

Loose Change: Flashy Facetiousness, Sorry Substance*

Vic Jackson (jjacks01@trinity.edu)
Department of Communication, Trinity University

In the wake of the disastrous events encircling September 11th, 2001, Americans desperately grasped for meaning. Approximately 3,000 people died that day; their lives cut short, their families devastated. In the wake of the grief and the despair over this great tragedy, another emotion quickly swept the country: outrage. People all over the world demanded answers – to questions such as “How could this possibly happen in a country as advanced as ours?” along with many others. Not all were satisfied with official explanations. Even after being investigated by several government bodies and hundreds of field experts (in demolition, structural engineering, architecture, avionics, the steel industry, and others), rumor and speculation have fueled doubts in the public sector as to who was actually responsible for the attacks. Several popular conspiracy theories either link, or completely blame, our own US Government for the attacks committed against our country that day. Dylan Avery’s *Loose Change (2nd Edition)* is a compilation of many conspiracy theorists’ beliefs into a (so-called) documentary that feebly tries to reconstruct the events related to 9/11/01. **Numerous misrepresentations of truth, and even outright mistruths, about those disastrous events are masked by flashy and professional contemporary editing techniques to form *Loose Change*; more propaganda than documentary.** First, the propaganda and the documentary form must be defined, compared, and contrasted. Next, this paper explores Dylan Avery’s overarching persuasive approach in *Loose Change* and debunks some of the more egregious errors of context and fact that litter his film. Finally, it will relate how *Loose Change* combines its questionable information with the polish of flashy and professional editing techniques and a compelling soundtrack in order to evoke a certain amount of innate authenticity, believability, and

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mysterious appeal from those that accept it at face value.

Loose Change (2nd Edition, recut) is now prefaced with a disclaimer about the unlicensed footage contained therein, and warns the viewer that the opinions expressed in the video do not reflect those of the copyright owners, the FDNY, or the NYPD. This disclaimer (The newest update to the 2nd edition as of the writing of this paper) is the only chance the viewer has to prepare before embarking on the veritable web of irrelevant, jaded, and out-of-context (but supposedly ‘factual’) data that is presented throughout the video. Most of the unlicensed footage isn’t credited during the film, either. The film’s discourse is a virtual smorgasbord of information completely lacking – or featuring inappropriate – citation. Perhaps more telling than any one example of misquote, mistruth, or ill-conceived conclusion derived from out-of-context information, is the sheer volume of logical flaws found in *Loose Change*. One of Dylan Avery’s more outspoken critics, Mark Roberts, tallies *Loose Change (2nd Edition)*’s totals in “Errors of Commission” at 426 (Roberts, May, 2006, “Appendix B”). Roberts also cites 81 “Errors of fact”; 92 “Assumptions and conjectures not supported by evidence”; 48 “Photo & video images that do not support statements being made”; 22 “Opinions expressed on technical subjects by non-experts”; 19 “Anonymous sources”; and 25 “Statements misleading because incomplete quotes are used” among many other problems (Roberts, May, 2006). Even though this source shows extreme bias against *Loose Change* and filmmaker Dylan Avery, the number of flubs discovered by Roberts – even if halved – should be considered despicable for any documentary film-maker. For example, it was a B-25 prop plane that flew into the Empire State Building, not a B-52 bomber as suggested in *Loose Change* (B-52s weren’t even flying for another 9 years) (Roberts, May, 2006; Rosenburg, 2006). In another example, Dylan Avery implies that at the time of the attacks, Marvin Bush, George W’s brother, was a member of the board of directors for the World Trade Center Towers’ security firm. In truth, Marvin Bush’s last term at that particular position ended in June 2000 (Iradian, 2006). Documentary films are not – and should not be considered to be – objective truth. Documentaries are subjective representations of opinion(s) that should be related to audiences through the fair treatment of the evidence surrounding the topic in question. Documentary filmmakers have a responsibility to provide the audience with factual information. Avery’s *Loose Change* makes no effort

towards preservation of factual data, and many of his points are derived from pure, uncited opinion or rumor. The techniques he uses to persuade the audience are very close to those used in the creation of propaganda films. A propaganda film may be defined (for the scope of this paper) as a film that uses questionable persuasive techniques in order to alter the opinions of its audiences.

