' visuals. This method uses the two pillars of denotation and connotation to first gain a technical understanding of what is being depicted in the images, then to understand the ideas and values behind those depictions. The use of denotation and connotation in the visual analysis is explicitly relevant to frame analysis, as the point of frame analysis is to identify the frames being used (denotations) and the narratives evoked by those frames (connotations).

The visual aspect of this analysis is important because Jones' visual techniques are strong reinforcements, or supplements, to his rhetorical framing techniques. For example, Jones often uses snapshots of article headlines to aid in the conveyance of his messages. Using Rose's sites and modalities can help to understand these images as more than just article headlines: who wrote the article, where was the article published, and what messages do the accompanying images in the article convey. Then, the semiotics of Barthes in Hansen and Machin (2013) will allow for the linking of the meaning of these images to Jones' rhetorical framing techniques through the extraction of the ideas and values of the image's representation.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 4 for a chart detailing a visual analysis based on sites and modalities.

The videos that make up the empirical data often deal with cultural issues in one way or another, whether regarding gender, institutions, politics, or general communication of what Jones considers to be “American values.” This makes studying the connotations of the images in the videos a valuable method as this method allows for the extraction of meanings, “cultural associations of elements, features in, or qualities of the image” (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.176). Supplementing this technique with an analysis of Rose’s (2001) sites and modalities fits well with the cultural, ocularcentric focus of image connotation since extracting the cultural meanings and narratives through frame analysis is imperative to this research.

### **3.3 Selection and Sampling Procedure for Empirical Material**

It is first important to make clear that since debunking Jones’ conspiracy theories is not part of this analysis, I have only chosen videos about Jones’ conspiracy theories that have already been debunked or widely discredited. Thus, it can be taken for granted that Jones’ conspiratorial claims are generally false, misrepresentative, or misleading without the need to debunk them before or as part of the analysis.

Video samples were sourced from YouTube, as this video database has a rich variety of content that is ripe for critical examination. There are a total of 14 videos used in the analysis, providing about two hours of rich content as Jones talks fast and covers much information in a short period of time. The videos were published between the years of 2011 and 2017—years in which InfoWars has quickly risen in popularity. The videos average 10 minutes each, with some videos being more than 20 minutes long and some being less than five minutes long. 13 of the 14 videos are of Jones discussing his conspiracy theories, and one video is of one of Jones’ reporting colleagues, Rob Dew (more on this video shortly). An imperative and primary criteria for video selection was for each video to be produced by InfoWars and focusing on Jones’ conspiracy theories, rather than other people analyzing or debunking his conspiracy theories. The visual analysis samples, which exist as representative screenshots of the videos, consist of six different figures<sup>13</sup> that are sufficient examples of

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 3 for these figures.

Jones' visual framing techniques. These sample choices were the result of the realization of visual framing themes that were made apparent during the data immersion process.

The sampling process adhered to the idea of judgement sampling outlined by Bernard (2000, in Patton, 2002, p.230): "In judgment sampling, you decide the purpose you want informants (or communities) to serve, and you go out to find some." Therefore, each video centers on government and institution related conspiracy theories as to ensure the empirical data will be relevant to the research questions and aims. Each YouTube video has at least thousands of views, with videos on the high end reaching nearly 5 million views and videos on the low end reaching about 6,000 views. The majority of the videos are in the range of the mid hundred-thousands regarding views<sup>14</sup>, suggesting the videos are popular and representative of InfoWars and Alex Jones to a relatively wide audience.

There are two videos that differ from the rest of the sample and therefore require explanations. First, in the video titled *Alex Jones & Joe Rogan Breakdown PizzaGate Pedophile Cult*,<sup>15</sup> Jones discusses a conspiracy theory with another person, Joe Rogan. This video is unique because it is the only video in the analysis where Jones is talking to another person for the entire video. I do not include transcriptions of Rogan since the context he provides to what Jones says is minimal. I have made this decision in an effort to prevent coding from Rogan's transcriptions to influence my analysis regarding the framing mechanisms of Jones. The fact that this is a conversation with Rogan means there is an implicit effect on Jones' framing mechanisms in this video, but not enough of an effect to alter the data in a significant or noticeable way. Watching and listening to Rogan when transcribing and analyzing the video ensures that no important data is missed.

The other video requiring explanation does not feature Alex Jones but rather features one of his reporting colleagues, Rob Dew, presenting on InfoWars a conspiracy theory about government plans to completely disarm the American public.<sup>16</sup> Since Dew is presenting on InfoWars, and the analysis focuses on how the conspiracy theories presented on InfoWars

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<sup>14</sup> Precise view numbers for each video can be found by following the video links provided in Data Sources.

<sup>15</sup> See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>16</sup> See Data Sources for a link to this video. The video is titled *Troops Ordered To Kill All Americans Who Do Not Turn In Guns*.

frame their subjects, I deemed this video as an acceptable contribution to my empirical material. Although Jones does not speak, the video is an accurate representation of the other conspiracy theories that Jones himself presents on InfoWars. I chose to include this video in my analysis because it is from the InfoWars program and it is an incredibly effective example of the way Jones and his InfoWars team use conspiracy theories, usually wildly inaccurate and misrepresentative, to portray subjects through negative frames.

### **3.4 Limitations**

Primary limitations for this research lie within the ephemeral nature of the empirical material: since the videos were sourced from YouTube, this means that the content publisher—in this case the InfoWars YouTube channel—can remove the content at any time. Also, the InfoWars YouTube channel has two strikes against it for violating YouTube’s content guidelines. If the InfoWars YouTube channel receives a third strike, which is a likely possibility considering the nature of InfoWars’ content and YouTube’s crackdown on such content, the account will be permanently deleted and there will be no access to the majority of the empirical material used in this dissertation. To mitigate this limitation, I downloaded most of the videos to my computer in case of an InfoWars YouTube ban. However, only 11 of the 14 videos were available for download. So, when this thesis is reviewed in the future, access to the empirical material may be limited to only the visual screenshots in the appendix if an InfoWars YouTube ban does happen. In this case, the video clips may be available elsewhere, but they will most likely exist integrated into larger segments in places like the InfoWars.com website. It is interesting to note that InfoWars’ poor standing with YouTube indicates the type of content that InfoWars produces.

The fact that this research only had one coder means that there is a lack of inter-coder reliability. Unfortunately, due to the scale and nature of this research, it was only plausible to have one coder. An additional coder could have been helpful in checking for biases in coding due to the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity, however the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity is also a strong suite of this research since it was necessary to understand the case regarding its context.

Another limitation is the fact that more time and resources could have provided better justification for sampling in the sense that quantitative data could have been used to justify the popularity and representativeness of each video and the general popularity of the conspiracy theories presented in each video. However, the only quantitative data available in this sense were YouTube video view numbers, which made for a sufficient supplement to the phronetic methods implemented in choosing the videos.



#### **4. Data Analysis**

Although this thesis is not focused on audience research, it is important to note InfoWars' reach to highlight the saliency of this analysis. Jones' InfoWars website is ranked among the top 1,000 most visited websites in the United States and top 3,400 most visited websites in the world.<sup>17</sup> Of the billion websites that exist, this puts Jones' InfoWars website in the 99th percentile of most visited websites in the world. Although exact ratings for Jones' syndicated radio broadcast, *The Alex Jones Show*, proved to be unattainable, it is safe to say that his radio listenership is in the millions, and possibly tens of millions per week. Although no explicit conclusions are drawn from this demographic information in this analysis, the vast reach and subsequent influence that Jones has suggests that what he says and how he says it might have an impact, consciously or subconsciously, on tens of millions of individuals.

##### **4.1 Positioning Alex Jones and InfoWars in a Broader Media Landscape**

Until the past few years, Alex Jones and his flagship media company, InfoWars, was fringe and relatively unknown—apart from radio syndication in a few markets and InfoWars content published on online, the national recognition of Alex Jones and InfoWars was scarce. InfoWars' unremarkable existence seemed to develop into national, and even international notoriety with the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States and a general populist wave sweeping the country and even the world. Jones' gain in notoriety is exemplified through increased media attention on his show and his conspiracy theories, as exemplified by an entire 22-minute segment of John Oliver's HBO show *Last Week Tonight* (2017) that covered Jones, InfoWars, and the conspiracy theories presented on InfoWars.

Jones' rise in notoriety can be partly attributed to his relationship with United States President Donald Trump. As highlighted in the data presented in this analysis, Jones boasts of personal contact and communication with Donald Trump; in one video not used in this analysis, Jones issues an apology to Trump with humblebrag overtones for missing his phone call. Trump has even been on InfoWars where he praised the work Jones does and the “amazing reputation” of InfoWars. Trump's embrace of, and subsequent amplification of, the

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 5 for a chart of this data. These numbers are from January 19, 2018. Jones' website traffic has been on a steady decline since the beginning of 2017. This is possibly due to spike in traffic as a result of the 2016 presidential election.

messages and conspiracy theories presented on InfoWars is unprecedented and controversial, having caused concern among many regarding the normalization of fringe conspiracy theories along with what many perceive as hateful and oppressive rhetoric. It is also possible that Trump's embrace of InfoWars may have a legitimizing, and therefore amplifying, effect on the conspiracy theories perpetuated on InfoWars programs, reinforcing InfoWars' framing power and making the narratives evoked by those frames more effective, appealing, and convincing to a broader audience.

Jones himself constantly refers to power structures of the media, government, what he calls the "Deep State," and other institutions and sociopolitical structures, and the way these power structures conspire to have ultimate control over the masses. Jones' use of this idea of a shadowy power structure is, ironically, part of what gives him so much media power. What is key here, though, is Jones' stance on *mainstream* media—although it is ironic that Jones himself has significant media power that he uses to manipulate his audience through different framing tactics such as fearmongering and demonizing institutions, that media power comes from a place of scepticism, as Jones has taken a stance of distrust, anger, and disdain against mainstream media and the institutions they are part of. Still, the dynamic constituted by hypocrisy and irony between the alternative media that Jones and InfoWars represents and mainstream media is interesting and should be noted when positioning InfoWars in the broader media landscape.

