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## **Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers: Assessing the First Generation of UFO Reportage, 1947–1967**

By Phillip J. Hutchison and Herbert J. Strentz

*Stories of flying saucers and unidentified flying objects reflect one of the most expansive and enduring news topics of the twentieth century. A historical analysis of UFO reportage over its first two decades indicates that American news organizations were deeply implicated in hyping and often obfuscating the UFO phenomenon. Journalists not only created and perpetuated the label “flying saucers,” but news organizations also thrived on a synergistic relationship with the entertainment industry. Consequently, germane issues related to UFOs, science, national security, and culture often became lost in the seams that delineated news values and reporting traditions from entertainment. When judged against the professional standards of the era, UFO coverage often was superficial, redundant, silly, and poorly coordinated.*

**O**n June 24, 1947 Kenneth Arnold, a private pilot flying a single-engine CallAir A-2 out of Chehalis, Washington, encountered nine peculiar aircraft near Mount Rainier, Washington. Arnold described the aircraft as flying at unworldly speeds in a wedge-shaped formation, which moved uniformly in a manner similar to a “saucer skipping across water.”<sup>1</sup> Arnold’s report to aviation officials piqued the interest of journalists, whose initial stories called the objects “saucer like.”<sup>2</sup> This description rapidly circulated across America via news wire services, and in the process of writing follow-up stories, journalists and headline writers conflated the terms of reference. Thus by

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<sup>1</sup>Edward J. Ruppelt, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (New York: Ace Books, 1956), 12–13.

<sup>2</sup>Associated Press, “Mysterious Object Still Unidentified,” *News* (Frederick, MD), June 26, 1947.

June 27, the label “flying saucers” appeared prominently in newspapers across America.<sup>3</sup> The incident not only generated a new journalistic moniker, but it also gave birth to one of the most expansive and enduring news stories of the twentieth century: the continuing story of flying saucers and unidentified flying objects (UFOs).

Archives indicate that hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of news items have covered UFOs since the Arnold sighting. Moreover, most of these news items, particularly during the first decades of UFO coverage, applied the journalistic label “flying saucers” to strange phenomena in the sky. Despite these realities, the journalism and media communication academy has barely addressed the relationship between journalism and UFOs; accordingly, the topic is absent from journalism histories. The present historical analysis deals with this shortcoming. Much of the study’s rationale is reflected in its title, which alludes to the 1956 motion picture *Earth versus the Flying Saucers*.<sup>4</sup> Newspaper journalists, indeed, were central players in constructing the postwar UFO phenomenon. Journalists developed and perpetuated the label “flying saucers,” and the ensuing UFO phenomenon also transpired at the intersection of the journalism and popular culture industries.

Yet even as both industries synergistically fueled decades of UFO interest, the historical analysis will show that the postwar UFO phenomenon cannot be reduced to the relationship between journalism and the entertainment industry. Instead, the inquiry reveals a complex *mélange* of technological, social, and political circumstances that converged in the years following World War II. These factors included the growth of civilian and military aviation, the Cold War, a science fiction craze, widespread fascination with the supernatural, changes in media technology and audiences, and evolving journalism institutions and practices. Ultimately, journalists of that era were unable to sort out these factors. Many germane issues related to UFOs, science, national security, and culture became lost in the seams that delineated news theories, news organizations, news beats, and reporting traditions. Consequently, when judged against basic journalistic standards of the era, UFO coverage was superficial, redundant, often silly, lacking in relevance, and poorly coordinated.

The ensuing study seeks to better explain how and why this happened. Given the complexity of the issues involved, the analysis is in three sections: the first explains the study’s theoretical orientation and its methodology; the second addresses the genesis of the UFO phenomenon in 1947; and the third traces the synergistic waves of UFO sightings and

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<sup>3</sup>Associated Press, “Flying Saucer Mystery Deepens as Eyewitness Descriptions Increase,” *Albuquerque Journal*, June 27, 1947.

<sup>4</sup>*Earth versus the Flying Saucers*, directed by Fred F. Sears (1956; Hollywood, CA: Columbia Pictures), Motion Picture.

news reports that animated UFO news coverage for the next two decades. The analysis identifies key challenges associated with UFO reporting in the postwar era, and it critiques some of the responses to these challenges. This orientation will help better conceptualize UFO coverage during its first generation, and the attendant insights will help focus future research into the social, psychological, and political aspects of UFOs.

### **UFOs and Postwar Culture**

The years following World War II provided fertile ground for creating and fostering public fascination with UFOs. Although many factors affected this situation, aviation histories illustrate how and why aviation technology proved particularly significant.<sup>5</sup> American civil and military aviation expanded dramatically during the postwar years, and the US Air Force was established as an independent branch of the armed forces on September 18, 1947. Accordingly, unprecedented numbers of commercial, private, and military aircraft filled the skies above North America. This technology not only took humans above previously unseen remote areas, but it also provided a vantage point from which pilots, aircrews, and passengers could witness phenomena that earthbound humans heretofore could not encounter. Additionally, the emergent aviation technology included avionics, sensors, and weaponry that, in unprecedented ways, engaged and generated electromagnetic phenomena. Simultaneously, government agencies expanded the use of non-piloted flying craft ranging from weather balloons to secret technology that was designed to monitor or strike the Soviet Union. Cumulatively, these factors transformed both what was in the sky and what could be seen in the sky.