Avery uses several different propaganda techniques throughout *Loose Change*, such as rhetorical manipulation, the transfer technique, fear appeal, as well as several slippery slope arguments to construct his argument. When talking about the #7 World Trade Center building-collapse, Avery says that even though every building around it stood intact, #7 fell straight down into a “convenient little pile”. Referring to hundreds of tons of steel and concrete as a “convenient little pile” is an example of the use of rhetorical manipulation. In actuality, the rubble pile was over 100 meters wide and 12-stories tall from the basement to the top (Roberts, May, 2006). Moreover, the #7 building collapse theories have been thoroughly examined by hundreds of experts, and the scientific conclusions don’t seem to make any mention of controlled demolition, other than to dismiss it as an irrationally-conceived possibility. When FEMA could not successfully conclude what caused the #7 building to collapse, the Commerce Department’s National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) conducted a three-year, \$24 million investigation into the structural failure and progressive collapse of #7 World Trade Center, as well as the other World Trade Center buildings (NIST NCSTAR 1, September, 2005). When asked about the controlled demolition conspiracy theories, Dr S. Shyam Sunder, NIST’s lead WTC disaster investigator, replied, “We consulted 80 public-sector experts and 125 private-sector experts. It is a Who’s Who of experts. People look for other solutions. As scientists, we can’t worry about that. Facts are facts” (2006, March, Jacobson). Unfortunately, the families and friends of those who lost their lives on 9/11/01 have to continue to endure the false claims by Dylan Avery and other conspiracy theorists.

Every time Avery refers to a government-issued explanation for any of the tragedies that occurred on 9/11/01, he uses the phrase “the official explanation...” without ever providing a citation of where that explanation came from and/or when this ‘official explanation’ was issued. By repeatedly referring to the government’s explanation as “the official explanation,” Avery is using the ‘plain-folks appeal’ propaganda technique – trying to create the

sensation that Avery is on the same level with his audience, an everyman with the same problems, ambitions, desires and suspicions as any ordinary human. He also engages in the plain folks appeal by engaging the audience with a conversational narration in which he directly addresses the audience with questions and suggestions. The overall result of the use of this technique is the audience perceiving the government as something that operates above and beyond the scope of the individual. This might cause the audience’s empathy to migrate towards the filmmaker and away from the ‘official explanations’ offered by impersonal official bodies (such as the government). In essence, the filmmaker portrays himself in a likeable, personable light, while ‘official explanations’ – by comparison – sound cold and impersonal. Instead of quoting where these ‘official explanations’ actually came from (e.g. a Government source, Fox News, The New York Times, FEMA’s report, NIST, etc.), Avery chose the path of ambiguous to no citation – an irresponsible path for a (supposed) documentary filmmaker making a (so-called) documentary. He could easily remedy both of these problems by citing the source of his ‘official explanations’.

Another, particularly conniving, example of Avery’s underhanded attempts to mislead the audience occurs when he presents the information concerning the burning temperature of jet fuel and the melting point of steel. Here, Avery combines an utter lie (implying that Dr. Brown stated 2000 degrees Fahrenheit was hot enough melt steel) with the unqualified testimony of faux-“expert” Kevin Ryan. He does this in order to ‘disprove’ the theory that the towers fell in response to structural weakening due to the jetliner impact and resulting fire (Popular Mechanics, 2005; Roberts, May, 2006). In actuality, Dr. Brown suggested the jet fuel – burning at over 1800 degrees Fahrenheit – *weakened* the steel to such an extent that the steel failed and caused the towers to fall (Popular Mechanics, 2005). John Ryan – Avery’s “expert” – did work for Underwriters Laboratories, but in the water-testing division. John Ryan was unqualified to make the statement he did, and was later fired by Underwriters Laboratories over this very issue (Roberts, May, 2006). Moreover, Underwriters Laboratories wasn’t responsible for any testing or rating of steel used in the WTC construction (Roberts, May, 2006). As a matter of fact, according to the NIST

in U.S. practice, steel is *not* certified at all; rather structural *assemblies* are tested for their fire resistance *rating* in accordance with a standard procedure such as ASTM E

119 (see NCSTAR 1-6B). That the steel was “certified ... to 2000 degrees Fahrenheit for six hours” is simply not true. (NIST, August, 2006)

Erroneous claims such as these make trusting Dylan Avery difficult and could quite possibly cause unwarranted skepticism towards other low-budget documentaries.