#### **4.2 The Framing Tools of InfoWars: Five Themes**

After coding and visually analyzing the empirical material, five framing themes became apparent. Each thematic frame employs tactics to portray its subject in a certain way. These themes, which are constituted by sub-themes (or categories), are as follows:

##### **Framing Theme 1: *Fearmongering***

Categories: *shock rhetoric, buzzwords, ambiguous they, calls to action*

##### **Framing Theme 2: *Disdaining institutions***

Categories: *"they hate you," "they want to hurt you," "they want to take away your rights," "they lie," demonizing media, linking media to government*

### **Framing Theme 3: *Nationalism***

Categories: *against globalization, patriotism, unpatriotism, positive portrayals of government*

### **Framing Theme 4: *Demonizing political others***

Categories: *personal attacks, name-calling, criticizing different opinions*

### **Framing Theme 5: *Methods of validation***

Categories: *government connections, legitimizing (claims of expertise), denial strategy*

#### **4.2.1 Fearmongering and Disdaining Institutions**

Jones evokes narratives of fear through a combination of his language, rhetoric (including the way he says things), and his physical appearance during his diatribes. Regarding the visual, Jones' facial expressions and flamboyant movements<sup>18</sup> can be considered as “poses” that “often carry connotations drawn from association” (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.177). The “connotations drawn from association” regarding Jones' alarmist rhetoric and poses serve as frame amplifiers. Take, for example, Jones' visual cues that accompany this quote:

This is a way to brain damage your children. It's in government documents... Doctors know and are told these vaccines will kill certain numbers of children. They will cause brain damage. It's in government documents.<sup>19</sup>

As Jones references the “government documents,” he holds up a long white piece of paper.<sup>20</sup> Here, connotation of officiality and legitimacy is drawn from association with the piece of paper since it is displayed while he says “government documents.” Earlier in the video, he mentions that this piece of paper is an insert for a vaccine that describes the side effects of the vaccine, although the validity of this claim can only be speculated. The document he clutches in his hand was drawn from a pile of documents scattered across his desk, serving as further attempts to frame his rhetoric as official through paperwork—paperwork that is often associated with professional and legitimate fields such as businesses, offices, governments, and research. The legitimacy conveyed through citing government documents is supplemented by the set on which Jones' does his broadcasts. The set is professional and filmed in high definition, with advanced graphics that rival that of mainstream television

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 3, Figures 1, 3, and 6 for examples.

<sup>19</sup> This quote is from *Breaking: Doctors Admit Vaccines Cause Convulsions, Brain Damage, And Death In Children*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 5 for a screenshot of this image.

news.<sup>21</sup> The high-budget production further connotes a sense of legitimacy, acting to validate the frames he uses to argue claims. Jones' validation methods are expanded upon in a later section, but it is important to note here that the *methods of validation* frame, just like the *fearmongering* and *disdaining institutions* frames, have strong connections and are not exclusive to themselves.

Jones' gaze is also used as a framing amplification method. Jones constantly looks directly into the camera during his broadcasts,<sup>22</sup> which establishes “symbolic ‘contact’ or ‘interaction’ between the viewer” and Jones (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.181). Here, the “social modality” of the “site of the image itself” (Rose, 2001) says something about the goals Jones is trying to achieve through the visual method of symbolic contact, or in other words, the “visual meanings” (Rose, 2001) of the image. Applying this idea of symbolic contact regarding Rose's social modality and the site of the image itself provides insight into the personal and cultural connections Jones fosters with his audience: a visual framing tactic that fosters engagement, such as Jones' intense gaze into the camera, may amplify the effects of his messages, as this tactic draws on “the social practices of spectating and the social identities of the spectators” (Rose, 2001, p.27) to establish a digital, or even imaginary, relationship with the audience. The visual framing tactics on InfoWars serve to amplify not only the fearmongering frames, but all of the other conspiratorial frames that are implemented in InfoWars broadcasts. When Jones uses fearmongering in quotes such as “This is a way to brain damage your children... vaccines will kill certain numbers of children. They will cause brain damage,” the visual medium in which this rhetoric exists allows for the implementation of visual frames, producing a more significant impact when compared to the sole use of rhetorical frames in radio, print, or interpersonal communication.

Jones' disdain for institutions falls into the two primary genres of institutional oppression and media demonization. Jones frames institutions, specifically the institution of government, as oppressive forces who lie to, hate, harm, and subvert the rights of the general public. Jones often claims that mainstream American news media such as ABC, NBC, CBS, and CNN are “state run,” as exemplified in this video excerpt:

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 2 for images of the InfoWars set and graphics.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 6 for an example of this.

They'll go, "There's a lot of state-run media in Russia". State run, ABC, CBS, NBC, I mean that stuff is admittedly run by psych-warfare people. And it's not run by the general Pentagon or CIA. They have weird leftist, social engineering nests that are at the top, who basically write the Hollywood scripts. They write basic templates and then they just regurgitate them out on every platform. And it's truly sickening.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Jones makes a moral equivalency between the Russian government and media and American government and media. Just before this statement, Jones refers to Russia as “draconian” and “totalitarian,” so his proceeding comparison of the two countries frames America as the same since the narrative evoked by “draconian” and “totalitarian” frames resonates throughout his proceeding claims.

The similarities between the two framing mechanisms of fearmongering and disdaining institutions should be noted. Jones uses fearmongering not only as a general framing tool, but he also implements that framing tool into the way he frames institutions, using fearmongering as a sub-frame. This highlights the way Jones’ general reliance on fear permeates throughout most aspects of his rhetorical framing techniques—there exists multiple, deeper layers of fearmongering seen in his anti-globalization rhetoric and anti-institution rhetoric. Perhaps no quote better illustrates Jones’ blending of fearmongering and disdaining institutions than this: “People running things are blood thirsty and hate us and don't have good will for us.”<sup>24</sup> This code clearly and concisely summarizes Jones’ framing techniques for government, institutions, and power structures. Jones’ rhetoric surrounding the stereotypical conspiratorial fear of a subversive elite is constituted by quotes such as “The system does not care about you” or “That's how dumb they think you are... They operate out in the open like you were absolutely idiots who have an I.Q. of about 30 points.”<sup>25</sup> Jones’ *modus operandi* for framing government is clarity regarding “their” intentions to bring harm and hate to “their” subordinates, and using language and imagery that evokes fear-driven narratives. This rhetoric encourages a gap, or divide, between “them” and “us,” which can possibly serve to amplify and reinforce, or at least supplement, the narratives evoked by fearmongering frames that permeate throughout most InfoWars broadcasts.

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<sup>23</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones: The Gay Bomb Rant*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>24</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones: The Gay Bomb Rant*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>25</sup> These quotes are from *Smoking Gun Evidence That 9/11 was an Inside Job*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

Jones' disdain for institutions, specifically government and the mainstream media, and his inclination for fearmongering, can be seen as the primary drivers of his rhetoric. Although these two frame tactics are distinct themes, they transcend thematic boundaries and permeate throughout nearly all of Jones' framing mechanisms as exemplified throughout the analysis. Jones' institutional disdain can also be linked to the theme of *nationalism*, as Jones consistently expresses disdain for globalists.

#### 4.2.2 Nationalism

Jones conveys his messages of nationalism through two primary methods: expressing what is good about America, and expressing what is bad about America. What Jones thinks is bad about the country, and ultimately the world, is an increasing level of globalization: "The globalists who sold this nation out, who thought they owned it, who thought we were a two dollar whore they can pimp out..." "McMaster's day one globalist Wahhabist bad connections, the fourth guy Trump tried to get who the Deep State put on him, a big problem... the globalists try to sabotage policy."<sup>26</sup>

Jones' disdain for virtually every form and implication of globalization sheds light on his reasons for supporting President Trump, who shares these views. In fact, one of the only aspect Jones supports regarding government is the current President of the United States, Donald Trump: "The American people have to realize they finally got somebody really returning power to Americans, really returning jobs to the economy, doing everything he said he would do."<sup>27</sup> Jones continues:

He is simply trying to be president and not have special interests in there running him and that's why the whole power structure is against Trump... Trump is trying to... take the contrary back and actually devolve power back to the states and back to the people... he's trying to create real prosperity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> These quotes are from *Breaking: Obama Planned Martial Law On Election Day But Choked*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>27</sup> This quote is from *Breaking: Obama Planned Martial Law On Election Day But Choked*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>28</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones & Joe Rogan Breakdown PizzaGate Pedophile Cult*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

Jones' support of Trump is notable since he is a libertarian who is vehemently against government and has never supported a sitting president in his lifetime. However, it seems as though Jones sees Trump and promotes him as a weapon to combat overreaching government.

The visual techniques used to supplement Jones' nationalistic framing methods are striking and clear: the digital backdrop to many of his videos is an American flag that seems to be majestically blowing in the wind.<sup>29</sup> This image suggests a particularly patriotic feeling surrounding the program, suggesting that if you watch this program then you are patriotic. One way to validate the impact this backdrop has is a "commutation test" (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.185): if the flag was replaced with, say, an upside down flag, or just a monochrome backdrop, the meaning of the studio set, and the words said during the broadcasts on the set, would carry different, less patriotic connotations. The salience of this image of the waving American flag is that it is a well-known cultural symbol. The way Jones himself overlaps the American flag backdrop outlines a "hierarchy of overlapping elements" allowing the viewer to identify Jones, and allowing Jones to frame himself as a patriot (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.188). The size of this backdrop furthers its saliency, emphasizing grandiose patriotic, nativistic, and nationalistic values present in Jones' rhetoric. It should be noted, however, that the flag alone does not represent nativism and nationalism, but rather amplifies those frames when accompanying such rhetoric.

#### **4.2.3 Demonizing Political Others**

In the video titled *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*,<sup>30</sup> Jones takes the demonization of his political opposites quite literally by framing Clinton as a non-human "other." Jones' discourse in this video exemplifies a link between conspiracy and religion in his equating of political figures to demons. For example, Jones characterizes Clinton as an "abject psychopathic demon from hell" who is "demon possessed," wants to "destroy the planet," and frightens "the people around her."<sup>31</sup> Jones' framing of Clinton as someone who is literally possessed by demons acts as a window into how he sees and constructs his political opposites

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 5 and Figure 6 for examples of this.

<sup>30</sup> See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>31</sup> These quotes are from *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

in general. The trend of Jones referring to Clinton and Obama in biblical or religious terms can also be seen as a tool in his framing tactic of fearmongering.

Jones not only uses fearmongering related tactics in the demonization of his political foes, but also personal attacks, often regarding physical appearances and name-calling. For example, Jones says of Huma Abedin<sup>32</sup>, “That woman number one is ugly. And evil,” while he comments on Hillary Clinton’s “big rubber face” with “flies all over her.” He continues his personal attacks against Clinton: “her big fat stinking—imagine how bad she smells man. I'm told her and Obama just stink. Stink, stink, stink. You can't wash that evil off man. There's a rotten smell around Hillary.”<sup>33</sup> Jones furthers his attacks against those with different opinions through direct attacks on his “Liberal” political opposites:

I want to just tell the trendy whites and black lives supporters and all of you idiots. I live here in Austin [Austin, Texas] around a lot of so-called Liberals that are really just mental patient basket cases that never got out of their house when they were kids. I mean I'm serious, these are really domesticated folks that I'm surprised aren't wearing diapers at age 30. I want to explain something to you jackasses.”<sup>34</sup>

Here, Jones incorporates his framing tactic of name-calling into the demonization of his political others. He continues his polemic, demonizing Liberals by calling them “trendies” and how a trendie is a “brainwashed, brain-damaged idiot.”

Jones’ attacks are often a result of someone having a different opinion than him. As mentioned earlier, he sees others with different political opinions not only as political foes, but in a much darker light—his framing of his political opposites as dark, evil forces offers a window into his general rhetorical framing techniques. Take this quote for example: “And you fools... the people that make jokes, you know, you know, you bet on pure evil. You know that you're wrong.”<sup>35</sup> Notice here the phrase “you bet on pure evil.” Jones’ framing tactic of linking his political opposites to evil, demonic characters of a biblical nature evokes accommodating narratives that may resonate with InfoWars’ Christian conservative audience.

