

## Examining factors contributing to the popularity of the *Loose Change* conspiracy

Erin Cooper ([erin.cooper@trinity.edu](mailto:erin.cooper@trinity.edu))<sup>1</sup>  
Department of Communication, Trinity University

“My version of hell is having to review these [conspiracy] books over and over again”

- Chip Berlet, senior analyst at Political Research Associates

Love it or hate it, there is something intriguing about *Loose Change*. Whether the viewer’s initial response is outrage or agreement, both parties’ dichotomy of reaction converges with the need to find out more. My impulse was to immediately get online, searching for answers to discredit Dylan Avery and what my classmates and I dismissed as a clearly amateur film. The question that arises, however, is why do I have such a strong reaction to *Loose Change*? This film makes me so uncomfortable because though I want to laugh it off, something in its style urges viewers to disappear down the rabbit hole of conspiracy. Even if its message is disregarded, *Loose Change* is an effective documentary; while the questions the filmmakers want audiences to answer may be passed over, the film’s most notable outcome is that it causes even skeptical viewers to react to the content. Simply: it riles us up. There are three main factors that play into this sense of intrigue: the nature of the Postmodern conspiracy theory, residual social anxiety about 9/11, and the personality associated with the director, Dylan Avery.

While conspiracy theory is nothing new, certain changes in society have created new elements that play into conspiracy in a different way than earlier in United States history. One of the major reasons *Loose Change* is so intriguing is because it’s a conspiracy theory of recent modernity, thus differing greatly from those popular mere decades before (e.g.,

JFK assassination). Clare Birchall, a scholar of conspiracy theories associated with Princess Diana’s death, analyzed some of the essential tenets of the Postmodern conspiracy theory. I’d like to examine these terms without getting distracted by the differences between modernity, recent modernity, Postmodernism, and post-Postmodernism; for the purposes of this research, it will be useful to collapse all these definitions into the single term of recent Postmodernism. Birchall argues, “Conspiracy theories are popular...because they possess the virtue of ‘unified explanation or explanatory reach” (Birchall, 2001, p. 68). Jane Parish also seizes on this concept of unity in her collection of essays, *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*. Postmodern conspiracy theories make use of the tool of the meta-narrative to combine information from a variety of fields to allow individuals to feel part of a greater whole. Mark Featherstone (2001) views conspiracy theories as the site where civic responsibility meets postmodernism. He believes that while conspiracy theory is inextricably tied to the concept of individual versus mainstream or normative collective—here I reference the “what they *want* you to believe” concept—it’s also a way for the aforementioned individuals to “stem the tide of difference” by trying to unite people to a single “right” understanding (Featherstone, 2001, p. 33). It is in this distinct moment of history that conspiracy theory makes use of new tools that without careful consideration could be taken for granted. One such tool is the Internet, which enables “a shift from subcultural to mainstream concern” (Birchall, 2001, p. 69). The democratization of production and publication techniques afforded by the Internet makes it easier than ever for someone to get her voice heard in a major way. Anyone browsing online can easily join into the meta-narrative of conspiracy—the Internet facilitates access to these realms, embodying the postmodern concept of information access.

The nature of the blogosphere is that individuals play a crucial role in what’s brought to public attention. The more popular blogs that link to certain theories, the more people are going to take notice of them. Moreover, where possibly in the past people wouldn’t come into contact with conspiracy theory on a constant basis, its inclusion in the blogosphere—whether in tacit agreement by featuring it on a personal website or publishing it in disbelief or mockery—allows people to explore the arguments themselves (or at least watch as the bloggers explore). A great example of this with *Loose Change* is all the versions available for public consumption. People have translated it into multiple languages such

