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PHILIPP KNEIS

Oregon State University; University of Tübingen; Fielding Graduate University

PHIL@PHILJOHN.COM

HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0009-0000-3210-7249

The Paranormal Counter-Public: The Impact of Platform Mediatization on the UAP Disclosure Discourse in American Politics

Abstract: This paper examines how mediatization processes in digital environments fundamentally transform political authority construction and democratic knowledge production. Drawing on mediatization theory and platform studies, the research analyzes how different media logics create divergent information ecosystems, enabling non-traditional actors to construct alternative forms of epistemic authority that can influence mainstream institutions while operating outside traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. Using UAP (unexplained anomalous phenomena) discourse as a critical case study, systematic analysis of media platforms from 2017–2025 demonstrates the migration of political discourse from institutional to algorithmic curation, facilitating the formation of "paranormal counter-public" that transcend conventional left-right divisions. The study reveals how platform-specific factors – especially algorithmic amplification and parasocial relationships – alter epistemological frameworks through which audiences evaluate evidence and expertise. These findings illuminate broader democratic transformations in how societies negotiate boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims, allocate speaking authority, and legitimate political action in an increasingly mediatized world.

Keywords: mediatization theory; platform studies; political authority; media logic; counterpublics; epistemic authority; digital platforms; UAP discourse; algorithmic curation; democratic knowledge construction

Introduction

Since the pivotal article by Blumenthal et al. (2017) in the *New York Times* revealing the Pentagon's secret UFO program, the discourse around unexplained anomalous phenomena (UAPs) has proliferated outside traditional media on alternative media platforms, revealing fundamental transformations in how society negotiates socially

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understood boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims. This demonstrates how mediatization processes in digital environments enable the formation of alternative political authorities that can influence mainstream institutions while operating outside traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. We can observe a shift of counter-cultural movements from conventional political left to libertarian, alternative, and new conservative spaces, in which different media logics create divergent information ecosystems that fundamentally alter epistemological frameworks through which audiences evaluate evidence and expertise.

Theoretical context

The question of how new media inventions change human behavior traces back to Plato's Phaedrus dialog (274c–275c), where writing is criticized for creating the appearance rather than substance of wisdom. Marshall McLuhan (1994) modernized this concern with his assertion that "the medium is the message," suggesting that tools such as media control and guide us rather than the reverse, echoing postmodern criticism about authorship and authenticity (Barthes, 1966). As Postman (2011, p. 18) argues, technological change is "ecological" – one significant change generates total change throughout the system.

These ecological changes within culture and society constitute what Hjarvard shows calls "mediatization" (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Hjarvard, 2008, 2013). The UAP disclosure phenomenon exemplifies both direct (congressional hearings navigating media coverage) and indirect mediatization (the nature of evidence and public debate shaped by digital media logic). Altheide and Snow's (1979) concept of "media logic" provides an additional framework for understanding how UAP discourse transforms across platforms. While traditional media logic emphasizes institutional credibility and editorial oversight, digital media logic prioritizes engagement metrics and algorithmic amplification.

This creates what Gillespie (2010, 2014) has termed "calculated publics" – audiences shaped by algorithmic selection that influences platform architecture, discourse, and authority construction. The "algorithmic imaginary" (Bucher, 2012) drives content creators to adapt messaging to perceived platform logics, potentially transforming the content itself. The result is what Nancy Fraser (1990) has termed "counterpublics" (p. 67) – parallel discursive arenas where subordinated groups circulate counter-discourses. The UAP community represents what can be termed a "paranormal counter-public" operating with nowadays direct access to Congress while in media, still existing as an echo chamber (mainly on YouTube and NewsNation) reinforced by algorithmic amplification. This observation is made without attempting to comment on the veracity of the UAP phenomenon, but rather as an analysis on how media functions to shape the public sphere and public discourse.

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The UAP taskforce between traditional vs. alternative media logics

On February 12, 2025, the U.S. House Oversight Committee announced a "Disclosure Taskforce" led by Representative Anna Paulina Luna, dedicated to revealing secrets surrounding UAPs. This followed the July 26, 2023 Congressional hearing (U.S. Congress, 2023a) featuring whistleblowers Ryan Graves, David Fravor, and David Grusch. Grusch testified about special access programs tasked with recovery of non-human craft, including what he called "biologics" (Romo & Chappell, 2023), claiming he could point Congress toward evidence in a secure briefing (Herman & Gypson, 2023). This and further testimony presented in front of Congress alleges that non-human intelligence exists, and has been in contact with us for some time. Further speculations include "other dimensions" and connections to "consciousness." Some wonder if extraterrestrial life exists as artificial intelligence given space distances (Rees, 2023; Rees & Livio, 2023), thus, tying in to the current debates about the ethics of fast-tracking artificial intelligence research and application (Barfield, 2015; Pillay, 2024; Porter, 2025).