The Cold War intensified the political ramifications of these developments. Aircraft were the primary means of delivering nuclear weapons, and this reality fueled security concerns about Soviet aircraft breaching America's air space. Consequently, the United States government—particularly the nascent US Air Force—became sensitive to unexplained phenomena in the sky. Government officials and intelligence agencies sought to cope with real and imagined national security implications of UFOs and to convince the American public that its military could manage the situation. To exacerbate matters, the recent advent and proliferation of nuclear weaponry had caused intense public anxiety. All the while, the United States government was regularly exploding nuclear weapons above ground and actively pursuing numbers of supposed communists that ostensibly had infiltrated all realms of America. Journalists

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<sup>5</sup>Roger E. Bilstein, *Flight in America: From the Wrights to the Astronauts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Joe Christy and LeRoy Cook, *American Aviation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994).

covered all of these developments, which naturally became conflated in the public's eyes: threats from without, threats from within, threats from the sky, threats from radiation, threats from anything that was unexplained. Given the heightened anxiety, the unexplained was never far removed from the misinterpreted. Ultimately, the latter relationship became increasingly significant after journalists introduced flying saucers to America's collective imagination.

Postwar cultural trends further magnified this situation. Art historian Karal Ann Marling explains how World War II produced pent-up consumer demand, which resulted in new and more mobile audiences and diverse consumer technologies. Each of these developments fueled a voracious appetite for popular-culture aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Assorted research documents how, as a manifestation of these trends, America's postwar years brought about a "golden age of science fiction."<sup>7</sup> The science fiction industry, which clearly was attuned to the pervasive Cold War angst, quickly exploited public concern with unexplained phenomena in the sky—and the catchy new journalistic moniker "flying saucers" aided the cause. In this environment, the boundaries between normal, paranormal, and science became blurred. Topics such as reincarnation (e.g., the 1950s Bridey Murphy craze) and astral projection intersected with the scientific study of hypnosis and repressed memories to create what Robert Genter termed a 1950s "hypnotizzy."<sup>8</sup> Cumulatively, these postwar phenomena further complicated the already ambiguous relationships among entertainment, science, and news.

Diverse interdisciplinary research has addressed the popular culture, social, and technological aspects of these issues.<sup>9</sup> Journalism, however, has been peripheral to these discussions. To date, Herbert Strentz's 1970 doctoral dissertation represents the sole study that directly addresses journalistic coverage of UFOs during this era. The dissertation, which comprises a media content analysis and respondent interviews, offers useful insights into early UFO reportage and the political and journalistic rationale that shaped news coverage. Although the study's data were not presented as a historical narrative, and its quantitative analysis was not

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<sup>6</sup>Karal A. Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup>Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: MacMillan, 2005), 195–229.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Genter, "'Hypnotizzy' in the Cold War: The American Fascination with Hypnotism in the 1950s," *Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 (2006): 154–69.

<sup>9</sup>William J. Dewan, "A Saucerful of Secrets: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of UFO Experiences," *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 472 (2006): 184–202; James R. Lewis, *UFOs and Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Myth* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2002); David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999). These are just a few widely cited examples of hundreds of similar studies and compilations.

informed by communication theory or journalism histories, Strentz's findings remain a useful point of departure for contemporary inquiry. For example, the study revealed news coverage patterns and practices that differed significantly among small local and large metropolitan-area newspapers. Such findings reinforce the present study's primary claim: journalism not only was central to the entire UFO phenomenon, but the issue itself also provides a revealing window into journalistic practices and institutions during the eventful decades following World War II. Each of these factors underscores the need to better incorporate the post-war UFO phenomenon into journalism histories.

The heuristic value of this approach is twofold: The historical orientation better informs the nature of journalism during this era, and it also sheds light on the interrelated legacies of journalism, popular culture, science, and national security. Additionally, as the Strentz dissertation documents, early UFO reportage illustrates how local news coverage helped shape a national phenomenon, even in the presence of a national news system. In notable respects, UFO reportage reflected the seams of human classification systems, a reality that underscores the constructed nature of news and the challenges journalists have faced historically when addressing science. This perspective is particularly relevant to journalism historians who embrace the challenges James Carey laid out for the discipline. Carey argued that journalism scholarship becomes more culturally relevant when it is examined and understood as a corpus. This perspective includes "multiple treatments of the same story" and "other forms of journalism that surround, correct, and complete the daily newspaper."<sup>10</sup>

The present historical analysis examines how journalists, by placing artificial boundaries on happenings, transformed occurrences into events and portrayed events as stories. Journalists structured news coverage both as discrete stories and as broader storylines that, as Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne explain, serve to "create meaningful totalities out of scattered events," a larger body of work that represents a continuing story of human activity.<sup>11</sup> By accounting for this reportage in terms of these integral relationships, the historical analysis can better account for elusive dimensions of cultural meaning that escape the net of purely quantitative methodologies. Although the attendant insights largely are interpretive, some findings can be judged against journalistic standards

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<sup>10</sup>James W. Carey, "The Dark Continent of American Journalism," in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, edited by Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 148.

<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, "Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News," in *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader*, edited by Dan Berkowitz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 333–50.

of the era (e.g., seek credible sources, verify facts, follow up, maintain objectivity and context).

To achieve these objectives, the analysis examines twenty years of UFO news reports beginning with the Arnold incident in 1947. This primary-source material is available through archival databases including ProQuest, Newspaperarchive, and Reader's Guide Retrospective, which cumulatively comprise keyword searchable reportage from tens of thousands of major metropolitan, local, and ethnic newspapers and news magazines. In ways that were not possible just a decade ago, searchable news archives allow historians to target, search, and trace terms of reference and incidents over time. The automated capabilities increase methodological precision, and their scope eliminates some blind spots associated with manual research methods.<sup>12</sup> For example, the databases help trace the etymology and usage patterns of key terms such as "flying saucers," "UFO," and "little green men."

In spite of these advantages, database-generated findings reflect the caveats and limitations Adrian Bingham outlined.<sup>13</sup> In particular, searchable databases are prone to false positive and false negative results, and search results appear outside of the physical context of the remainder of the news product. Consequently, even with automated capabilities, it is not possible to precisely account for or classify all facets of a topic as expansive as UFO reportage. Nor is it possible to assimilate all findings into an article of this length and scope. Yet it is possible to identify storylines and reportage trends that emerged during key situations. Such insights expand on Strentz's early findings and better illuminate the complex interrelated issues and trends that shaped journalistic coverage of UFOs.