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<sup>32</sup> Huma Abedin was the vice chair of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign.

<sup>33</sup> These quotes are from *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>34</sup> This quote is from *Obama To Cancel Elections With Martial Law Over Incited Race War*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>35</sup> This quote is from *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.



It seems as though Jones does not respect differing opinions, but is rather angered by them. When he is not literally “demonizing” someone for having a different opinion, he often resorts to name-calling and hate:

I'm gonna tell the Democrats something, and all the trendies... you don't appreciate anything. You're pseudo intellectuals that think you know everything... You are despicably sad and pathetic people... If you wanna redeem yourself then admit Donald Trump is right... The entire power structure you claim you're not part of is against him and then ask yourself why you wanna be part of this delusion club. The delusionites. The delusionals.<sup>36</sup>

Notice here the words and phrases “trendies,” “pseudo intellectuals,” “despicably sad,” “pathetic,” “delusion club,” and “The delusionites. The delusionals.” Here, in the span of just a few sentences, Jones uses name-calling tactics seven times. This framing method of using disparaging names to demonize others seems to be at least partially effective, as Jones and his ilk have turned the word Liberal—a word that formerly only described a political affiliation—into now what can arguably be understood as a derogatory term associated with irrational sensitivity, subservience to political correctness, and the restriction of rights such as free speech and the right to bear firearms.

Jones’ angry rhetoric is almost always accompanied by angry body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. As Jones shouts “you fools,”<sup>37</sup> he slams his fist downward towards the desk with an upset expression on his face.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Jones is well known for screaming to the point of nearly foaming at the mouth in many of his segments. These verb-focused mannerisms (i.e. slamming of the fist and angry facial expressions) are used to make Jones’ views, and the frames that represent those views, more clear, by providing an activity (slamming the fist) and the result of that activity (an expression of anger and passion) (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.197). These actions and results allow for the identification of “what is the meaning of the occupation,” (ibid) or what is the meaning of the narrative of the frame that Jones presents.

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<sup>36</sup> This quote is from *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>37</sup> This quote is from *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 3 for this image.

Jones uses demonization tactics as a method of polemic against the mainstream media (which can also be considered Jones' political opposite or political rival) just like he does the same for his political opposites. Take, for example, this quote: "China keeps people alive and takes part of the organs and keeps them alive, months in some cases, ripping them out. And our media criticizes you if you're against that."<sup>39</sup> Here, Jones implicitly suggests that mainstream media is supportive of "ripping out organs." The framing Jones does here of China as violent murderers, and the mainstream media as supporters of murder, is paralleled in his framing of Hillary Clinton as someone who is "demon possessed," scares "the people around her," and wants to "destroy the planet." Once again, it is clear how Jones' framing tactics of fearmongering and shock rhetoric permeate throughout InfoWars broadcasts and transcend other framing boundaries such as demonizing media, demonizing political others, and disdaining institutions.

An interesting visual note here is the way Jones signals distress when discussing how China "harvests organs" with actions such as looking down in seeming despair and hiding his face in his hand.<sup>40</sup> Here again we can use the social modality of this image (Rose, 2001), combined with the connotations and associations related to pose (Hansen and Machin, 2013), to understand the image's visual meanings. Jones' hanging of his head and covering of his face with his hands, which constitutes the site of the image itself regarding social modality, carries the cultural connotation (or visual frame) of despair, sadness, and discontent. In other broadcasts not explicitly analyzed in this thesis, Jones adopts this persona of sadness to an even more extreme level: one YouTube compilation video titled *Alex Jones Crying Compilation* (2014) shows Jones putting on tearful performances with intense, dramatic, and hysterical crying.

This more sensitive, in-touch-with-his-feelings persona of Jones is an interesting departure from his typical anger-and-testosterone-driven performance. Jones is typically very forward about his masculinity and what he thinks it means to be a man, which begs the question, what is Jones trying to achieve when he switches gears like this? Jones may be attempting to move

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<sup>39</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones: The Gay Bomb Rant*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>40</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 1 for these images.

away from his typically masculinity-driven presentation of self, if only just for a moment, to appeal to a broader audience by framing himself as a more caring, empathetic, and rational character, as these specific emotion-evoking frames carry such cultural connotations. Jones' visual and rhetorical techniques of displaying sadness and despair may have the effect of validating some of his more controversial and disruptive narratives through nuance and denial, also highlighting how his methods of validation permeate throughout most of his thematic framing techniques. It should be noted, however, that comments on the specific motives for Jones to employ these tactics are only speculative and not the primary focus of this research.

#### 4.2.4 Methods of Validation

Jones frequently sites government contacts to validate his claims and conspiracy theories, framing what is typically considered as a fringe opinion as an official narrative. Jones frequently cites his “so many contacts inside the secret service,”<sup>41</sup> and boasts about his relationship with United States President Donald Trump: “Of course Trump saw my emergency message to him...”<sup>42</sup> “I've had Trump on and I talk to him some.”<sup>43</sup> He cites government officials at all different levels, ranging from the United States Secret Service to police officers: “I'm told this by NYPD [New York Police Department] detectives, I mean the Secret Service gave me information.”<sup>44</sup> Jones supplements his sources of insider information with claims of expertise: “I've written books on it. I'm like the leader on that...”<sup>45</sup> “It appears from the video layers with our experts looking at it to be real.”<sup>46</sup>

Like most of Jones' rhetorical frames, he incorporates visual frames into his validation techniques. For example, as mentioned earlier, Jones holds up a piece of paper from a stack of papers on his desk while citing “government documents” in what may be perceived an

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<sup>41</sup> This quote is from *Secret Service Admit Obama Is A Muslim!* See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>42</sup> This quote is from *Breaking: Obama Planned Martial Law On Election Day But Choked*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>43</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones & Joe Rogan Breakdown PizzaGate Pedophile Cult*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>44</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones & Joe Rogan Breakdown PizzaGate Pedophile Cult*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>45</sup> This quote is from *Obama To Cancel Elections With Martial Law Over Incited Race War*. See Data sources for a link to this video.

<sup>46</sup> This quote is from *Is This Final Proof Michelle Obama Is A Man? Number 1 Video On The Web*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

attempt to frame his claims as not conspiracy-related, but rather confirmed by the government itself. Jones' use of objects can "tell us something about them due to their associations" as they have a "particular cultural resonance" that "should be considered salient in any image" (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.183-184)—here, the "government documents" carry cultural resonance of officiality. As mentioned earlier, the high-budget, professional set<sup>47</sup> that constitutes the InfoWars broadcast space further serves as a method of validation, since high-quality, high-budget productions evoke a narrative of power, control, legitimacy, validity, and knowledge.

Jones also attempts to validate his claims through attaching caveats to his statements, or in other words, by adding qualifiers to his rhetoric in the form of preemptive denial. This typically occurs when he is discussing a certain faction of society, most notably regarding religion or gender and sexuality: "*I'm not against muslims in general but whether it's psy-op or whatever, the secret service are saying no, he is a radical Muslim.*"<sup>48</sup> Regarding gender and sexuality, Jones says, "You think I'm shocked by it so I'm up here bashing it because I don't like gay people? I don't like them putting chemicals in the water that turn the friggin frogs gay!"<sup>49</sup>

Using caveats and qualifiers provides the similar framing effects as discussed earlier where Jones frames his radical statements and claims not as fringe and uncommon, but rather as thoughtful and mainstream opinions. Jones exemplifies his framing tactic of denial strategy by invoking his personal political ideology: "I'm not saying that Michelle Obama is a tranny, and I don't hate trannies, I'm a Libertarian."<sup>50</sup> Here, Jones relies on the frames evoked by the term Libertarian to make his preceding and proceeding claims more relatable and rational, as Libertarian political ideology centers around radical freedom, free will, and laissez-faire government policy. It can be argued, however, that the claims and statements that are attached to these attempts at denial render null Jones' efforts at legitimization.

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<sup>47</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 2 for images of the InfoWars set and graphics.

<sup>48</sup> This quote is from *Secret Service Admit Obama Is A Muslim!* See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>49</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones: The Gay Bomb Rant*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>50</sup> This quote is from *Is This Final Proof Michelle Obama Is A Man? Number 1 Video On The Web*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

Regarding Jones' discussion on the possibility of Michelle Obama being a transexual, the visuals Jones uses contradict any attempts at nuance or denial. For example, immediately after Jones attempts to validate his claim by stating he is a Libertarian, multiple full-screen, unsourced images are displayed on-screen of Michelle Obama and enlarged, zoomed-in images of what appear to be a bulge in her pants. Another image follows of Michelle Obama with a zoomed-in image of her hands with the caption "man hands."<sup>51</sup> These images invoke a combination of cultural and biological categorization that "connote familiar news frames for audiences" (Hansen and Machin, 2013, pp.193-194). The cultural familiarity of a bulge and large hands are "stereotypical physical characteristics" (ibid) that carry connotations of masculinity, serving as a tool to frame Michelle Obama as a man or a transexual. These biological and cultural categorizations that act as frames invoke negative connotations (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p.194), which is especially evident when positioned against the tense cultural debate around gender in the United States. This categorization "is important in connecting the viewer to the interests and experiences of the participants," which gives evidence for the power and effects of Jones' frames.

Another visual framing technique that Jones uses as a method of validation is his use of advanced graphics and supers that look nearly identical to those of mainstream media,<sup>52</sup> which is ironic seeing that Jones makes an effort to set himself apart from mainstream media—at least in his rhetoric, ideologies, and claims. In addition to graphics, the set that Jones broadcasts from is also very similar to the the set of local and even cable news stations. These graphics include lower thirds (also known as supers), over the shoulder graphics, and graphic wipes (graphics that often constitute the introduction of a broadcast or facilitate the transition between segments), among other things. The striking similarities in set design and general use of graphics between InfoWars and mainstream media highlights Jones' attempts to legitimize his operation through a superficial professional feel, mimicking the visual aesthetic of local and cable news while simultaneously demonizing and expressing disdain for them.

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<sup>51</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 4 for these images.

<sup>52</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 2 for a comparison of Jones' graphics to graphics used in mainstream, local television news.

An understanding of the visual meanings of Jones' use of these graphics can be gained through analyzing the compositional modality of the site of production of the image and the site of the image itself (Rose, 2001). The visual effects used by InfoWars carry a connotation of legitimacy that is associated with mainstream media. The advanced graphics and set designs present in InfoWars broadcasts also carry a connotation of legitimacy that is associated with high-budget, large scale productions. Since "images or any of their parts can trigger different meanings for us" (Hansen and Machin, 2013), it can be inferred that the denotation of news graphics carries a connotation of legitimacy since mainstream media is so familiar to the general public, while alternative media like InfoWars is fringe. For example, mainstream media like cable news and local television news is part of the lives of many Americans from an early age: many children grow up in households where the evening news is on most nights, leading the family to adopt a sense of familiarity and trust with that news station and its anchors and reporters. These habits can be adopted by the children and passed down the next generation—this strong cultural foothold that mainstream news holds is part of why it is called "mainstream."

