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### Faulty Evidence

Since the early twentieth century, extraterrestrial life and unidentified flying objects (UFOs) have become popular topics of interest for scientists, literary authors, and conspiracy theorists. In the late 1940s, the media started to pay more attention to supposed “flying saucer” sightings. The Roswell Incident of 1947 sparked a debate among the American public about top-secret government projects and produced many false assumptions regarding federal involvement with aliens and UFOs (Saler ix-4). When Russia launched Sputnik I in 1957, the “Space Age” officially began, heightening popular interest in extraterrestrial phenomena (Garber). Yet to date, this curiosity has primarily manifested itself in hypothetical UFO stories—not in concrete facts. Because the available evidence supporting the existence of UFOs is plagued by ambiguous factors including psychosocial effects, media influences, and technological manipulation, the accounts and images of alleged sightings lead to flawed conclusions and remain untrustworthy.

The psychosocial phenomenon that generates falsified beliefs about UFOs is based on schemas. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a schema is “an automatic, unconscious coding or organization of incoming physiological or psychological stimuli, giving rise to a particular response or effect” (*OED*). In other words, when a person experiences a stimulus there is “a process of revision in light of the person’s beliefs and expectations [that] occurs immediately” (Dewan). The individual perceives this reconstructed representation of the experience as a memory—a supposedly factual event. However, the “memory” is significantly

affected by the emotional and social states of the person at the time of the event and by his or her previously constructed schemas. In addition, because these “cultural schemas are ingrained into our thought processes, interpretations of experiences...typically arise automatically and are not pondered” (Dewan). As a result, people are not aware of the distortions in their memories, and the same event can be “accurately” recalled in many different ways.

UFO sightings are especially prone to schema-induced falsifications. Because most of the incidences occur in very short periods of time, only small groups of people experience each sighting, and their recollections often contain slight differences that cannot be separated from “reality.” These indefinable differences result from an individual’s cultural schemas regarding UFOs, which are mainly based on interpersonal and media influences. For instance, in 1986, a family of three—a mother, a father, and their young daughter—claimed to see an unidentified object flying over their small Pennsylvania hometown. In a series of interviews in 2006 (twenty years after the supposed sighting), each member of the family recalled his or her memory of the event and all three of them referenced outside information in their recollections. For example, because the daughter was only a child at the time of the sighting, “her observation of swirling lights was reaffirmed by later accounts,” especially by her parents’ repeated discussion of the incident. The father learned about the mysterious phenomenon “from people in town before witnessing it himself,” so he had already constructed a mental image of the object using his neighbors’ descriptions. Although the mother first witnessed the UFO herself, she, too, “reaffirmed her experience with the accounts of her husband, friends, and others in town who shared their stories.” Although the father, mother, and daughter may not realize, their “memories” of the 1986 incident were altered by the other stories that they had heard before and after their own experiences (Dewan).

In addition to these interpersonal influences, depictions of UFOs in the media also affected the family's explanations of what each person "saw." For example, at one point in the interview, the daughter mentioned that she had "heard of other people's cases where they [saw] the exact same thing...on TV once in a while, like the Discovery Channel" (qtd. in Dewan). This remark suggests that her account relied on depictions of UFOs in the media, most of which are skewed, archetypal representations. Because she was so young at the time of the sighting, her "perception, interpretation, and validation" of the event more significantly depended on outside influences to fill in the gaps in her memory (Dewan). As a result, the daughter's account of the hovering, lighted object was most likely built off of details and images from the media. Although her parents experienced the event when they were much older, their recollections contained differences that also probably resulted from media influence. For example, while "the mother recalled a searchlight emanating from the craft," the father "saw no searchlight, even finding it peculiar that [one] was [not] present" (Dewan). Since the mother based much of her later knowledge about UFOs on television programs, "the searchlight schema" probably "filter[ed] into her memory over time...to fill in unclear details and to reinforce her expectations of the experience" (Dewan). Cognitive anthropologists have also found that different television programs and media outputs have varying impacts on viewers. In one study of college students, "participants who viewed [a] one-sided news segment containing testimony about the saucer crash in Roswell, New Mexico, increased their beliefs in UFOs significantly more than those who viewed [a] two-sided news segment about UFOs" (Sparks). These findings suggest that the Pennsylvania family's recollections may have also been altered by the types of television programs they watched, again highlighting the media's subconscious effects on viewers' ideas about UFOs.