## The First Wave

Within three weeks after the Arnold sighting, journalists established interpretive frameworks that shaped portrayals of UFO-related phenomena for decades. These interpretive strategies, which paralleled established news values and reporting practices, revolved around the journalistic label "flying saucers," a phrase that did not exist prior to the Arnold reports.<sup>14</sup> As journalists merged their catchy new moniker with news values, they delimited not only news coverage, but also public perceptions and popular culture depictions of UFOs. From the outset, journalists portrayed UFO events in terms of news values including prominence, irony/novelty, proximity, timeliness, conflict, and

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<sup>12</sup>Adrian Bingham, "The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians," *Twentieth Century British History* 21, no. 2 (2010): 225–31.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Multiple archival database searches confirm this.

impact. In the context of UFO issues, these news values aligned with well-established journalistic practices including human-interest features, public affairs reporting, and science journalism. In each respect, the unusual nature of UFO phenomena created a revealing quandary for journalists: none of the prevailing news traditions could afford to either own or ignore UFO issues. Consequently, even as early UFO reportage followed clear patterns, it also was unfocused in ways that would persist.

Initial coverage of the Arnold sighting highlighted the word “mystery” in body copy and in headlines. This approach, which reflected novelty as a news value, naturally emphasized the dramatic qualities of news in ways that shaped public perception in two significant ways. First, in accordance with James Carey, mystery implicitly structured news as “dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at play.”<sup>15</sup> Second, the dramatic action generated a narrative trajectory that impelled someone to solve the mystery. Follow-up stories increasingly addressed the latter perspective. Early explanations varied: a Seattle ironworker claimed the flying discs were merely bottle caps carried adrift by the intense heat and wind of the ironwork’s blowers.<sup>16</sup> Others suggested seagulls that appeared distorted by light conditions, or tinfoil carried into the upper atmosphere by the wind.<sup>17</sup> Military sources denied any relationship between military aircraft and flying saucers and suggested only unusual “weather conditions” or “meteorites.”<sup>18</sup> Behavioral psychologists suggested “imagination, hallucinations, or delusions.”<sup>19</sup> Given the rapidly growing reports of sightings, however, such “reasonable” explanations were perceived as vague and unsatisfying.

By early July 1947 North America was inundated with flying saucer sightings and news reports. Digitized newspaper archives confirm Strentz’s findings: When compared to the daily news reports of late June, flying saucer news items increased by more than tenfold by mid-July.<sup>20</sup> The wave peaked on July 5 and tapered off steadily by late July. Journalists, indeed, had constructed a compelling national story that sensitized the public to mysterious phenomena in the sky. Moreover,

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<sup>15</sup>James W. Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” *Communication 2* (1975): 8.

<sup>16</sup>Associated Press, “He Solves Mystery,” *San Antonio Light*, June 30, 1947.

<sup>17</sup>“Walla Walla Man Sees Flying Disks, Finds Them Seagulls,” *Union-Bulletin* (Walla Walla, WA), July 1, 1947.

<sup>18</sup>United Press, “Army, Navy Officials Silent as ‘Flying Saucers’ Reports Pour in from Many Parts of US,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette* (Mason City, IA), July 5, 1947.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Targeted searches on both newspaperarchive.com and newspaper.com, which comprise thousands of local newspapers, reveal similar proportions and ratios: approximately a 10:1 increase. Strentz, 26–27 cites similar findings.

as the public looked skyward with newfound curiosity, the label “flying saucers” offered a new explanation for difficult-to-explain and easy-to-misinterpret phenomena. Whether a UFO was sighted from the air or ground, the encounter always related to a point in geography. This reality established strong local news angles for any UFO report, and it underscores the distinctive role local newspapers played in each historical UFO wave. During the height of the 1947 UFO wave, many local newspapers featured news compilations under a single headline. These news summaries typically combined several wire service stories with local coverage of nearby encounters.<sup>21</sup>

Barely forty-five days after journalists coined the label “flying saucers,” a Gallup Poll found that 90 percent of Americans had heard of flying saucers.<sup>22</sup> This reaction not only attested to the news value of UFO issues, but it also reflected significant commercial ramifications. Simply put, flying saucers represented great entertainment value. This reality not only proved to be a boon for the science fiction industry, but journalists also were quick to exploit this situation. Accordingly, some journalists parodied UFO reports. In early July, nationally syndicated columnist Hal Boyle penned a satirical account of his trip on a flying saucer with a “green-haired Martian pilot.”<sup>23</sup> On a purely local level, the *Atchison* (Kansas) *Daily Globe* featured a front-page artist’s portrayal of six airborne teacups and saucers flying over Atchison.<sup>24</sup> Yet satire aside, given the paucity of explanations for the many UFO sightings, by July 5 national journalists began acknowledging suggestions that flying saucers might be “space ships” commanded by extraterrestrial beings. This view, which the United Press originally attributed to a letter writer in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, crossed a key journalistic threshold.<sup>25</sup> The storyline, by ascribing news value to claims of extraterrestrial visitors to Earth, blurred journalistic boundaries in ways that remain evident today.

On one hand, journalists encountered an issue with significant scientific and public affairs ramifications. On the other hand, UFO storylines reflected novel qualities that could play out as either mystery or farce. The latter tack often prevailed during the first wave of UFO news coverage. Throughout the 1947 wave, news headlines and body copy used the label “flying saucer” not as a noun, but as an adjective for the nouns

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<sup>21</sup>“Walla Walla Man Sees Flying Disks”; Ed Harrington, “Flying Saucer ‘Jitters’ as Lights Go Out through Area,” *Lowell Sun* (Lowell, MA), July 8, 1947.