The November 13, 2024 meeting (U.S. Congress, 2023b) featured Luis Elizondo, former director of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP), and Rear Admiral Tim Gallaudet. These developments followed the *New York Times* article "Glowing Auras and 'Black Money': The Pentagon's Mysterious U.F.O. Program" (Blumenthal et al., 2017) and the release of Pentagon UFO videos "FLIR" and "GIMBAL" (Naval Air Systems Command). While some of these videos may well be explained conventionally (West, 2025), their release nevertheless has contributed to attempts towards public disclosure of alleged UAP secrets.

Yet these topics continue to suffer from what has been termed the "giggle factor" (Kaufman, 2019). This challenge has been widely discussed by journalists like George Knapp, who testified at the September 9, 2025 Congressional hearing (U.S. Congress, 2025; Vincent, 2025), Jeremy Corbell (who runs the "Weaponized" Podcast with Knapp), and Ross Coulthart who frequently addresses UAP disclosure (Coulthart, 2023, 2025a, 2025b) on NewsNation's "Reality Check" (since 2021). Other key players include more established researchers such as Stanford immunologist Gary Nolan, Executive Director of the Sol Foundation, physicist Avi Loeb, who runs Harvard's Galileo Project, and Louis Elizondo, former director of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP; Elizondo, 2024).

Some UAP disclosure advocates such as NewsNation host Chris Cuomo make no connection between UAPs and extraterrestrial craft, arguing instead that this is about government secrecy, transparency, and democratic accountability rather than aliens (Cuomo, 2024).

Former special forces airman Jake Barber claims the United States trains telepaths ("psionics") to control conscious alien spaceships (Coulthart, 2024b; Cuomo, 2025), echoing CIA's Project Star Gate on remote viewing (Griffin, 2017; CIA, 2000). The

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disclosure community continues to push for transparency (Vincent, 2025b), hoping the Trump administration might provide answers (Burman, 2025) to mysteries ever since the alleged events of Roswell, 1947.

As to the role of media, the initially mentioned December 16, 2017 *New York Times* article represents a critical case for understanding traditional media logic. Despite significant impact, it was an outlier rather than the beginning of sustained institutional engagement. The article succeeded by adhering to institutional requirements – named sources, official documentation, government confirmation. However, this success explains subsequent marginalization: few UAP developments meet such stringent standards.

Following 2017, major outlets provided only sporadic coverage (such as Pompeo, 2017, 2020; Rennenkampff, 2024a, 2024b), demonstrating Tuchman's (1978) notion of the "strategic ritual" – covering newsworthy events while maintaining institutional distance from controversial claims. NewsNation, as an upstart channel with a strong YouTube presence, illustrates how emerging media outlets use niche topics for brand differentiation. Ross Coulthart on the same channel aims to lend credence as an experienced journalist, leveraging authentic investigation methods while avoiding traditional media's reputational constraints.

Conspiracy, hauntology and alternative truths

The bipartisan nature of UAP disclosure efforts reveals interesting dynamics. The recently released documentary *The Age of Disclosure* (2025) features a selection of interviews with leading figures in politics and security services such as Marco Rubio, James Clapper, Kirsten Gillibrand, André Carson, Harry Reid, and Tim Burchett, who warns that: "You better be careful about a government that does not trust its people because there is no telling what they will pull on you" (Fox News, 2024). The documentary took a long time to be released and has not yet led to official political disclosure, notwithstanding online pressure.

The very push for UAP disclosure connects to demands for disclosure on further transparency on controversial issues such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy as well as the Epstein affair, thus, responding to "Deep State" conspiracy beliefs which have proliferated since the beginning of the 1960s counterculture movement (Yinger, 1960). American culture remains rife with conspiratorial undertones (Hofstadter, 1964), potentially expressing subconscious guilt about slavery and indigenous dispossession through hauntology and spectrality (Cariou, 2006; Derrida, 2012), as well as with suggestions about a long-term historical non-human presence (Vallée 1991, 1988). The popular culture presence of the UAP topic ranges from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (for which Vallée was a scientific adviser) to *Star Trek*, *Stargate*, *Twin Peaks* and *The-X-Files* as well as *Ancient Aliens* and *Skinwalker Ranch*, and has

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arguably prepared audiences for an acceptance of conspiracy thinking and apocalyptic visions (Barkun, 2003).

Within the UAP movement, the discussion involves the "phenomenon" (witnessed events) and the "program" (clandestine government work). Some suggest the phenomenon resists documentation – recent drone sightings led to speculation about objects "going dark" when filmed (Nicholls, 2024). As Harvard psychologist John Mack concluded from the related issue of alien abduction testimonies: "These phenomena tell us... consciousness itself may be the primary creative force in the universe, and our knowledge of the properties of the physical world is far from complete" (Mack, 2002).

Such observations align also with indigenous American philosophies. Alternative history writer Graham Hancock famously advocates using Ayahuasca to perceive additional consciousness layers (*Ancient Apocalypse*). Arguably, the emergence of artificial intelligence makes this more relevant. Large language models may lead to truly alien artificial intelligence whose consciousness feels as alive as our own (Johnson, 2002). Bruce Mazlish's *The Fourth Discontinuity* (1993) notes how Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud contributed to human disillusionment; thus, extraterrestrial life and artificial intelligence pose severe challenges to the human ego and attract ample speculation within the newly emerging media cultures.