Loose Change is riddled with examples of Avery’s slippery-slope assumptions. After showing his audience – and reviewing – the footage of an unrelated jetliner crash, Avery apparently believes he possesses sufficient expertise to assert that there’s absolutely no way that the hole in the interior wall of the Pentagon was created by the nose of an aircraft. The article in *Popular Mechanics* actually cited material proving that this was most likely caused by the sturdier, more dense, landing gear and not the nose (*Popular Mechanics*, 2005). Instead, this conclusion allows him to blame the US Government for the events, asserting that the government shot a cruise missile at their own military HQ. As he explains the World Trade Center towers’ collapse, Avery’s totally hollow arguments about the “melting point of steel” (which, as aforementioned, are irrelevant) in the towers being too high to be melted by jet fuel, combined with the explosions that he can see burst out of windows as the buildings fall, leave him only one viable explanation: controlled demolition. To support this argument, Avery uses footage of old brick buildings being demolished – apparently in order to show the similarity between the two events – and seismic activity that was recorded as the towers fell (presumably recording bombs going off before the tower collapse). However, *Popular Mechanics*, the “9-11 *Loose Change: Second Edition Viewer Guide*”, the NIST and FEMA reports, all present much more substantial scientific evidence to the contrary.

Another of Avery’s general affronts to documentary filmmaking with *Loose Change* is the use of extensive quote mining. On many occasions throughout the film, outdated sources, portions of interviews, and convenient segments of newspaper articles, are used to convey the filmmaker’s convoluted view. Not even five minutes into the video, Avery already has taken a quote out of context from the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) report that reads, “Further, the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor” (Donnelly, 2000). The key word here is

transformation. The transformation discussed by PNAC here is referring to the process of incorporating new information technologies into the military in order to avoid the repetition of a situation like Pearl Harbor, where we had insufficient technological counters to the attacks of the Japanese (Donnelly, 2000; Iradian, 2006). The September 11th attacks weren’t PNAC’s Pearl Harbor, because they were entirely orchestrated by a non-military force. The military technology advancements suggested by the PNAC are less helpful in battles against terrorists (Iradian, 2006). Furthermore, the PNAC were harboring a pet-project recommendation for a sentinel array of missile launchers bordering the American coastline that was quickly scrubbed after it was realized that our own commercial airliners were a greater contemporary threat to our national security (Donnelly, 2000; Iradian, 2006; Unknown, 2006). Later in the film, Avery quotes Wally Miller, the Somerset County Coroner, out of context from an article in the *Washington Post*, attempting to make it seem as though there were neither debris nor bodies at the Flight 93 crash site. For example, Avery quotes Miller as saying, “It looked like someone took a scrap truck, dug a 10-foot ditch and dumped trash into it,” but this is misleading because Miller had just concluded saying that he hadn’t yet gotten a very close look at the hole; the hole was actually close to 35 feet deep (Roberts, May, 2006). The second Miller quote from the film: “I stopped being coroner after about 20 minutes, because there were no bodies there” is also taken out of context. Miller continued to explain that even though no bodies were found, around 1500 total human remains were recovered, and all of the passengers were positively identified (Roberts, May, 2006).

Sometimes, the arguments presented in *Loose Change* seem unproductive or generally confusing. Avery sometimes contradicts his own arguments throughout *Loose Change*, such as when he asks why the windows weren’t blown out of the pentagon in the immediate area surrounding the impact – somehow, for Avery, this meant that a missile, not a plane, struck the pentagon. Later in the movie, as part of another question, he lets slip that the object struck the only section of the Pentagon outfitted with 2,500 lb blast-proof windows. This comment actually answers the question he poses earlier in the film -- the windows weren’t blown out of the pentagon in the immediate area surrounding the impact *because* this section was outfitted with reinforced windows and walls (Roberts, May, 2006). One of the particularly frustrating arguments put forth by Avery is the rumor that he heard – and apparently decided to include in his ‘documentary’ –

is about more than \$160 billion worth of gold being stolen from a tunnel near WTC 5 (Roberts, May, 2006). Embellishing, he continues on to say:

So where did all the gold go? Remember the gold that was found in November, 2001? Reuters reported, that it was discovered in the back of a 10 wheel truck. Along with several cars in a delivery tunnel underneath World Trade Center 5. (narration from *Loose Change*)

Here's the actual Reuters story:

Treasure Found in World Trade Center Rubble

NEW YORK - Over \$230 million in gold and silver was recovered from a delivery tunnel beneath 5 World Trade Center Wednesday...Officials finally reached the trove Tuesday after removing a 10-wheel truck and several cars that had been crushed by the debris. No bodies were recovered. ... The contents of the vaults had to be removed because authorities need to demolish the building. -Reuters and New York Daily News (Roberts, May, 2006)