<sup>22</sup>George Gallup, “Nine out of Ten People Heard of Flying Saucers,” *Public Opinion News Service* (Princeton, NJ), August 15, 1947.

<sup>23</sup>Hal Boyle, “Boyle Describes 57,600-Mile Trip with ‘Balmy’ in Flying Saucer,” *Pampa News* (Pampa, TX), July 10, 1947.

<sup>24</sup>“Saucers over Atchison,” *Atchison Daily Globe* (Atchison, KS), July 12, 1947.

<sup>25</sup>United Press, “Many Explanations Are Given for Mysterious ‘Flying Saucers,’” *Butte Montana Standard* (Butte, MT), July 5, 1947.

“fad” and “craze.”<sup>26</sup> As with any craze or fad, diverse commercial interests developed entertaining promotions to capitalize on the public interest. News reports documented many such promotions in July 1947: the Estherville, Iowa Junior Chamber of Commerce designated a “Flying Saucer Day” in which an airplane flew over town and dropped saucer-shaped prize certificates bearing the name of local merchants.<sup>27</sup> A California insurance agent offered a special policy covering any property damage caused by flying saucers.<sup>28</sup> These factors also resulted in assorted hoaxes, many of which were publicized via local newspapers and wire services.<sup>29</sup> Although news coverage did not necessarily cause such hoaxes, journalists clearly were implicated in the issue.

Such issues foreshadowed longer-term problems for UFO reportage. It became problematic for news organizations to simultaneously portray an issue both seriously and farcically. Journalists were responsible for piquing the public’s interest in mysterious, and sometimes even scary, phenomena in the sky. Given that many such phenomena were easily misinterpreted, public UFO reports often ranged from odd to downright silly. In this context, journalistic farce all too easily digressed into public ridicule. Moreover, ridicule often was targeted at less privileged members of the public, a factor that helps explain why African American newspapers generally ignored the UFO phenomenon from its outset.<sup>30</sup> Langston Hughes satirized the situation in a play that featured mythical Harlem resident Jesse B. Semple: “If a Negro did see a flying saucer, I bet the papers wouldn’t report it. They probably don’t even let flying saucers fly over Harlem, just to keep Negroes from seeing them.”<sup>31</sup> A 1947 story in a white-owned North Carolina newspaper, the *Statesville Daily Record*, lends credence to Hughes’s views:

About six Negro boys reported they saw a flying saucer flying around the Statesville high school on the night of July 21. They reported the incident to police who came up with the flying saucer. The so-called saucer was nothing but a lighted flarpot

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<sup>26</sup>For example, see United Press, “Orville Wright Calls Disks War Propaganda,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, IA), July 9, 1947.

<sup>27</sup>“Jr. C. of C. Will Sponsor Big Day July 30th,” *Estherville Enterprise* (Estherville, IA), July 24, 1947.

<sup>28</sup>“Around the Town,” *Independent* (Long Beach, CA), July 15, 1947.

<sup>29</sup>Associated Press, “Four Boys Perpetrate Flying Saucer Hoax,” *Benton Harbor News* (Benton Harbor, MI), July 12, 1947.

<sup>30</sup>Digitized archives indicate that, for example, the *Chicago Daily Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* ran almost no news stories about flying saucers throughout the duration of this study.

<sup>31</sup>Langston Hughes, *The Best of Simple: Stories* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 231.

(flambeau) being drawn up and down the walls by a rope. ...  
But it was a flying saucer to those boys.<sup>32</sup>

Not all journalists facilitated UFO hoaxes, ridicule, and silliness; other journalists addressed significant public affairs aspects of the issue. From the outset, the United States military was never far removed from this inquiry, which initially generated vague and uncoordinated responses from the armed forces. On July 4, Army and Navy officials told the United Press that none of their experimental aircraft were the source of flying saucer reports, and military radars had not detected unusual phenomena.<sup>33</sup> Yet on the same day, a public information officer at an Army Air Force base near Roswell, New Mexico, confirmed that a local rancher had turned over pieces of a crashed “flying disc.”<sup>34</sup> The report caused a flurry of interest for a few hours until Eighth Air Force officials in Louisiana intervened and explained that the rancher had found only a crashed weather balloon. Although the Roswell incident passed with little fanfare in 1947, thirty years later it gained worldwide notoriety when UFO interest groups introduced revisionist accounts, which claimed the incident was part of a government conspiracy to cover up the presence of dead extraterrestrial beings at the crash site.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in August 1947, Army Air Force officials in Washington state scrambled to quash rumors that a B-25 bomber, which had crashed near Kelso, Washington, was carrying flying saucer debris.<sup>36</sup> In reality, the two Air Force officers who died in the crash were investigating a UFO-related hoax.<sup>37</sup>

Conspiracy narratives relating to these and other 1947 incidents did not fully materialize until decades later. Consequently, during the fall of 1947 sightings and news coverage died down, but it did not die off. Two patterns characterized news coverage during the remainder of the year: sporadic local reports of sightings and continued news coverage of UFOs and national security issues. The national-security angle rose to prominence in late December when Representative Harris Ellsworth of Oregon suggested that flying saucers were related to Soviet rocket tests.<sup>38</sup> Harris’s theory related to a series of 1946 reports from Sweden citing

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<sup>32</sup>“Caught One ‘Saucer,’” *Statesville Daily Record* (Statesville, NC), July 22, 1947. Strentz, 115–28 provides many similar examples of newspapers ridiculing less privileged members of the public, although most involved poorer white people.

<sup>33</sup>“Army, Navy Officials Silent.”