Programs like InfoWars, however, do not have the same kind of access to the everyday lives of families and individuals since the primary mode of broadcast is via the internet. Therefore, these visual techniques that mimic mainstream media can be seen as an attempt to gain aspects of legitimacy constituted by that same familiarity, trust, and cultural foothold that mainstream media possesses. Take, for example, the comparison between the set located in the InfoWars studio and a local news set.<sup>53</sup> The similarities in set design—a long, wrapping desk, monitors, and screens with graphics on them—present InfoWars as a mainstream, rather than fringe or alternative, media outlet through the evocation of a mainstream legitimacy narrative. The set design, combined with the similar over-the-shoulder graphics, lower thirds, and wipe graphics highlight an attempt to legitimize through familiarity.

#### **4.2.5 Calls to Action and PizzaGate**

Jones' framing mechanisms are often accompanied by calls to action during and at the end of his videos. For example, in one video, Jones warns his viewers that "They're imploding America by design. Warn everyone you know ladies and gentlemen. This is so huge... please

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<sup>53</sup> See Appendix 3, Figure 2, InfoWars Set for this set comparison.

get the word out.”<sup>54</sup> In another video, Jones calls for independent research in order to keep a movement alive: “Whatever you do research this video for yourself and save it because there's major moves to censor this information.”<sup>55</sup> These calls to action can be seen as adding power to Jones’ frames in the form of real-life action. Although it is only possible to speculate whether certain frames can evoke real-life action, there are indications that certain frames represent ideologies that can lead to real-life action.

This idea of discourse leading to action is exemplified by the 2016 “PizzaGate” conspiracy theory, where members of various online communities such as 4Chan and Reddit made false connections between terms in leaked emails from prominent Democrats and a fabricated child sex ring led by Hillary Clinton that was supposedly run out of a pizzeria in Washington D.C. This conspiracy culminated in an individual storming the pizzeria with a gun in search for the truth—at least one gunshot was fired. In addition, employees of the pizzeria were harrassed with death threats, along with bands who played music there and other affiliates of the restaurant. Yelp had to freeze the pizzeria’s account since most of the reviews were about news stories regarding the conspiracy theory rather than actual dining experiences (Snopes.com, 2018). This conspiracy theory was heavily pushed by Jones, who is widely credited for spurring this real-life action due to his rhetoric that portrays the fictional pedophiles as “psychic vampires stealing the energy from the kids”<sup>56</sup> who murder, dismember, and rape children (Beauchamp, 2016).

Jones supplements his calls to action, as well as his other frames, with a key visual ingredient that engages the viewer, described by Hansen and Machin (2013) as “demand.” Jones enacts demand by his mode of address: in almost all of his videos, he is sitting behind a desk, serving as the primary object of focus, looking directly into the camera which can provide an engaging effect for the audience. This demand “creates a visual form of address” since it gives the audience the impression that they are being personally addressed (Hansen and Machin, 2013). This visual tactic “produces an image act” that “is used to do something to

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<sup>54</sup> This quote is from *OBAMA ESTABLISHING DICTATORSHIP!* See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>55</sup> This quote is from *Is This Final Proof Michelle Obama Is A Man? Number 1 Video On The Web*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>56</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones & Joe Rogan Breakdown PizzaGate Pedophile Cult*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

the viewer... it asks something of you in an imaginary relationship” (Hansen and Machin, 2013). This sheds light on why Jones’ calls to action can be so powerful—a phenomenon illustrated by the aforementioned PizzaGate anecdote.

### **4.3 Analysis in Explicit Reference to Entman’s Frame Characterization**

To further ground this analysis in media framing, it is beneficial to explicitly apply Entman’s (1993, 2004, 2007) characterization of what constitutes most media frames to the conspiratorial framing on InfoWars. Entman’s frame characterization defines frames as having four functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgement, and remedy promotion. These parts of a frame contribute to the overall function of a frame to combine “elements of perceived reality” and assemble “a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (ibid, 2007, p.164). Conspiracy theories do just that: they take “elements of perceived reality” and develop a particular narrative about that reality. This phenomenon is exemplified through Jones’ theory that former United States President Barack Obama is a demon who smells like sulphur.<sup>57</sup> Here, the element of perceived reality is the fact that flies landed on Obama’s face. Jones takes this occurrence and structures a narrative around it, explaining why it happened: flies land on Obama because he is, of course, a sulphuric-scented demon from hell. This frame best fits into the *demonizing political others* thematic frame. This frame, like many of the frames that constitute Jones’ conspiracy theories, clearly runs into credibility issues, which can lead to a decrease in frame efficacy, or in other words, frame resonance (Benford, 1993). These shortcomings in frame resonance may explain InfoWars’ fringe status and lack of credibility.

InfoWars’ intense focus around a narrative of the American government plotting to revoke the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution, taking away all guns from American citizens, serves as a prime example to which Entman’s (1993, 2004, 2007) four frame functions can be explicitly applied. In the video titled *Troops Ordered To Kill All Americans Who Do Not Turn In Guns*,<sup>58</sup> Rob Dew, Jones’ InfoWars colleague, wholeheartedly embraces the *fearmongering* thematic frame:

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<sup>57</sup> This theory is from *Hillary Clinton: Demonic Warmonger*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>58</sup> See Data Sources for a link to this video.



They're gonna take your guns and once they take your guns you're not gonna have any type of freedom of speech, you're not gonna have any type of freedom of the press, you're not gonna have anything... That means no security for the individual. That means you don't have any rights. It's only the state that's gonna have rights... No Second Amendment.

Here, Entman's first frame function, problem definition, is established: the government is going to take your guns and, ultimately, take away all of your rights. Frame function two, causal analysis, is also implicit within this quote: the government wants to take away all of your rights, and confiscating guns is the first step in achieving this goal. Dew then invokes Entman's third frame function of moral judgement into his fearmongering tactics:

There's not gonna be any peace with them. They're gonna be kicking your heads in and shooting everybody in sight... There's no negotiations. There's only killing people and machine-gunning them when they don't comply.

Here, the government is demonized through frames that evoke narratives of malice and immorality. This moral judgement not only serves as a negative representation of the government, but also as justification for the fourth frame function of remedy promotion which, in this case, can be found in calls to action:

You better start talking to people, you better start warning people... you better start making a plan. You better start having firearms... You better get this information out. Don't waste anymore time. You better get some guns. You better get a plane. You better learn how to shoot. Don't waste this time now that we have.

The rhetoric in this example is based on the "perceived reality" (Entman, 2007) of a 1961 State Department<sup>59</sup> publication titled *Freedom from War* detailing a United Nations plan to mitigate risks of war through what the document describes as "the progressive reduction of the war-making capabilities of nations" (Dosfan.lib.uic.edu, 1961). The previous example was also based on a local news report that showed United States government officials confiscating guns during Hurricane Katrina. Dew labeled this incident as "training" for the future universal disarmament that the *Freedom from War* publication supposedly calls for:

They went in just to grab guns because that's what they're training to do. It wasn't about helping people. It's about taking people. It was about taking people's guns to see if they could get away with it under a crisis. And that is how it's gonna happen."

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<sup>59</sup> The State Department is the United States governmental agency that deals with foreign affairs.

Here, Dew is promoting “a narrative that highlights connections” among the “perceived reality” (Entman, 2007, p.164) of the *Freedom from War* publication and the Hurricane Katrina gun confiscation incident, resulting in a conspiratorial interpretation of reality. Dew made conspiratorial, and likely misrepresentative, connections and thus constructed a conspiratorial narrative where the *Freedom from War* publication showed evidence of citizen, rather than military, disarmament. He also made direct, and likely incorrect, connections between the *Freedom from War* publication to the Hurricane Katrina gun confiscation incident, calling it practice for future universal gun confiscation under the *Freedom from War* proposal. This led to the promotion of the aforementioned interpretation of that perceived reality.

This event interpretation method is not exclusive to conspiracy theories, but rather what makes this frame conspiratorial is the content of the narrative. Conspiracy theories—more specifically, their constituting conspiratorial frames—are based on an element of perceived reality that is shared by conspiracy theorists and non-conspiracy theorists alike. What differentiates conspiratorial frames from non-conspiratorial frames, however, is the content of those frames, the implied connections within and between that content, and the narratives evoked by that content. Conspiracy theorists and non-conspiracy theorists can typically agree that, in its most reduced state, an event happened—the State Department did indeed publish the *Freedom from War* document, and government officials did indeed confiscate guns during Hurricane Katrina. What differentiates Dew’s conspiratorial portrayal from other non-conspiratorial portrayals of those shared realities are the perceptions of intent behind those events that are evoked from differentiating narratives built around those events. Essentially, the contrasting disagreements between conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial frames are what define and separate them.

#### **4.4 The “They”**

One of the most noticeable aspects of Jones’ rhetoric is the ambiguous “they.” The ubiquity of Jones’ framing techniques puts the ambiguous they in much of the rhetoric that constitutes the framing themes and categories on InfoWars. The use of the ambiguous they is not exclusive to Alex Jones and InfoWars, but rather quite common in the discourses of general American society: it is not uncommon for phenomena to be attributed to the “they” when

discussing something that is not readily attributable to a single actor. For example, many refer to “they” when casually discussing scientists and research, government, specific groups or societal constructs of groups, other broad societal institutions and constructs, or even general society itself: “They say smoking can kill you,” “They found a cure for a disease,” “They are coming out with a new technology.” This form of “they” is even sometimes personified, as exemplified by characters such as “Uncle Sam,”<sup>60</sup> “Mother Nature,” or “Father Time.” The ambiguous they is also commonly referred to in more abstract terms regarding unknown, subversive, clandestine, or otherwise less defined and more mysterious actors or constructs. This last example of the ambiguous they is where Jones and InfoWars come in.

Despite the commonplace ambiguous “they” in American society, and possibly many other societies and cultures, identifying the specific use and purpose of the ambiguous they used by Jones is of specific importance for this research. Judging from the common themes in Jones’ rhetoric, it can be deduced that the “they” Jones is usually referring to is the political establishment and “Deep State.” This idea of the establishment and Deep State is characterized by the previous description of the ambiguous they: an unknown, subversive, clandestine, and mysterious power structure that controls not only American politics, but even world politics, banks, media, and many other aspects of societies. Societal structures and institutions are not naturally occurring phenomena that are the product of humanity’s social nature (as described in Berger and Luckman, 1966), but rather, according to conspiracy theorists such as Jones, man-made objects, created by the few, with the purpose of controlling and manipulating the masses. Therefore, it becomes clear that Jones seems to use the ambiguous they interchangeably with terms such as the “political establishment,” Deep State, media, and government—the “they” is typically a mechanism for referencing such society-controlling institutions without the necessity for clarity and specificity. This lack of clarity and specificity frames the enemy as unknown, hard to identify, and ultimately more frightening, increasing the effectiveness of the *fearmongering* frame.