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Cooper, an undergraduate communication student at Trinity University, wrote this term paper in December 2006 for a course on documentary film. The course was taught by Professor Aaron Delwiche. Student papers are available online at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/guides.html>

as Korean, Spanish, and German. Others have re-edited the video footage to insert comments and questions. All these versions are available on Google Video. Thus, it's the nature of the Postmodern conspiracy theory to be more interactive and more public than ever before. *Loose Change* draws us in because it possesses these very qualities. Similarly, the postmodern conspiracy theory exists because media sources are easier than ever to analyze. Birchall points to the fact that "the lone dissenting voice of, say, Jim Garrison, is today only a romantic model for the regular contributor to one of the many conspiracy newsgroups on the Internet" (Birchall, 2001, p. 70). *Popular Mechanics*' "Debunking the 9/11 Myths," which ran in March 2005 introduces its research with a command to the reader: "Go to Google.com, type in the search phrase "World Trade Center conspiracy" and you'll get links to an estimated 628,000 websites" (Chertoff, 2005, p. 9). While many lament this fact that, contending, "technology is capable of catastrophic potential which is impossible to calculate," I see it as a valid explanation of why I'm so intrigued by *Loose Change* (Parish, 2001, p. 3). Dylan Avery uses websites and online footage to back up many of his claims, and the viewer is left questioning the validity of the footage—another feature of the easy access of media and media archives that's tied to the nature of this "new" era of postmodern conspiracy theory, and another reason the movie is so frustrating.

This general sense of frustration is something with potential for exploration. The omnipresent feeling of unrest about September 11, 2001 in the lives of Americans is a reason for the effectiveness of *Loose Change* in a way that transcends the film's style or the era in which it was created. When I first saw the film, I believed wholeheartedly that Dylan Avery was a fringe theorist. That's why I was shocked when browsing for more information online to find Michael Powell's September 8, 2006 article for *The Washington Post* relaying surveys that prove many agree with him to a certain extent. It states, "a recent Scripps Howard/Ohio University poll of 1,010 Americans found that 36 percent suspect the U.S. government promoted the attacks or intentionally sat on its hands" (Powell, 2006, p. 1). While thirty-six percent is in no way the majority, it's a much higher quantity than the three percent I was envisioning agreeing with *Loose Change*. New Yorkers are closer to about half agreeing that "the government 'consciously failed to act'" (Powell, 2006, p. 1). Granted, there exists the unavoidable fact of the vague wording of the surveys versus Avery's bombastic claims, which would encompass a larger variety of opinion. This would in turn yield a higher

percentage of those in agreement with a statement. That is to say that though some quantity of people express confusion about the 9/11 attacks, in no way are they in tacit agreement with the *Loose Change* conspiracy—if only because so many alternate theories occupy the realm of possibility for respondents.

What these surveys definitively prove is that a reputable news source noticed there remain unanswered questions about September 11th to a notable percentage of Americans. I think relaying this information to the class also did something to change the way in which we analyzed *Loose Change*. The tone of discussion was one of disbelief in the film, but there were undeniable confessions that there existed sections of Avery's argument that intrigued us, if only because they seemed ripe for investigation. It is these questions still bothering everyone five years later that caused *Popular Mechanics* to interview over 300 experts and organizations to debunk allegations such as those made by *Loose Change*. The popularity of The 9/11 Commission Report (I read the authorized edition) augments the argument of individuals looking for truth and answers. A major factor in this sense of unrest and desire for clarification is that 9/11 was, as Jean Baudrillard would say, a "pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place" (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 4). Clearly, Baudrillard's argument goes on to prove a number of things that aren't particularly salient to the issue of Americans being effected by 9/11, but at the same time it indicates a truth about the attacks on the World Trade Center.

In War of Words: Language, Politics, and 9/11, Sandra Silberstein argues that "Perhaps for the first time since 1790—when it ceased being the federal capital—New York became archetypically American on 9/11. On that day New York became America" (Silberstein, 2004, p. 91). There is a universality of experience associated with September 11<sup>th</sup>, whether or not we (or our families) were in New York City at the time. We feel affected, whether or not we were actually involved. Fritz Breithaupt's essay "Rituals of Trauma" argues that the media was the agent of inflicting trauma on those who weren't traumatized by the physical event of 9/11 (Breithaupt, 2003, p. 67). It is in this manner that everyone in America can feel impacted by the series of events on that day and after. Silberstein also points to the dialogue we use to talk about 9/11 based on Presidential speeches. Phrases such as "Our purpose as a nation is firm" and "We express our nation's sorrow" indicate a unified America all feeling the same feelings (Silberstein,