<sup>34</sup>“Disc Mystery Is ‘Solved’ for Three Hours until Roswell Find Collapses,” *Albuquerque Journal*, July 9, 1947.

<sup>35</sup>Kal K. Korff, *The Roswell UFO Crash: What They Don’t Want You to Know* (Amherst, NY: Dell, 2000).

<sup>36</sup>United Press, “Disc Fragments Linked to Crash,” *Oxnard Press Courier* (Oxnard, CA), August 4, 1947.

<sup>37</sup>Strentz, 211–12.

<sup>38</sup>Associated Press, “Thinks Flying Saucers from Russ Rockets,” *Waterloo Courier* (Waterloo, IA), December 22, 1947.

mysterious lights in the sky. Some observers termed the lights “ghost rockets” and feared the lights were missiles fired from a Soviet rocket test area at Peenemunde in Soviet-occupied Germany.<sup>39</sup> Although over time no evidence emerged to support Harris’s thesis, at the outset of the Cold War, the larger national-defense storyline resonated with government officials and journalists. Three weeks later, when a US Air Force fighter jet crashed while chasing a UFO near Fort Knox, Kentucky, the unexplained event underscored the seriousness of UFO issues—particularly to the nascent Air Force.<sup>40</sup> Questions that emerged in response to the mysterious events of 1947 thus set the stage for a long-term relationship among UFOs, journalists, the public, and the US Air Force.

### Continuing Waves

In the two decades following the 1947 UFO wave, UFO sightings continued across North America. Throughout this period, local, state, and national government officials continually received reports of UFO sightings, and this trend was punctuated by heavier waves of UFO sightings in 1952, 1957, and 1965–66. Each of these subsequent UFO waves, none of which traced to claims of extraterrestrial encounters, involved distinctive circumstances and reflected evolving journalistic technology and practices. Although journalists organized news coverage around the templates established in 1947, increasingly diffuse cultural affiliations and commercial interests shaped public perception of the subsequent UFO waves. Three trends stand out in this regard. From the outset, the Air Force became the focal point for investigating UFO reports, a development that proved controversial and ineffective over time. Partially in response, networks of flying saucer “believers” emerged in the early 1950s. These groups quickly became visible advocates of their beliefs and vocal critics of government investigations. Simultaneously, the entertainment industry capitalized on the public’s fascination with flying saucers, and the enthusiasts promoted the topic across the spectrum of popular-culture venues.

Journalists were implicated in each of these developments. In terms of journalistic principles and ideals, the most troublesome affiliations trace to journalists’ relationship with government UFO investigators, particularly the United States Air Force. In this respect, news archives indicate that journalists for years failed to scrutinize what proved to be two decades of ineffective Air Force programs for investigating UFO

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<sup>39</sup>United Press, “Flying Saucer Worth \$3,000,” *Telegraph-Herald* (Dubuque, IA), July 8, 1947.

<sup>40</sup>Associated Press, “National Guard Flyer Killed while Chasing ‘Flying Saucer,’” *Galveston Daily News* (Galveston, TX), January 9, 1948. In later investigations, the US Air Force attributed the UFO to a US Navy weather balloon.

reports. From 1948 until 1969, the Air Force UFO programs were Project Sign (1948), Project Grudge (1949–52), and Project Blue Book (1952–69). Over time these programs have been widely criticized, most conspicuously from former program officials, including Capt. Edward Ruppelt, Lt. Col. Hector Quintanilla, and Northwestern University astrophysicist J. Allen Hynek.<sup>41</sup> In book-length critiques of these programs, Ruppelt, Quintanilla, and Hynek each depicted a government bureaucracy that was never up to the task of studying a phenomenon as socially and scientifically complex as UFOs. These accounts portray the three Air Force programs as minimalist operations that skewed toward debunking versus edifying the phenomenon. Moreover, each author asserted that Air Force investigations devolved into a public relations program that opportunistically promoted and defended the Air Force more so than it investigated UFO reports.

If Air Force UFO investigations were deficient in these regards, the public of the 1940s and 1950s could not draw such conclusions from mainstream news reports. News archives indicate that journalists did not pursue such storylines, and the public largely remained unaware of these shortcomings until the latter days of Project Blue Book in the 1960s. Post-1947 UFO reportage remained descriptive versus analytical, and it focused on transient events at the expense of assimilative in-depth reports. Partially in response to this situation, by the early 1950s communities of UFO believers emerged and became increasingly vocal. The movement gained critical mass in December 1949 when Donald Keyhoe, a retired US Marine Corps major and aviator, authored “Flying Saucers Are Real” for *True*, a popular men’s magazine. The article, which was eventually published as a paperback book in 1950, stated its central claim succinctly: “For the past 175 years, the planet Earth has been under systematic close-range examination by living, intelligent observers from another planet.”<sup>42</sup>

Ruppelt asserted in 1955 that Keyhoe’s article “was one of the most widely read and widely discussed magazine articles in history.”<sup>43</sup> Although Keyhoe introduced his claims in a popular versus a journalistic venue, mainstream news outlets quickly engaged the issue. Hearst’s *International News Service* circulated a condensed version of Keyhoe’s article, and in the days immediately following its release, assorted columnists discussed Keyhoe’s claims. Keyhoe did not merely raise questions of government bias, seriousness, or competence; he alleged a

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<sup>41</sup>Ruppelt; J. Allen Hynek, *The Hynek UFO Report: What the Government Suppressed and Why* (Amherst, NY: Dell, 1977), 11–27; Hector Quintanilla, *UFOs, An Air Force Dilemma* (unpublished manuscript, 1974), <https://archive.org/details/ufos-an-air-force-dilemma>.

<sup>42</sup>Donald Keyhoe, *Flying Saucers Are Real* (New York: Fawcett, 1950), 141.