As outlined throughout this analysis, some of Jones’ favorite targets of his polemic include government and the mainstream media, among other institutional bodies. It seems as though he uses the framing tool of the ambiguous they as a method to portray these institutions as

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<sup>60</sup> Uncle Sam is the personification of the United States Government.

shady, secretive, and ultimately scary and threatening, which serves as a sub-frame and does the legwork for his fearmongering framing tactic. The use of the “ambiguous they” frames structures and institutions that are supposed to be healthy for society, such as government and the media, as structures to be feared, structures that want to do harm, and generally sinister actors. For example, regarding authority, one might say “They do not allow that.” The ambiguity of the “they” here can be clarified through specification: “The police do not allow that,” “The teacher does not allow that,” or “The law does not allow that.” This may relieve tension surrounding an ambiguous, omnipresent, mysterious, and unknown “they.” It seems as though Jones would rather forgo the specificity and embrace the ambiguity, ultimately embracing the fear and anxiety-inducing tension and uncertainty of the frame.

Jones does, however, take steps to specify and clarify the “they” in some of his rhetoric with results being no less of an indictment of Jones’ fearful and angry persona, and examples come in the form of labeled constructs. Take, for example, the term “Liberal.” The term Liberal, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, was originally a way to describe a specific political affiliation. Now, however, the term carries a more derogatory connotation for individuals with left-wing political ideologies. Although the term Liberal can be defined, it still labels and represents a construct of a certain sociopolitical faction, which serves the same purpose as the “they,” just in a more specific fashion. Additionally, since the term Liberal is identified and defined, a fear-related narrative is reduced—even though Liberals are criticized for allegedly wanting to restrict the rights and freedoms of American citizens, the fact that the term has an identity and definition takes away from the fear of ambiguity and the frightening uncertainty associated with that ambiguity.

#### **4.5 Mainstream Media’s Adoption of Conspiratorial Frames**

Jones and InfoWars’ framing power is amplified through different media channels by the news media’s adoption of InfoWars’ frames. As Entman (2004, 2007) points out, an individual or organization’s framing power is increased when their frames are reproduced in the media. Lakoff (2004, p.3) details the effects of reproducing frames, even when arguing against the ideas that a frame represents: “Their language picks out a frame—and it won’t be

the frame you want.”<sup>61</sup> So, when mainstream media addresses the conspiracy theories presented on InfoWars (which they have increasingly started to do as Jones has gained notoriety) and they use the same language he uses when describing the conspiracies, his narratives, or the frames that evoke his narratives, are reinforced and perpetuated no matter the validity of the argument against them.

An example of this can be seen in Jones’ rhetoric regarding multiple school shootings. In the video titled *Alex Jones Final Statement on Sandy Hook*, Jones says “I’ve watched a lot of soap operas and I’ve seen actors before. And I know when I’m watching a movie and I know when I’m watching something real. Let’s look into Sandy Hook.”<sup>62</sup> Here, Jones is referring to one of his most controversial conspiracy theories that claims the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting was a “false flag” (manufactured and perpetrated by the government) operation to suppress gun rights. He repeats this “actor” and “false flag” narrative regarding the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, where he claims many of the students are “crisis actors,” hired and paid to push Liberal gun control agendas. The media picked up on this narrative and started trying to debunk it, as exemplified by a Vice article titled *Where the ‘Crisis Actor’ Conspiracy Theory Comes From* (Koebler, 2018) or an Al Jazeera video titled *The ‘Crisis Actor’ Myth* (Facebook.com, 2018). However, according to Lakoff (2004), these attempts at debunking are only reinforcing the narrative evoking frames of the term “crisis actor.”

The media’s adoption, or re-presentation, of pre-established frames is not unprecedented. Just as the media adopts many frames regarding conspiracy theories such as the “crisis actor” or “false flag” narratives, news frames often come from frames present in the content and issues on which they report. Many examples of this phenomenon are present in political news frames. In news media, it is common to hear about political issues regarding “pro life” versus “pro choice” (regarding abortion), “gay rights” versus “religious freedom” (regarding gay rights/gay marriage), and “gun control” versus “gun rights” (regarding the right to keep and

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<sup>61</sup> Lakoff (2004) gives the political example of the term “tax relief”: “For there to be relief, there must be an affliction, an afflicted party, and a reliever who removes the affliction and is therefore a hero” (ibid, p.3). So, when democrats adopted this term “relief” in arguments against tax cuts, they were only reinforcing the idea that Democrats were imposing an affliction on the American people and Republicans were removing that affliction and were therefore heroes.

<sup>62</sup> See Data Sources for a link to this video.

bear firearms). For example, the pro life versus pro choice frames that constitute the debate in the United States regarding abortion frames the issue of abortion in two very different ways: the “pro life” camp relies on this frame to evoke a narrative of saving lives, or even anti-murder, by framing the other side as takers of lives, while the “pro choice” camp relies on a frame that evokes a narrative of freedom to choose by framing the other side as infringing upon the rights of women. The frames around the debate in the United States over firearms is similar: the term “gun control” is a rhetorical frame that has been widely adopted, even by the pro gun control camp, that frames any restrictions on the ownership or use of firearms as a control, restriction, and infringement upon those gun rights.

The news media often regurgitates political frames verbatim, straight from the mouths of politicians and political activists. Although this may be done in an effort to present a straightforward, unbiased, and unaltered account of the issues, this phenomenon leads to the reinforcement of whatever frame is being repeated. News media often fails to reinterpret these frames into more neutral frames—returning to the gun control frame example, a more neutral frame could be “gun safety.” This is a term that both sides of the debate may have an easier time relating to, and a term that may lead to common ground and ultimately more constructive political discourses.

Thus, it is no surprise that Jones’ InfoWars has grown in popularity as mainstream news media have started to give him, including his frames, more attention. Jones’ claims and propositions become less and less fringe with their increased coverage, and ultimate legitimization, in mainstream news, possibly having real-world consequences such as that of the aforementioned PizzaGate incident.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to ultimately expand the definition of framing theory, or in other words, to add nuance to the way framing theory, specifically media framing, is currently understood. Through the qualitative critical analysis of Alex Jones' InfoWars and the development of the conspiratorial framing grounded theory, that goal has been achieved. This conclusion serves as an opportunity to not only reflect on the process of achieving this goal, but also to expand upon, contextualize, clarify, and situate the results of the analysis. The conclusion then reiterates the ultimate, more abstract goals of this research: developing and defining a conspiratorial framing typology in order to broaden our understanding of media framing, media representation, framing theory in general, and ultimately, the mechanisms of how we understand truth, fact, reality, and their mediated representations.

### 5.1 A Typology Defined as a Tool in the War on Information

The relationship and interplay between the InfoWars frames identified in this analysis are of much significance. A sufficient way to summarize the connection between the different thematic frames is as follows: Jones uses *fearmongering* frames as part of most of his other frames, most notably the *disdaining institutions* frame; then he uses *methods of validation* frames in an attempt to legitimize the narratives evoked by the preceding frames. This same process of the implementation of fearmongering frames into other framing mechanisms, followed by the use of a validation frame, can be applied to the other thematic frames of *nationalism* and *demonizing political others*.

The frames used by InfoWars not only exist in the themes, but also in the categories of the themes. For example, the *methods of validation* frame contains three categories, which can also be considered sub-frames. These categories, or sub-frames, are *government connections*, *legitimizing (claims of expertise)*, and *denial strategy*. Each of these individual categories serve a different framing function, but all of the categories together contribute to the broader thematic frame of *methods of validation*. Although it is not the purpose of this thesis to understand media effects or audience research, some speculation may be appropriate to the influence these frames have over the consumer: since Jones and InfoWars push seemingly aggressive, apocalyptic, and demonizing rhetoric, it can be assumed that this content may have anxiety, fear, and anger-inducing effects, among other negative emotions. As was

outlined in the analysis, these effects may have the potential to translate from rhetoric into action, such as those actions of the PizzaGate gunman.

Conspiratorial framing, in this case, serves the purpose of allowing for an understanding of how information is presented through the mediation channel of InfoWars. More broadly speaking, conspiratorial framing acts to further define media representation and the construction of reality, truth, and fact. The mediated representation of reality is never a purely objective characterization of the truth, as every component of mediation and mediatization adds another filter to the reality of fact. However, with tools and definitions such as that of conspiratorial framing, the media consumer's ability to identify and understand these filters is enhanced and their relationship with objective reality—through a subsequent understanding of subjective reality—becomes that much stronger. Through identifying specific methods of framing in InfoWars and ultimately making transparent some of the media framing techniques in the mediated communication of conspiracy theories, a better understanding is gained of the mediated construction of reality, and the true nature of the ideas and happenings presented on InfoWars is made clearer. The results of the analysis of this thesis serve to cut through the clutter and deceptions of opinionated rhetoric and provide a clearer picture of what is going on, what is being said, and most importantly how it is being said.

It is important to note that the case of Alex Jones and InfoWars does not necessarily represent every conspiracy theory community, and the frames that define conspiratorial framing in this analysis are not necessarily representative of every frame that is present in InfoWars broadcasts. Additionally, these frames may be used elsewhere in non-conspiratorial rhetoric. The frames used by Alex Jones and InfoWars are also not necessarily the frames used by other conspiracy theorists; however in the current American sociopolitical climate, Jones and InfoWars seem to be highly representative of many conspiracy theory cultures, which means there is general knowledge to be gained from this case study.

It is also important to note that the typology of conspiratorial framing developed in this thesis is specific to the empirical material used in the analysis. This means that the definition of conspiratorial framing present in this thesis is not the only possible definition of the term. Many more typologies could and should be developed to define this phenomenon. Different



research may provide different takes on conspiratorial framing, and further research of the same subject, or even the same case, may yield different results. The typology of conspiratorial framing in this thesis that defines the term is a result of research on a single medium—InfoWars—and a limited selection of conspiracy topics. This case study, however, is likely representative of broader conspiracy theorists and theories, as evidenced by Jones’ popularity. Jones’ broad recognition as a conspiracy theorist and his relationship with broader conspiracy theory communities indicates a certain level of representativeness of the frames used on InfoWars and provides sufficient justification for the case, its validity, and the validity of the analysis and its results.

## **5.2 A New Dimension to Media Framing**

Media is an integral part of the everyday life of American culture and cultures all over the world. Whether it is traditional media such as television, radio, books, newspapers, or magazines, or new media such as the internet and social media, the intertextuality of the media landscape and the media consumer has implications for how individuals live their lives and understand reality. The way individuals and societies interact with media, and the way all different facets of media interact within the broader media landscape, dictates the way reality is understood through a mediated construction of that reality. Therefore, it can be deduced that the mediated communication of conspiracy theories and the frames that constitute them have implications for understandings of reality.