2002, p. 51). Still, though people as citizens of this (allegedly) unified nation might have questions, it doesn't mean that they're on the side of the conspiracy theorists. In the words of Parish, is it easier to see the things that don't make sense about 9/11 as conspiracy "or ineptitude?" (Parish, 2001, p. 4). It's certainly more sensational to agree with conspiracy, or wonder as does the Reverend Frank Morales of St. Mark's Church on Second Avenue (your average conspiracy theorist), "at what point massive incompetence crosses over into negligent homicide" (Powell, 2006, p. 3). The tone of The 9/11 Commission Report is quite moderate in that it doesn't really implicate anyone (Kean, 2004). It admits that there were failings on many parts, and though Dylan Avery refers to it as "The 9/11 Omission Report," is still presented as less believable than the *Loose Change* conspiracy theory. While the report, like the film, clearly has flaws in scholarly research, it still seems wrong to dismiss it simply because the language used isn't as contentious in tone as Avery's work.

A final factor in why *Loose Change* captures the viewer's attention goes along with the idea of the strong opinions conveyed by the directors of the film: the persona of Dylan Avery is potentially troubling. His narration patronizes listeners, using phrases like "Do you *still* think the jet fuel brought down the World Trade Center?" and "A little common sense proves..." (Rowe, 2005). This can be quite grating for anyone who sees him or herself as an intelligent, informed citizen—or at minimum a non-ignorant individual. His music choices represent exactly what Michael Powell was referring to while referencing "hip-hop inflected documentaries" (Powell, 2006, p. 2). For example, during the credits, an unidentified rapper flows with bombastic lyrics such as "your lies don't justify globalized homicide" (Rowe, 2005). While the message might be interesting, the format undercuts its potential importance, bringing to mind action sequences in violent movies. Similarly, the footage of the World Trade Center towers collapsing that are shown to prove the existence of controlled, internal explosions (i.e., bombs) are highly stylized—so highly stylized that they're purple, with crosshatches reminiscent of a first-person shooter game. The question arises of why Avery would choose to make his footage look as unrealistic as possible when trying to convince viewers of one of the most controversial points that serves as a lynchpin of his entire *Loose Change* argument. In an interview with Evan Solomon that aired on CBC-TV in Canada, Avery raised more questions than he answered. It's incredibly confusing to make such strong claims in a film and then refuse to stand by

them in an interview. This tendency to vacillate, evade questions, and stubbornly repeat answers makes him a less credible source. It's hard to respect one of the most prominent conspiracy theorist as an idea-leader if not a true leader of a movement if he doesn't support his own arguments wholeheartedly. A first example is how he repeatedly uses the phrase "the burden of proof is not on me" (Canadian Broadcast Company, 2006). Why highlight evidence in a film if you don't really believe you're out to prove anything? At another moment, Avery says at the beginning of one of his statements, "That's very though...I don't want to try and implicate anybody" but then goes on to throw stones towards the end of the statement: "I don't want to implicate anybody without hard evidence, but it seems that NORAD and the FAA and a lot of key institutions of our government simply dropped the ball" (CBC, 2006). The stance of *Loose Change* is much less neutral than Avery's trying to appear at this particular moment. He states that he doesn't feel the need to accuse people, and yet throughout the film makes extremely accusatory statements towards the CIA, President Bush, various insurance agencies, and the federal government several times. Another interesting moment in this interview is when Evan Solomon asks about the 1993 World Trade Center bombing's impact on heightened security: "Post '93, when we already know that the World Trade Centers are going to be attacked...how then would this other bomb play out? In other words, how does that make logical sense then?" This moment is Dylan Avery's chance to push his agenda and reiterate some key points in the film. In *Loose Change*, he claims bomb-sniffing dogs were removed from the premises and security guards got moved off of twelve-hour shifts to suddenly decrease security to allow the planting of the bomb. And yet his response to Solomon is vague and makes no reference to the film's stance on the subject, "You can't put anything past our government...I mean, let's just be real here: if our government wants to do something, they're going to do it" (CBC, 2006). Solomon, trying to get more information out of Avery, repeats, "Do you have any evidence of that?" to which Avery can only respond, "No, I don't, but you're asking me to theorize, so I'm theorizing" (CBC, 2006). Though the viewer likely finds Avery's style grating, one of the most frustrating issues with the persona of the film is that it seems not to correlate with the personality of Avery in any interviews. It is not unreasonable to expect consistency, but it becomes even more imperative when the message is so controversial. In *Loose Change* Dylan Avery appears as a radical dissenter making claims via his God-like narrator voice. In "person" (on television), he's young, confused, and