<sup>43</sup>Ruppelt, 93.

far-reaching government UFO cover-up. Accordingly, Keyhoe's book publisher, Fawcett Gold Medal Books, exploited this perspective for public relations purposes by falsely asserting that "defense department officials have exerted 'a lot of pressure' to prevent sale of the book."<sup>44</sup> From the outset, journalists acknowledged the community of UFO believers, but news organizations provided little independent perspective one way or the other. Meanwhile, the believers' communities spawned assorted niche publications such as the *Flying Saucer Review* and *Flying Saucers* to advance their claims.

Scientific inquiry aside, the supernatural implications of flying saucers captivated the public's imagination, and the entertainment industry quickly capitalized on this reality. By the early 1950s, flying saucers and stories of extraterrestrial Earth visitors were common offerings in cinema, broadcast media, comic books, comic strips, novels, and toy merchandising. Several artifacts stand out. In 1951 two top-ten grossing movies, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Thing from Another World*, highlighted the relationship between flying saucers and extraterrestrial threats to Earth.<sup>45</sup> This cinema trend continued throughout the decade to include hit films such as *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *Earth versus the Flying Saucers* (1956), and myriad similar grade B films. Other mediums reflected similar trends. Mark Young and Jeffrey Kripal, respectively, document how the flying saucer craze also inspired extensive television programming and comic book fare during this period.<sup>46</sup> The flying saucer craze also was a boon to the postwar toy industry. Among the many flying saucer toys marketed during that era, the world-famous Frisbee flying disc stands out as perhaps the most enduring artifact. The saucer-shaped toy was originally named the "Flyin-Saucer" and, later, mass marketed as the "Pluto Platter."<sup>47</sup>

These developments highlight the symbiotic relationship that conjoined news and entertainment industries during this era. Although this relationship was neither formally coordinated nor reducible to a simple cause-effect dynamic, it does reflect social issues Carey and sociologist Robert Park addressed. Of significance, each theorist explained how audiences influence what is newsworthy. Park traces these social

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<sup>44</sup>United Press, "US Ban Hinted on New Flying Saucer Book," *Telegraph-Herald* (Dubuque, IA), May 25, 1950.

<sup>45</sup>"Year: 1951," *Internet Movie Database*, [http://www.imdb.com/year/1951/?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_inf](http://www.imdb.com/year/1951/?ref_=tt_ov_inf).

<sup>46</sup>S. Mark Young, "Creating a Sense of Wonder: The Glorious Legacy of Space Opera Toys of the 1950s," in *1950s Rocketman TV Series and Their Fans*, edited by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdin Van Riper (New York: MacMillan, 2012), 149–62; Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>47</sup>Fred Morrison and Phil Kennedy, *Flat Flip Flies Straight!: True Origins of the Frisbee* (Wethersfield, CT: Wormhole Publishers, 2006).

dynamics to human-interest journalism, which simultaneously promotes and caters to reader interest by emphasizing the dramatic, novel quality of news. These factors, which shaped UFO reportage from its outset, commonly were manifest as the sort of silly news “brights” noted previously. By the early 1950s, however, more substantial human-interest features embraced the idea that UFO reports might correspond to extraterrestrial Earth visitors. A widely cited April 7, 1952, *Life* magazine feature titled “Have We Visitors from Space?” represents one of the most influential examples of the latter trend. The feature emphasized the mysterious aspects of several high-profile UFO sightings, and it concluded:

The real depths of the saucer mystery bemuse penetration, as the night sky swallows up a flashlight beam. What of the other shapes? Why do the things make no sound? What power urges them at such terrible speeds through the sky? Who, or what, is aboard? Where do they come from? Why are they here? What are the intentions of the beings who control them? ... Answers may come in a generation—or tomorrow. Somewhere in the dark skies may be those who know.<sup>48</sup>

Given the overlapping boundaries associated with news, entertainment, and flying saucers, the cause-effect relationships associated with such news features remain unclear. A June 9 follow-up article in *Life* noted that the April account “provoked a tremendous barrage of letters ... an unprecedented response from readers.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Project Blue Book records reflect a pronounced spike in UFO reports in 1952. The records indicate that prior to 1952, the Air Force received approximately 170 UFO reports per year, but that number jumped to 1,500 in 1952.<sup>50</sup> Some of the 1952 UFO wave traces to a heavily publicized series of UFO sightings over Washington, DC, in late July. The sightings were not only reported by civilian and military sources, but the unidentified objects also appeared on military and civil aviation radars as moving rapidly across controlled air space over the White House. A United Press dispatch accurately reported: “Mysterious objects streaked through Washington skies early today at such speed that 550-mile-an-hour jet planes could not catch them, the Air Force reported.”<sup>51</sup> Although the Washington, DC sightings later were credibly explained as optical

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<sup>48</sup>H. B. Darrach Jr. and Robert Ginna Jr., “Have We Visitors from Space,” *Life*, April 7, 1952, 96.

<sup>49</sup>Robert E. Ginna Jr., “Saucer Reactions,” *Life*, June 9, 1952, 20.

<sup>50</sup>“Total UFO (Object) Sightings,” February 15, 1967, MAXW-PPBB1-1188, *Project Blue Book Archive*, <http://bluebookarchive.org>.