The “interconnectedness” and “interrelatedness” (Couldry and Hepp, 2017, pp.55-56) between the consumer and the media landscape, and between facets of media themselves, is summarized by the idea of the media manifold. For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to understand how conspiratorial framing fits into the media manifold. It is also important to note that not *all* conspiratorial framing is media related, as exemplified by word-of-mouth, interpersonal communication of conspiracy theories. However, as posited earlier in this thesis, the vast majority of conspiracy theory communication is mediated in some way, either through radio and internet broadcasts such as those of InfoWars, conspiracy theory websites such as 911truth.org and other online forums or blogs, movies such as *Loose Change*, and books such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Since this thesis focuses primarily on

conspiracy theory communication mediated through the digital medium of YouTube, an understanding of InfoWars' role in the media manifold is imperative.

The idea of the media manifold (Couldry and Hepp, 2017, pp.55-56) focuses on “the social actor’s position within a much larger institutionalized environment of interdependent media.” In this case, Jones and InfoWars can be seen as the social actor *and* as a part of the institutionalized media landscape. Stuart Hall (Media Education Foundation, 1997) reinforces Couldry and Hepp’s (ibid) emphasis on the power the media manifold has over the experience of reality in the everyday lives of individuals with his talk on media representation. Hall (ibid) highlights how perceptions and understandings of reality are largely based on mediated representations: to understand and give meaning to reality, one must understand the events that constitute reality, along with the history, consequences, stakes, and stakeholders of those events.

Since the media manifold is a primary constructor of reality, individuals learn about the events (in this case, the events that are the focus of conspiracy theories) that constitute reality from the media, highlighting the media’s ability to shape narratives and set agendas—something Jones and InfoWars do through the frames they use. By placing Jones and InfoWars in this largely influential media manifold that has the power to represent reality and influence media consumers’ perceptions of reality, the power potential that Jones and InfoWars hold becomes clear. It can be deduced from the five framing themes of InfoWars that reality representations on InfoWars are constituted primarily by fear and disdain—more specifically, fear and disdain of institutions and other individuals or sociopolitical groups who differ from the norms set by InfoWars and the alt-right. These framing themes also shed light on a conspiratorial world view, specifically regarding “others,” politics, government, mainstream media, and other institutions, that sees these actors as malevolent forces who want to do harm. Not only do conspiracy theories portray many institutions as malevolent actors, but conspiracy theories, at least the ones presented on InfoWars, also portray differing sociopolitical individuals and groups as threats to their ways of life and general wellbeing. The *ad hominem*s that Jones employs against these social actors create a representative narrative that defines them in a certain way, constructing a particular reality around those actors. For example, Jones’ portrayal of Hillary Clinton as demon who smells like sulfur and

has a scary “big rubber face” constructs a malevolent and evil narrative of who Hillary Clinton is.

The ubiquitous and ever-present nature of the media manifold has given rise and opportunity to media outlets like InfoWars through increased access and availability. The digital revolution, which can be argued is a primary source and catalyzer for Couldry and Hepp’s (2017) idea of the media manifold, is deep and complex with many layers and aspects, however on the surface and at the most basic level, the power of the media manifold in relation to InfoWars is manifested through InfoWars’ reach to tens of millions of consumers every month through easily accessible platforms such as the radio, YouTube, and the InfoWars.com website. Couldry and Hepp (ibid) would take it a step further and ask the question of how do the specific mediums of radio, YouTube, and the InfoWars.com website affect the frame evoking narratives and ultimately the perception of these narratives? After all, InfoWars viewers are not seeing or hearing Alex Jones, but rather a mediated representation of Alex Jones. Neither are InfoWars viewers hearing about, seeing, or experiencing the issues and events Jones discusses on his broadcasts, but rather mediated representations of those events. So, how do these mediated representations of the real thing alter, affect, and influence the perception, understanding, and reality of that thing? Or more simply put, how do digital mediums change or influence the message that is being communicated?

The development of conspiratorial framing in this thesis sheds light on these questions, which are briefly addressed, in part, by the visual analysis of graphics, objects, and Jones’ gaze, positioning, and pose. As mentioned in the analysis, Jones stares straight into the camera and positions himself near the middle of the frame with a waving American flag in the background. Here, Jones’ gaze and positioning make him the center of attention and establishes a digitally mediated connection, or relationship, with the audience, cultivating an intimate and personal feeling to the broadcast and providing the feeling that Jones is speaking directly to the individual audience member. This digital presentation has a different effect on the message being presented than if that message was communicated through a different medium such as a book or even in-person. The aspect of legitimizing graphics—graphics that mimic the professionalism and credibility of more mainstream and less fringe news

media—used on InfoWars is another digital presentation technique that, as described in the analysis, legitimizes the message being presented compared to if the message was presented in a less professional, or in-person, mode.

### **5.3 Coming Full Circle**

The aims of this research have been realized through a qualitative data analysis on the case of InfoWars, however as mentioned earlier, more research is needed in order to develop more typologies of conspiratorial frames in order to cultivate a more robust definition of the term. Further research regarding conspiratorial framing typologies will be useful in contributing to and expanding upon the idea of conspiratorial framing and ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understand of media framing, media representation, and framing theory in general.

Not only does this research contribute to framing theory, but also to theories regarding conspiracies, as exemplified by the similarities and connections between conspiracy theory research outlined in the literature review and theoretical outline and the analysis of conspiracy theories on InfoWars. For example, InfoWars' methods of validation build upon the idea in the literature review that conspiracy theorists try to emulate science and understand the world through what they see as logic—this thesis has outlined a number of other validation techniques such as prestigious information sources, legitimization in the form of claims of expertise, and attempts at nuance and relatability. Jones' implementation of religion in his conspiracy theories also adds to pre-existing fields of thought regarding conspiracy theory as, within, and about religion. Additionally, the themes of *nationalism* and *disdaining institutions* resonate with the typical politically paranoid style of the conspiratorial mindset regarding powerless subjugated masses and a fight against clandestine and malevolent actors who are a threat to “a nation, a culture, or a way of life” (Hofstadter, 1964, p.4). Mirowsky and Ross' (1983) assertion that “victimization and exploitation tend to produce paranoia” (p.228) is especially clear throughout this analysis, most notably in alarmist rhetoric such as “They're gonna take your guns and once they take your guns you're not gonna have any type of freedom of speech, you're not gonna have any type of freedom of

the press, you're not gonna have anything”<sup>63</sup> or “People running things are blood thirsty and hate us and don't have good will for us.”<sup>64</sup>

More generally speaking, this research has addressed the problem of a lack of specific, narrow, topic-centered framing research by taking the broader and more abstract concepts of framing theory and honing them in on the specific topic of conspiracy theories. The way Alex Jones and InfoWars give meaning to the events portrayed in conspiracy theories helps to understand how information is presented, re-presented, and ultimately understood in our digitally mediated world. Hopefully, the result here will be the inspiration of more tangible framing research. The ideas presented in this thesis will be of much value for future research regarding not only how institutions, individuals, groups, and events are portrayed and ultimately perceived, but why they are portrayed and perceived in certain ways and how that information can be put to practical use.

In a world marred by a war on information, realities are increasingly built with distorted bricks and self-righteous mortar. Hopefully, this dissertation exposes those deceptive realities and encourages a healthy relationship with truth and fact.

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<sup>63</sup> This quote is from *Troops Ordered To Kill All Americans Who Do Not Turn In Guns*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

<sup>64</sup> This quote is from *Alex Jones: The Gay Bomb Rant*. See Data Sources for a link to this video.

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## Appendices

These appendices provides necessary material to supplement and give context to the body of this thesis. The appendices provide empirical material samples, touch on analysis methods, and provide additional information regarding each item not included in the body of the thesis.

### Appendix 1: Coded Video Transcript with Codes

The following is a coded video transcript with the corresponding codes serving as an example of the thematic content analysis method. Each code is in bold, directly followed by that code's numerical identifier; each video transcript was assigned a letter. This numbering and lettering system made referencing codes more manageable for constructing concept maps—for example, if a category in a concept map references code J7, the researcher will find video transcript J and code number 7 in that transcript (which, in this case, is “it's fully in place to only send you white house messages on cable TV, radio, internet”). The high number of codes helped to ensure that no code, category, or theme was missed during the data analysis, allowing the researcher to notice categories and themes that may have otherwise gone undetected. Some codes were single words, and some codes were entire paragraphs. Video transcriptions are followed by any memos that I took during the coding and transcribing process. Memos are followed by a list of the codes.

J. <https://youtu.be/kpiUfb7adPE> (Alex Jones: The Gay Bomb Rant) (10/16/2015)

**Russia tried to cut off the world wide web. Yes they're testing internet kill switch (1).** And the **Guardian and the Telegraph and others act like this is so incredibly evil (2).** Well I agree that an **internet kill switch or only allowing state-run media is very draconian and Russia is totalitarian to a certain extent and I don't like it (3).** But you know the **United States had a kill switch in they admitted about seven years ago (4)** and now they call it **(5) the Obama kill switch (6)** and it's **fully in place to only send you white house messages on cable TV, radio, internet (7), any time they want (8).** And now you notice they're **(9) forcing your phone to turn on and give you alerts. Some people are getting videos from the president now, forced emails when you're not on their email list (10).** They're slowly testing the waters to have **media takeover (11).** And it's bad if the **U.S. does it, bad if Russia does it (12).** They'll go **(13) "There's a lot of state-run media in Russia". State run, ABC, CBS, NBC (14), I mean that stuff is admittedly run by psych-warfare (15) people. And it's not run by the general Pentagon or CIA. They have weird leftist, social engineering nests that are at the top, who basically write the Hollywood scripts. They write basic templates and then they just regurgitate them out on every platform (16).** And it's **truly sickening (17).** I mean you like going to seeing **Hollywood movies where they just brainwash you (18)? You like being a victim of them laughing at you (19)? I mean this is sick (20)! Grrrr. And I'm trying to not get mad here but this is ridiculous (21). Shame on Hollywood, shame on the CIA, shame on the justice department (22).** I mean look, I know **you're anti-American crooks (23)** at the top who are **parasites who live off us (24).** And everybody knows whether its a spoiled rotten kid or spoiled rotten employees or whatever that **when you let people get spoiled rotten and live off you they end up becoming your masters and disdaining who feeds them. That's well-known. You got punk kids you spoiled, they'll be 18 beating you up demanding more money and grabbing it out of your purse. Because they were never disciplined. And we've got a bunch of people that actually believe that sucking blood out of us isn't enough (25).** They want to kill the golden goose as an act of power **(26).** Bunch of spoiled