unable to convince anyone of anything. The final sense one comes away with from the interview expounds upon this sense of Avery as confused youth. His inarticulate statements on how he came up with the title of the film were less than impressive:

We were walking back home, and you know, it's two kids, wasted, having a good time, a little high, a little of this, you know, just talkin', messin' around...And I don't remember, it was so long ago, but basically the phrase "loose change" just kind of came out, and I thought about it for a second...and I was, like, "huh!"...I thought, "Well, that's cool"...It actually means the change is loose, you can't stop it—you know, again, it's just one of those titles that, to me, it just seemed perfect (CBC, 2006).

This story is hardly what a viewer wants from a documentary expositor. Drug use and uncertainty don't augment the cause of Avery's authoritativeness.

*Loose Change* implicates Americans for not questioning the happenings of 9/11. For a film that makes so many controversial assertions and matches them with a certain degree of (at least implied) research, I find it interesting that its director is only able to match up to the same level of seriousness within the documentary. If a director of a film and leader of a movement can't back up his claims, it's unsettling for him to judge viewers so harshly. By revealing himself as a less than credible person, Avery discredits his professional work. This disparity between Avery's standards for viewers—urging them to challenge authority, research and uncover the government's lies—and allowing himself to vacillate so constantly is a major factor in why the viewer may try to seek out more information to resolve this disconnect. Avery urges Americans to take up his cause but doesn't give them direction beyond a few websites. Once online, it is easy to stumble into one of two worlds: discrediting Avery or investigating 9/11 conspiracy. His persona/personality conflict is thus one of the main reasons people take time to learn more about his views, though it's not important what stance they take towards them. I speak from personal experience when I say that this discrepancy is why I just can't get over *Loose Change*; what is this paper if not entering willingly into Avery's world, fueled by frustration and unanswered questions?

It would be impossible to describe with any certainty all the reasons why individuals pay attention to *Loose Change*. It's unimportant whether viewers love or hate the message—what's really relevant is why conspiracy theories such as this documentary are

such popular fodder for investigation these days. I've pointed to the nature of the postmodern conspiracy theory as more widely propagated than ever before, the sense of confusion in multiple sectors of American society regarding the attacks on the World Trade Center, and the—frankly—annoying personality of the filmmaker as three potential areas of influence on the film's success. Of course, by "success" I refer to its presence in the cultural dialogue about 9/11 regardless of in what tone it's discussed. The potential for further exploration exists; the more studies that come out about media coverage and post-September 11<sup>th</sup> theorists, the more additional answers become available. Ultimately, I think *Loose Change* is engaging for people who like it and those who dislike it (for obviously different reasons), but I find it difficult to assign a good/bad polarity to this fact. If I must select from the positive/negative dichotomy of judgment towards *Loose Change*, I feel more comfortable arguing that it's a bad documentary. While not intrinsically bad or "unpatriotic" to question the American government, there exists an underlying sense that Avery is simply taking advantage of this moment in history to exploit the convergence of postmodern conspiracy, technology, national emotional vulnerability to get his voice heard. I just wish his voice offered direction, inspiration, or credible fact—or that I didn't feel such strong dislike of the filmmakers. Frustratingly enough, however, if by definition a "good" documentary garners attention to a cause, then Dylan Avery is indubitably a filmmaking genius. On this opposing side of the good/bad judgment, dislike of the filmmakers' motivation and presentation has no bearing on the evaluation. As much as it pains me to admit it, by garnering my and others' interest, Avery has succeeded in making an effective documentary.

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