<sup>51</sup>United Press, “Flying Saucers’ Elude AF Jets,” *Long Beach Independent* (Long Beach, CA), July 28, 1952.

illusions (to include phantom radar signatures) from temperature inversions, hundreds of other summer 1952 sightings, including some near Chicago, defied clear explanation. Air Force records indicate that UFO reports never returned to pre-1952 levels. Instead, from 1953 to 1956 public reports to Project Blue Book averaged 550 reports annually, then doubled in 1957.<sup>52</sup>

In accordance with Carey's and Park's views, these developments trace to the interplay among three factors: public awareness, public interest, and public misidentification. Although each factor relates to human-interest journalism to varying degrees, the misidentification factor also implicates science journalism and public affairs reporting. Historical reportage indicates that journalists from major newspapers addressed, but did not delve deeply into, the scientific and social implications of flying saucers. For example, beginning in 1950 some news reports began using the more scientific term "unidentified flying objects" in lieu of the more catchy journalistic label "flying saucers." Nonetheless, databases also indicate that throughout the 1950s, newspapers emphasized the moniker "flying saucers" at a 5:1 ratio over the more headline-friendly acronym "UFO." Over the course of the 1960s, this ratio would decrease to approximately 1:1.<sup>53</sup> Yet even in light of this trend, beginning in 1950 other journalists facetiously associated flying saucers with the "little green men" who ostensibly piloted them. The latter term, which prior to the 1950s depicted gnome-like fantasy characters or alcohol-induced hallucinations, became yet another staple of UFO human-interest journalism over time.

In 1968 Strentz surveyed and interviewed more than 100 journalists to determine the rationales behind such news practices and judgments. Most respondents cited common concerns and issues. Journalists found it difficult to maintain reader interest over time as novelty waned. The issue itself was mired in hoaxes and questionable sources; moreover, little solid information emerged from government investigations. Arthur Snider, then science editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, explained that latter factor deterred science writers from pursuing UFO issues in light of "more tangible topics" such as polio research, heart transplants, cancer research, and space technology. Walter Sullivan, a science writer for the *New York Times*, similarly described how the episodic and unpredictable nature of UFO news deterred science writers from addressing the issue. Accordingly, news archives indicate that science or aviation writers rarely bylined UFO stories.<sup>54</sup> Of further significance, Strentz's hundreds of findings evidenced abundant rationalizations for news judgments, but

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<sup>52</sup>"Total UFO (Object) Sightings."

<sup>53</sup>Searches of newspaperarchive.com and newspaper.com generate similar proportions and ratios.

<sup>54</sup>Strentz, 290–303.

little reflexivity regarding journalistic shortcomings. As a result, UFO reportage remained reactive and focused on breaking news versus assimilative or in-depth reporting. Pervasive human-interest stories and headlines about “little green men” further obfuscated the situation.

These trends underscore a distinctive feature of UFO journalism during the 1950s and 1960s: Major metropolitan newspapers (i.e., newspapers of record) largely did not define the phenomenon; rather, smaller local newspapers combined with wire services to shape public perception of UFOs. Again, news archives reflect clear coverage patterns during this period. UFO news typically originated as local sightings that appeared in smaller newspapers, and then wire services collected and circulated these disparate reports nationally. Ultimately, many of these wire-service compilations appeared in larger metropolitan newspapers (e.g., the original Arnold sighting offers a classic example of this situation). These dynamics produced the illusion of a national trend, and even as these factors might not have caused cycles of excitement per se, the relationships appear to have intensified the cycles. Consequently, news archives indicate that much—if not most—early UFO journalism originated from small, local news outlets that were the least equipped to handle such complex and far-reaching social and technological issues. This situation ultimately undermined the quality of UFO journalism. Not only were smaller local newspapers disproportionately influential in generating UFO news, Strentz demonstrated that these newspapers also were more likely to run single-sourced reports and were less likely to rely on authoritative sources.<sup>55</sup>

Although these circumstances continued into the 1960s, several situations changed notably as the decade progressed. Of significance, journalists became increasingly skeptical of Project Blue Book. The situation reached a tipping point in March 1966 when Project Blue Book officials appeared to cursorily dismiss a series of widely witnessed UFO incidents in Michigan. The incidents, which were witnessed by hundreds of credible sources, involved glowing lights that appeared to hover over two sites in rural Michigan. When Project Blue Book officials explained the widespread reports as “swamp gas,” news organizations and the public quickly challenged Project Blue Book’s seriousness and credibility. Walter Sullivan reported in the *New York Times* that “the public disquiet” appeared to affirm “widespread charges by UFO enthusiasts that the Air Force was concealing the truth about these episodes lest there be public panic.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the controversy highlighted the cursory and dismissive nature of most Project Blue Book investigations. Sullivan wrote: “The Air Force attitude toward the problem was indicated by the

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 95–98.

<sup>56</sup>Walter Sullivan, “Air Force Selecting University to Study ‘Flying Saucer’ Data,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1966.

fact that its office for checking on such reports was staffed by one officer, one sergeant and a secretary.”<sup>57</sup>

The situation generated significant media and public reaction, which ranged from giggles to frustration. Kenneth Arnold, whose 1947 sighting began the UFO phenomenon in North America, told the Associated Press: “Let’s face it, there are a great many things in the world we don’t understand. Calling these things swamp gasses is completely idiotic.”<sup>58</sup> Political columnist Roscoe Drummond argued that Air Force investigators were “so bored and totally skeptical” that they had lost credibility. Drummond and others called for Congress to name an “objective and respected” panel to investigate these issues.<sup>59</sup> Michigan representative Gerald Ford, then minority leader of the US House of Representatives, similarly called for a congressional investigation.<sup>60</sup> In response to the pressure, the Air Force Office of Scientific Research contracted with the University of Colorado to recommend whether UFOs merited the continued federal funding to study the phenomenon. The University of Colorado UFO Project, which comprised approximately thirty-five interdisciplinary members and associates, conducted its study from November 1966 until November 1968. The study’s final report ultimately found no scientific value in the continued study of UFOs, and its conclusions led to the termination of Project Blue Book in 1969.