rotten scum. Here's the good news filth (27), congress has a 9 percent approval rating (28). We focused our attention on Monsanto and on Walmart and on other enemy operators, McDonalds, and they're already in free-fall (29). I'm gonna tell you something Disney: you better try to go do state-run media for China (30). You better try to get some other contracts elsewhere to keep your bottom line up, because we're now gonna come after you. We're gonna point out what un-human trash of the earth you are. You filth. You absolutely diabolical deceiving scum (31). Dumbing this country down to the level of mindless jellyfish (32). You're never gonna get away with what you've done to humanity. You're never gonna get away with your hatred (33). People say "oh you're the one who sounds hateful." No look, I look foul feel fair (34). Where as they look fair feel foul, to quote J. R. R. Tolkien. I'm not hiding anything here (35). I know I'm under chemical and biological attack and I see the brain-damaged kids everywhere from the vaccines and I have to live this, I have to watch you and know what you are (36). So I openly am disgusted (37). Ok that's just some of the stacks right there (referring to stacks of paper on his desk). Look at this, look what they've turned us into (38). (reading headline) "Children becoming hunchbacks due to addiction to smartphones." "smart phones can be worse for your skin than the sun". Everything they give us is to hurt us (39) "Shock claim: world on the brink of 50-year ice age." "Scientists claim zapping brains with magnets can treat belief in god". Uh yea, so can giving someone a lobotomy. "Did parallel universe open up? Hundreds see floating city in skies above China." That's mainstream news. It was videotaped (40), and it's clearly a giant 500 yard tall, wide, hologram, which they admit China and the United States mainly for social control, they projected, again, 600 yard tall Jesuses in the desert. They did that in operation desert storm, the Iraqis, they just hit them with hallucinogens, you name it. And they fly over and spray them with some hallucinogens, you can look that up, and then hit you with uh Jesus and Mohamed fighting with lightsabers. Believe me, folks started flipping out. By the way they didn't just test it, they sprayed them with gay bombs (41). If you're a new listener just type in "Pentagon tested gay bomb on Iraq." (42) They didn't consider using it, they've used it on our troops, in Vietnam, they'd spray PCP on the troops, Jacob's ladder (43). Ha! You think PCP, some horse tranquilizer something, ha! They got stuff that'll wack your brain permanently (44). Brain chips in the troops. They give the troops special vaccines that are really nano-tech that already reengineer their brains (45). Look it up for yourself (46). What do you think tap water is? It's a gay bomb baby (47). And I'm not saying people didn't naturally have homosexual feelings, I'm not even getting into it quite frankly. I mean give me a break. You think I'm shocked by it so I'm up here bashing it because I don't like gay people (48)? I don't like them putting chemicals in the water that turn the friggin frogs gay (49)! Do you understand that?! I'm sick of this crap! I'm sick of being social engineered (50). It's not funny! I apologize to the family audience (51). I'm going to settle down, I haven't done this in months and I just cannot handle it anymore. I apologize, I apologize, Jesus forgive me (52). Let me just get back to the news, thank you. (reading headline) "Children becoming hunchbacks due to addiction to smartphones." "Weather outlook: big snow for northeast." "Relief for thirsty California: record snow." "Fears grow over increased antibiotic resistance." "Cure for chronic pain: world first patient fitted with permanent spinal cord implant." "Rise of the cheap and cheerful warehouse robot." Oh see how good it is (sarcastically)? That is just two of the stacks. I've got like twelve more of them. I'm gonna go to your phone calls I apologize. Maybe I shouldn't apologize because Christ was God and I'm just a man and he beat the money changers with a whip, overturned their tables and basically depending on which version you read, the Jewish

version he was basically punching people in the nose as well (53). I just cannot handle, I just cannot believe that they harvest millions of babies and even try to keep them alive a few days so they can harvest them properly (54) and China keeps people alive and takes part of the organs and keeps them alive, months in some cases, ripping them out (55). And our media criticizes you if you're against that (56). I mean don't we have any value for ourselves? Don't we know that people running things are blood thirsty and hate us and don't have good will for us (57)? I mean this is crazy. And then I flipped out yesterday because they're announcing (58) a new justice department mega-unit with their number one national directive to go after conservatives and veterans and libertarians and gun owners. They're announcing all this executive gun grabbing outside of law and they're announcing they believe the Tea Party is gonna start blowing stuff up any minute. While they persecute people illegally (59). And I just know full well what these scum (60) are gonna pull. I mean do people of the Justice department really wanna be involved in more false flags? You really like blowing up daycare centers and blaming it on the states? They were about to have a states right movement to get out of the U.N. and globalism in 1994/95. Oklahoma was leading a state coalition of 27 states to do it and so they blew up the federal building and blamed it on the patriots. And I'm telling you that's the kind of crap they're gonna pull (61). And what did Steven Seagal say, it's up on InfoWars.com. (quoting Steven Seagal "I believe in the second amendment and I believe a lot of these mass murders going on that a lot of these are engineered.") (62) I don't know they had Al Qaeda launch two chemical attacks on Assad and film it and post it bragging screaming "Allah akbar" and they still blamed the Syrian government (63). They wouldn't do anything like that here, I mean they'd abort 55 million babies, they'd keep babies alive and sell their body parts (64). You know we have videos of 8 month old, 7 month old babies fighting scalpels for their lives. You know when a baby at 5 months starts fighting the scalpel and jerking it's legs away and fighting the fingers, the arm, the hand, and up the shoulder and they get the neck, blood starts spraying (making spraying noise). They get in "whack whack whack". Even a baby will fight for its life in the womb (65). Won't you fight for your life (66)? Won't you recognize who these scum are (67)? I'm gonna say it real slow for you. They were testing different political systems (68). These are scientists that we fight (69). They tested Bolshevik communism in 1917 in Russia. It killed 50 million people. Conservatively. They put Mao in in 49, that's declassified. The CIA put Mao in that killed 84 million people. They then as a counter to it created Nazi fascism as a scientific test to see what that would do (70). Do you understand that the United States and England gave birth to communism and Nazism (71). So while you're talking about those as the old evils, those little dragons, look at Momma (72) if you wanna know what we're facing (73). Momma kills you in the water and the vaccines. Momma kills you with brainwashing. Momma kills you with liberalism. Momma kills you (74) with lots of trendies wearing non-threatening clothing. It's camouflage (75). Not the actual trendie, that's a brainwashed, brain-damaged idiot (76). But their master controllers know exactly what they're doing (77). These are technicians (78). They get orders. We're completely overrun people (79). But if you wake up to the criminals, it's game over. But you've got to break with them (80).

Memos:

-Regarding code 62: interesting how he references Hollywood actor who he agrees with, but demonizes Hollywood in general

Codes:

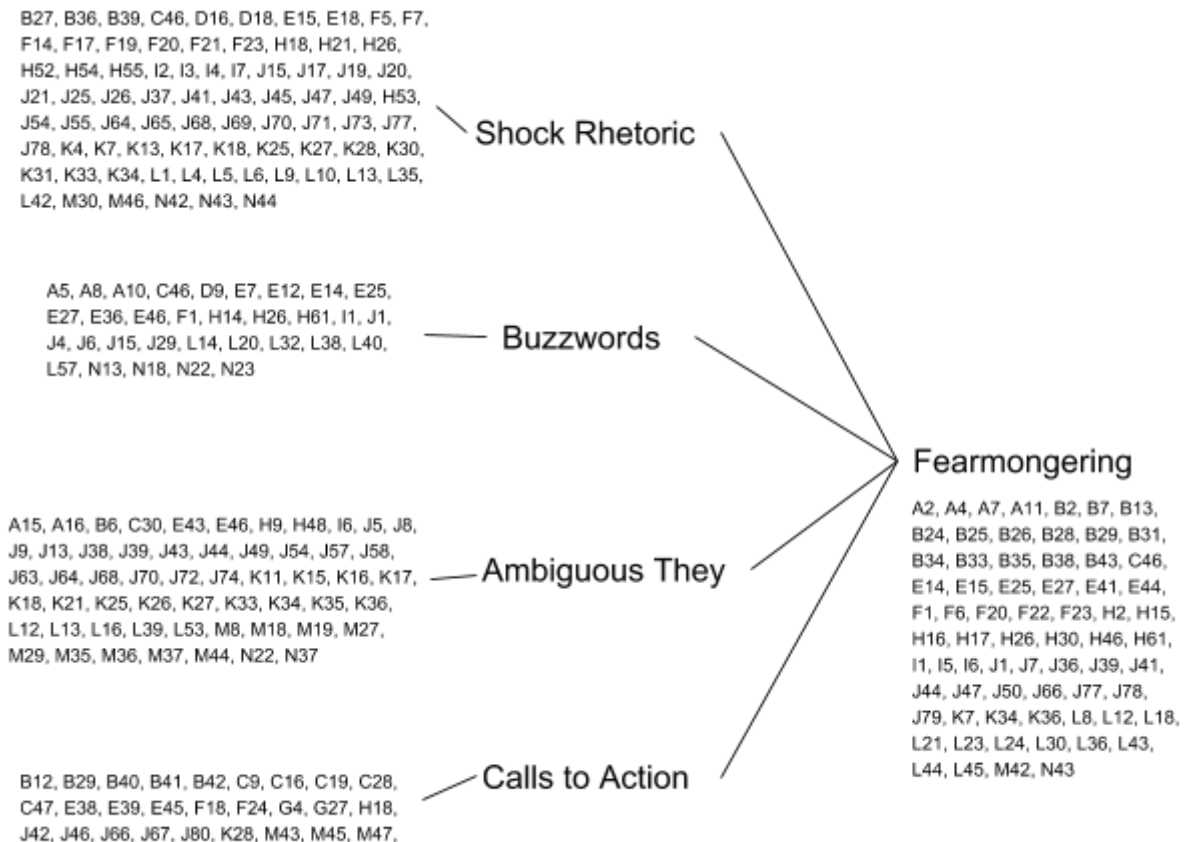
- (1) Accusing Russia of testing “internet kill switch”
- (2) Interpreting mainstream media’s opinion
- (3) Signaling unfavorable opinion of totalitarianism
- (4) Accusing United States of having “internet kill switch”
- (5) Ambiguous they
- (6) Attributing “kill switch” to Obama
- (7) Fearmongering
- (8) Ambiguous they
- (9) Ambiguous they
- (10) Sub-conspiracy; Government forcing media contact with citizens
- (11) Ambiguous they (government) testing media takeover
- (12) Moral equivalent between U.S. and Russia
- (13) Ambiguous they
- (14) Sub-conspiracy/Insinuating U.S. mainstream media is state-run
- (15) Mainstream media is “psych-warfare”
- (16) Claiming mainstream media is run by “leftist social engineers”
- (17) “It’s truly sickening”
- (18) Hollywood movies brainwash you
- (19) You are a victim who is being laughed at
- (20) “This is sick”
- (21) “I’m trying not to get mad here but this is ridiculous”
- (22) Expressing disdain for government and Hollywood, connecting the two
- (23) Media and government are unpatriotic
- (24) Demonizing media and government
- (25) Comparing either government/media/public to spoiled kids who need discipline
- (26) “They want to kill the golden goose as an act of power”
- (27) Calling either government/media/public to spoiled scum and filth
- (28) Happy that congress has 9 percent approval rating
- (29) Expressing his power; Monsanto, McDonalds, Walmart are “enemy operators”
- (30) Claiming Disney is in the business of state-run media
- (31) Demonizing and expressing hate for Disney
- (32) Disney is dumbing people down
- (33) Disney won’t get away with their evil deeds
- (34) “Look foul feel fair”
- (35) Assuring audience of his honesty
- (36) Citizens are under chemical and biological attack
- (37) “I openly am disgusted”
- (38) Blaming societal problems on ambiguous they
- (39) Fearmongering; Blaming societal problems on ambiguous they
- (40) Validating claim by citing mainstream media, videos
- (41) Sub-conspiracies
- (42) Call to action
- (43) Ambiguous they; Sub-conspiracy; demonizing government
- (44) Ambiguous they; Fearmongering
- (45) Sub-conspiracy
- (46) Call to action
- (47) “It’s a gay bomb baby.” saying tap water is meant to turn people gay