A paranormal counterpublic? (Alt-)truth, media and the new counterculture

Former AARO director Sean Kirkpatrick's denial of the existence of evidence for Grusch's allegations (Seligman, 2023) has created fierce reaction from the UAP community, especially from Luis Elizondo and Christopher Mellon (Rennenkampff, 2024b). The post-truth atmosphere is fueled by anti-establishment sentiment similar to 1960s counterculture, but driven by libertarian, independent, and new conservative voices rather than the left. Conspiracy thinking is becoming more popular (Kużelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022; Lamberty & Imhoff, 2021), complementing feelings of political impotence. Trust in government has eroded since 9/11 (Pew Research Center, 2024), the perceived futility of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Partnership for Public Service, 2024). President Trump has famously positioned himself against the establishment, claiming early opposition to the Iraq war (PolitiFact, 2016) and decrying vaccine mandates despite spurring Operation Warp Speed (Messerly, 2024).

All this falls on fertile ground during a global rise of depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Jorandby, 2021), some triggered by social media (Pittman & Reich, 2016). The new counterculture thrives on algorithm-driven podcasts, vlogs, and messenger apps. "The Joe Rogan Experience" (Rogan, since 2009), a central forum for this counterculture, is the global number one podcast. Trump appeared on Rogan before the election; Harris did not, and Rogan himself used to be a supporter of Socialist Bernie Sanders. Among his frequent guests are Graham Hancock, Eric and Bret Weinstein,

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Jordan Peterson, and Lex Fridman (JRE.ai, n.d.). The Weinsteins are alleged to be part of the "Intellectual Dark Web" (Roberts, 2024); Eric Weinstein even worked for Peter Thiel (2025; Rogers, 2025), who has been crucial to Trump's campaign.

Such formats have successfully positioned themselves in the media landscapes as supporters of radical free speech, advocating for alternative thought, "alternative" science (Kneis, 2014), and potentially pseudoscience (Kneis, 2022, 2025a, 2025b). Importantly though, Ross Coulthart insists on journalistic integrity (Coulthart, 2024a), and Chris Cuomo on transparency and democracy (Cuomo, 2025). Luis Elizondo emphasizes national security: "We're talking about technologies being encountered over controlled U.S. airspace... that have the potential to interfere with our nuclear assets and outperform anything we have" (Hurn & Elizondo, 2024).

Analysis and conclusions: Mediatized post-truth and the paranormal counterpublic

Traditional media gatekeeping has systematically excluded the UAP discourse from the mainstream by framing (Entman, 2010, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) it as outside established knowledge, while digital platforms amplify it for the very same reason, creating divergent ecosystems and echo chambers (Arguedas et al., 2022; Swart, 2021). The 2017 *Times* article remained an outlier. While the authority of traditional media relies on official titles and verification; alternative platforms enable authority through personal experience and the performance of authenticity, creating Boyd's (2010) "networked publics" where audiences participate in meaning-making (Jenkins, 2006). Elizondo exemplifies this transformation: "We cannot allow our thought processes to be hijacked... by labels" (Hurn & Elizondo, 2024).

The migration and political amplification of the UAP discourse into "new new media" (Levinson, 2010) reflects broader political authority transformations, which are fueled by rising distrust in established institutions especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Reveilhac & Boomgarden, 2025). The bipartisan Congressional Taskforce emerged from alternative media advocacy, not traditional political or media pressure. The UAP community represents a "paranormal counter-public" – a virtual public sphere (Habermas, 1991; Papacharissi, 2002; Sunstein, 2001) which has become a set of parallel discursive arenas with algorithmic amplification (Bryant, 2020; Ledwich et al., 2022; Narayanan, 2023) and sustained engagement with a fragmented audience.

Five key findings emerge: First, traditional and alternative media operate by different logics, creating separate ecosystems with political consequences. Second, platform architecture shapes epistemology through algorithmic pressure. Third, epistemic authority migrates from institutional credentials to audience metrics. Fourth, digital platforms enable "paranormal counter-publics" developing political influence through cross-platform amplification. Fifth, the UAP discourse as the chosen example reveals

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political realignment where establishment-versus-anti-establishment orientations supersede left-right distinctions.

Whether this represents democratization or fragmentation remains open. The presence of the UAP phenomenon within different forms of media provides insights into how democratic societies navigate uncertainty, construct authority, and legitimate political action in an increasingly mediatized world.

Discussion points

1. How does the migration of UAP discourse from traditional to alternative media platforms reflect broader transformations in democratic knowledge production, and what are the implications for institutional legitimacy when Congressional taskforces respond to pressure from algorithmically-amplified counterpublics rather than traditional media advocacy?

2. Given that platform-specific properties fundamentally alter epistemological frameworks for evaluating evidence, how should democratic societies balance the democratization of discourse through digital platforms against the risks of epistemic fragmentation when addressing scientifically controversial topics that nevertheless may have national security implications?

3. If anti-establishment movements have migrated from left to right while maintaining similar conspiratorial frameworks, what does this suggest about the relationship between media ecosystems and political ideology, and how might this "establishment switching" phenomenon affect future policy debates around transparency, scientific authority, and government accountability?

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