There are several things one must pay close attention to at this particular juncture of *Loose Change*: 1) \$230 million in gold and silver was recovered. This is the amount that is recorded as being there (Roberts, May, 2006). 2) Avery says "Reuters reported" it was discovered in the back of a 10-wheel truck. Reuters actually reported that officials finally "reached the trove" – the trove meaning the vaults – after "removing a 10-wheel truck and several cars that had been crushed by the debris" (emphasis added). Furthermore, Avery makes assertion of an unreferenced "rumor" that actually \$160 billion worth of gold was being stored underneath the World Trade Center, and has the audacity to conclude (in a cased-closed tone) with the statement, "167 billion dollars in gold. 200 million is found. And that's just the money" (*Loose Change*, 01:16:50) There is absolutely no excuse for such wanton disregard for proper citation and referral of information. Avery seems to care less about the truth than he does the buzz and popularity that his eccentric claims have generated.

Loose Change has a spectacular number of factual errors, cites information poorly (or not at all), and doesn't hesitate to make totally unsubstantiated claims about events that likely did not and could not have taken place. But that doesn't mean this film

isn't persuasive. On the contrary, arguments are voiced with an air of confidence and the visual and aural elements of the film combine to create a viewing experience that shows promising appeal to younger generations that appreciate the types of music and the visual patterns which Avery utilizes to express his opinions.

The music chosen for the piece is a perfect compliment, somehow embodying the essence of conspiracy and adding a hint of mystery and anxiety; it keeps the video moving and keeps it tense at the same time. At several key points, visual elements rhythmically align with the music to create emphasis – such as in the music transition that occurs during the Teresa Veliz quote, approximately thirty minutes into the video. During this transition, the quote fades in ("...There was another explosion"), followed by the first downbeat of the new song and simultaneous revealing of "And another", downbeat revealing, "I didn't know where to run..." and the mood is thus set to continue on to the next segment of the film. All of Avery's segment transitions were skillfully executed; they clearly delineated the beginning and endings of segments, while remaining unobtrusive to the flow of the video.

The visual material that Avery presents is made up of a large number of photographs, web-sites and otherwise 'still images', but he does a wonderful job of making these images come alive and crawl across the screen. With constant motion, inverse color effects, transparent black rectangles to show quotes over Google™ Earth shots and custom black-fades on the edges of the screen – Avery puts on quite a visual spectacle. The Matrix-reminiscent transition used to show the date is also catchy. Considering the actual amount of video footage that is used – and often repeated – throughout this hour-and-a-half long movie, the visual experience is altogether impressive, even if there were a couple too many Google™ Earth flyovers.

The old Spiderman adage, "With great power, comes great responsibility," is just as applicable to modern-day documentarians as it is to men with superhuman powers. Dylan Avery, though a talented editor/filmmaker, leaves much to be desired regarding the issue of ethical responsibility in documentary film. Yes, he has a right to his own opinion, as well as a right to express that opinion under the protection of the 1st Amendment. Yes, his film is thought-provoking and persuasive. But does *Loose Change* fairly document the events surrounding 9/11? The answer is a resounding no (B., 2006; Curiel, 2006; Popular Mechanics, 2005;

Roberts, May, 2006; Robertson, 2002; Jacobson, March, 2006). Good documentaries properly cite all sourced material, and they don't take quotes out of context to support the direct opposite perspective of what the quoter intended. These attempts to trick the audience are devious, and can only result in the degradation of the documentary genre – particularly the credibility of amateur documentarians. As Dylan Avery asks the audience in *Loose Change*: “Think about it.” How many times does one have to be lied-to before beginning to lose trust in the source of the lies? All of the strong and widespread adversarial reactions to the conspiracy theories advocated in *Loose Change* – from all the 9-11 myth-debunking websites to the specials in Time magazine – are testament to the fact that educated media consumers find *Loose Change*'s lackadaisical manipulative approach at persuasion to be simply unacceptable. The persuasive techniques used in *Loose Change* more closely resemble the shameless persuasive techniques used by World War II propagandists than those expected from documentary filmmakers. New media avenues and technological advances continue to allow amateur filmmakers like Dylan Avery to easily distribute their work on a global scale. *Loose Change*, with over 10 million views (Curiel, 2006), should serve as an example to amateur documentary filmmakers everywhere: an example that even amateur productions can attain wide-spread (national, and even global) attention, but – most importantly – an example of an unacceptable breach of the documentarian's responsibility to respect, rather than deceive, the audience.

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