Like television, more recent technological advancements strongly contribute to people's beliefs about UFOs. For example, Area 51 is a U.S. military base in Nevada where, "according to UFO lore,...the Pentagon has...stored frozen extraterrestrials and recovered alien spacecraft." Over the past sixty years, people have reported countless UFO sightings around Area 51. However, "the [Central Intelligence Agency] has [recently] started to declassify top-secret programs developed at Area 51," providing the general public with new information about government activity around the base. Thornton Barnes, "a former special-projects engineer," worked at Area 51 to help create a secret spy plane called the A-12 OXCART. He and his team "conducted 2,850 test flights of the A-12 out of Area 51" and, although the military employees knew about the test runs, Barnes admitted that the planes would have looked like "flashes of light" to uninformed viewers. Barnes explained that these "mysterious lights" were most likely responsible for the abundance of "UFO sightings" around Area 51. Furthermore, Barnes confessed that he and his colleagues benefited from the UFO rumors because "they helped keep the site's true activities under wraps" (Heussner). As a result, government officials who knew about this secret project made no effort to correct the myths about extraterrestrial activity around Area 51. In addition to lending credence to the reported UFO stories around the military base, the "flashes of lights" produced by the A-12 test flights probably also appear in the photographs of "UFOs" around Area 51 that people distribute and publish. These photos can be altered further or even created from scratch by another recently developed form of technology: Photoshop. Photoshop is an advanced photo-editing program that enables users to change or generate images. With Photoshop, a person can design an object and insert it into any background. The exact instructions about how to add a UFO to a background are easily available online in a tutorial entitled, "Photoshop a UFO into a photo" ("Photoshop"). In a matter of minutes, anyone

can create a believable image of a UFO to support his or her claim that “flying saucers” exist. Like the A-12 planes, Photoshop is a prominent technological influence that contributes to the ambiguity of UFO sightings and pictures.

Overall, the evidence about UFOs cannot be trusted because of the manipulative effects of interpersonal, media, and technological influences. Many of the UFO advocates who rely on this faulty data consequently make illogical assumptions. For example, Robert Hastings researches “the reality of UFO activity at nuclear weapons sites” (Hastings, “About”). In a 2010 interview, Hastings cited an incidence at an Air Force Base in Montana in 1967 in which “a saucer-shaped object [appeared] above a nuclear missile launch site” immediately before “all ten of the missiles controlled by this site malfunctioned.” Hastings went on to conclude that, because “there was no technical explanation for what occurred,” the glitches were a result of extraterrestrial activity. This pattern of reasoning does not prove a causal effect between the “saucer-shaped object” and the subsequent malfunctions (Hastings, Interview). Interpersonal, media, and technological factors provide countless opportunities for error in Hastings’s deduction. For instance, the supposed UFO may have been the product of a top-secret government project; cultural schemas created by the media may have affected Hastings’s interpretation of events; or an undiscovered technological phenomenon may have caused the malfunction. Hastings is one of many UFO believers who arrive at false conclusions because they do not fully recognize the effects of sociocultural influences.

Although the current evidence regarding UFOs is not credible, future proof may show that “flying saucers” do exist. Alan Hale, a former astronomer, emphasizes that too many advocates assume the existence of UFOs by “eliminating a few token explanations and then crying, ‘Well, what else can it be?’” Like many skeptics, Hale insists that an “extraordinary

claim require[s] extraordinary evidence...[—]the aliens themselves” (Hale). Until someone provides this kind of undeniable evidence, people must approach reports of UFOs with suspicion, keeping in mind all of the factors that can falsify the stories. One day, someone might capture an extraterrestrial from a UFO. But will we discover the truth about aliens before they destroy us and take over our world?

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