- (48) Claiming he doesn't have hard feelings towards gay people
- (49) Ambiguous they; water turning frogs gay
- (50) Insinuating social engineering
- (51) Courting a family audience
- (52) "Jesus forgive me."
- (53) Referencing religion and the bible
- (54) Ambiguous they keep babies alive to harvest them; Shock rhetoric
- (55) Accusing China of "keeping people alive" and harvesting their organs
- (56) Accusing U.S. media of being immoral
- (57) The ambiguous they hate us
- (58) Ambiguous they (government)
- (59) Government planning to violate rights of citizens, mainly conservatives
- (60) Government is scum
- (61) Accusing government of "false flag" operations
- (62) Referencing Steven Seagal to validate his argument
- (63) Ambiguous they (government) blamed their attacks on Syrian government
- (64) Ambiguous they harvesting body parts of aborted fetuses; Shock rhetoric
- (65) Shock rhetoric
- (66) Fearmongering/call to action
- (67) "Recognize who these scum are" call to action; Demonizing
- (68) Ambiguous they; Sub-conspiracy
- (69) Fighting against oppressors and evil; Righteousness
- (70) Ambiguous they; Sub-conspiracy
- (71) Sub-conspiracy, U.S. and England responsible for communism and Nazism
- (72) "Momma" (government, ambiguous they, invisible hand)
- (73) Collective struggle
- (74) "Momma" is out to get you
- (75) "Trendies wearing non-threatening clothing" is camouflage
- (76) Name-calling people he disagrees with
- (77) "Master controllers know exactly what they're doing"
- (78) "These are technicians"; indicating public is being socially engineered
- (79) "We're completely overrun people"/Fearmongering
- (80) Call to action; encouraging fighting against suppressors/criminals



## Appendix 2: Concept Map

The following is one of the concept maps developed from the thematic content analysis coding process. The interpretation of this concept map should go as follows: on the far right is the thematic frame; in the middle are the categories that constitute the thematic frame; on the far left are the individual codes that make up each category. Underneath the thematic frame are individual codes that pertain directly to the theme. Some of the individual codes are shared between categories and themes since, as outlined in the thesis, the categories and themes all share strong relationships and connections.



### Appendix 3: Images for Visual Analysis

The following are images used in the visual analysis. The images come from screenshots of the YouTube videos used as empirical material and sufficiently represent the still and moving visual framing techniques present in the videos.

Figure 1



Figure 2

**Lower Thirds (Supers)**



InfoWars  
Vs.  
Local News



InfoWars  
Vs.  
Local News



InfoWars  
Vs.  
Local News



**InfoWars Set**



InfoWars  
Vs.  
Local News



**Over the Shoulder Graphic**



InfoWars  
Vs.  
Local News



(continued on next page)

### Graphic Wipe Sequences



Figure 3





Figure 4



Figure 5

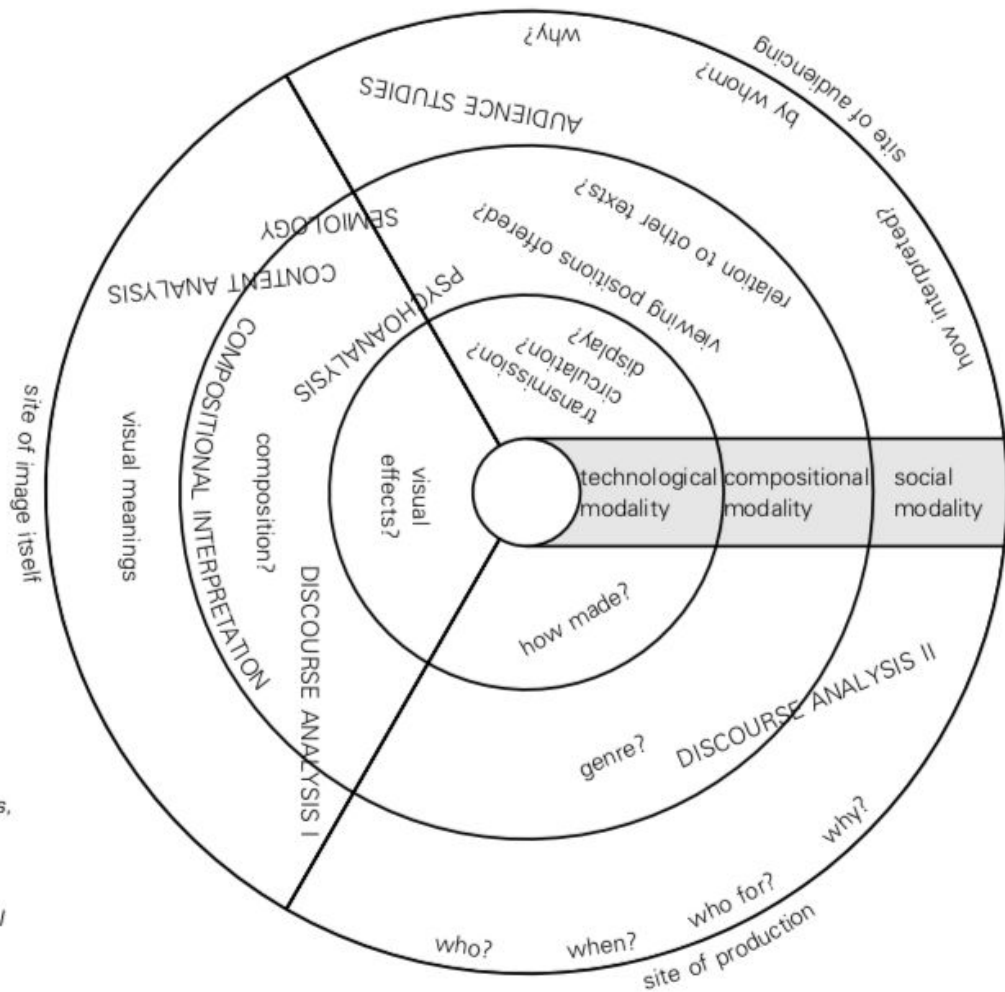


Figure 6



### Appendix 4: Rose's Sites and Modalities

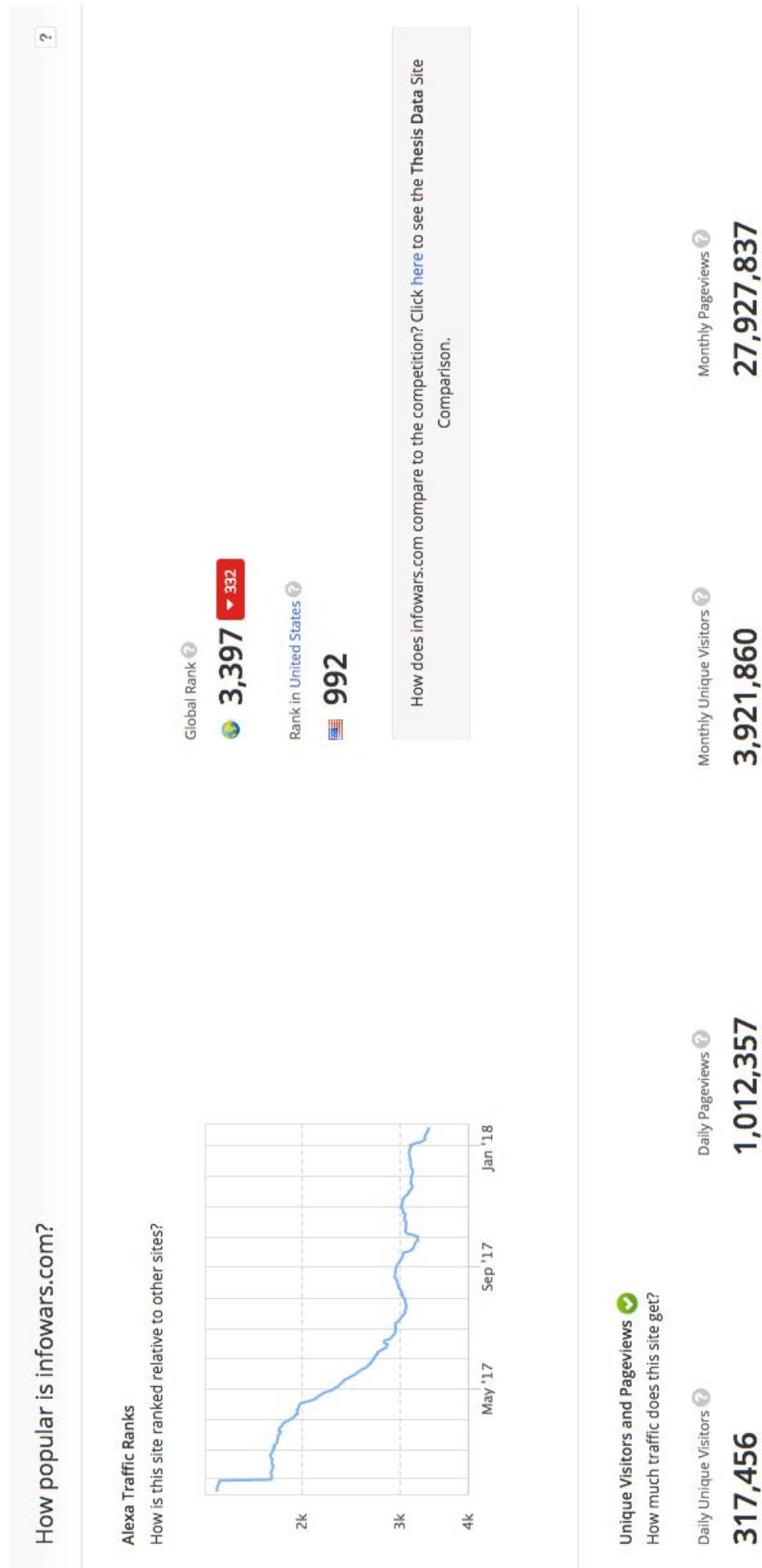
This chart served as a guide to the visual analysis. The visual analysis in this thesis references primarily the “site of the image itself” as part of the social modality. This chart can be found on page 30 of *Visual Methodologies* (Rose, 2001).



**Figure 1.4** Sites, modalities and methods for interpreting visual materials

## Appendix 5: InfoWars Audience Demographic Data

The following demographic data is provided as referenced in the body of this thesis as case justification, as well as to give context and position InfoWars in the broader media landscape.



(Alexa.com, 2018; demographic information as of January 19, 2018)