During this period, television news also began to influence public perception of UFOs. Although television was present since the early days of the UFO phenomenon, news archives indicate that television news organizations rarely addressed UFO stories. The situation changed in the mid-1960s, and television documentaries proved significant in this regard. In response to the controversies associated with the 1965–66 UFO wave, CBS, ABC, and NBC each aired primetime UFO documentaries. These documentaries provided the sort of assimilative journalism that had proven elusive for print journalists. As a prime example, in May 1966 *CBS Reports* aired an hour-long documentary “UFO: Friend, Foe or Fantasy” in response to the Michigan “swamp gas” controversy.<sup>61</sup> Anchored by Walter Cronkite, the documentary addressed issues including the Michigan sightings, technological innovations, optical illusions, Air Force investigations, and the community of UFO believers. Although

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<sup>57</sup>Walter Sullivan, “Campus Engaged for Saucer Study,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1966.

<sup>58</sup>Associated Press, “Lighted Object Sightings Real, Idaho Man Says,” *Era* (Bradford, PA), March 30, 1966.

<sup>59</sup>Roscoe Drummond, “Pooh-poohing Isn’t Enough,” *Leader-Times* (Kittanning, PA), March 26, 1966.

<sup>60</sup>Associated Press, “UFOs Merely Swamp Gas? Observers Won’t Buy It,” *Ogden Standard-Examiner* (Ogden, UT), March 27, 1966.

<sup>61</sup>*UFO: Friend, Foe or Fantasy?*, narrated by Walter Cronkite (May 10, 1966; New York: CBS News), Television broadcast.

the documentary was presented as being reasoned, thorough, and objective, it clearly emphasized skepticism of UFOs as an extraterrestrial phenomenon. Of note, the report interviewed several members of the “contactee” community, a fringe group of UFO believers who claimed to have interacted with extraterrestrials. Accordingly, each interviewee was depicted—largely through their own words—as highly eccentric.

Prior to the mid-1960s, mainstream journalists largely ignored the contactee community, which dated to the earliest days of UFO sightings. The situation changed in October 1965 when the *Portsmouth* (New Hampshire) *Herald* ran a front-page feature about Betty and Barney Hill, a Portsmouth couple who claimed to have been abducted in 1961. The Hills, an interracial couple who appeared to be sober and credible, said they encountered a UFO on a remote New Hampshire highway in September 1961. The Hills remembered seeing the saucer and its occupants and hearing strange “beeping sounds,” but they could not account for a two-hour period after the sighting. Three years later, during hypnosis, the couple shared common memories of being abducted and examined by extraterrestrial beings. Although the Hills shared the account publicly in 1963, news organizations did not report on the incident until the *Portsmouth Herald* feature appeared. The account quickly circulated nationally via wire service reports and in October 1966 resulted in a two-part national feature in *Look* magazine and a book, *Interrupted Journey*.<sup>62</sup> Of significance, these stories were largely descriptive, and none scrutinized the issues implicit in the Hills’ account (e.g., the validity of hypnotic-induced memories, or even the physical evidence).

A year later, mainstream journalists crossed another threshold that once differentiated legitimate news from UFO enthusiast literature: animal mutilation by unworldly sources. This storyline surfaced in an October 5, 1967 Associated Press report from Alamosa, Colorado: “Snippy, a 3-year-old Appaloosa horse didn’t return to the Harry King ranch for her usual evening drink Sept. 7 and her owner is blaming a flying saucer or at least a radioactive surgeon.” The story reported that when the owner found Snippy two days later, “there were no tracks around the dead horse, but the animal had been completely skinned.”<sup>63</sup> The owners also reported finding “15 circular exhaust marks” near the carcass and that a forestry official had checked the area with a Geiger counter and found a high radiation count.<sup>64</sup> Given the story’s visibility and proximity to the Colorado UFO Project, a month later project officials investigated the incident and determined that the horse died of natural causes (i.e., probably an infected

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<sup>62</sup>John Fuller “Aboard a Flying Saucer,” *Look*, October 4 and 18, 1966; John Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey: Two Lost Hours* (London: Dial Press, 1966).

<sup>63</sup>Associated Press, “Victim of Saucer Creatures?” *Farmington Daily Times* (Farmington, NM), October 5, 1967.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

leg) and that its carcass appeared consistent with normal decomposition. The allegations of exhaust marks and radioactivity proved to be false. Colorado UFO Project investigators attributed the mistakes in the Snippy stories to “the absence of reliable sources.” When pressed for readable copy about the incident, reporters uncritically relied on the horse’s owner, a UFO enthusiast.<sup>65</sup>

By the end of 1967, UFO reportage had become increasingly diffuse and remained bereft of solid information. Accordingly, the University of Colorado UFO Project corresponded to a transitional period of UFO journalism. After the Colorado UFO Project issued its final report in late 1968 and Project Blue Book was terminated the following year, UFO concerns no longer could be directed to any central government agency. This factor not only deprived journalists of a routine and readily available news source, but also decentralized UFO inquiry. The sightings continued, and so did news coverage, but the media and cultural landscape were changing rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The last clear-cut UFO wave occurred in 1973, and journalists largely presented the reports as local news items. Nonetheless, the UFO phenomenon certainly did not end; it merely evolved away from legacy news frameworks and into diverse information niches that characterized increasingly hypermediated social systems. Yet even as the UFO phenomenon evolved significantly since 1968, the phenomenon continues—and it continues to reflect journalistic legacies that date to June 1947.

## Conclusions

From the outset, some scientists and government officials blamed journalists for the UFO phenomenon. For example, Philip Morrison, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology told *ABC News* in 1967: “It is a social phenomenon of journalism and television. If you look in the newspapers and journals of a hundred years ago, you’ll see the same thing ... they’re much more frequent now.”<sup>66</sup> The present study provides a more complex understanding of this situation. Even as journalists played a distinctive role in hyping and often obfuscating the UFO phenomenon, the study better situates this reality amid the diverse factors that shaped mid-twentieth-century social systems. In these respects, few journalistic texts better exemplify Carey’s argument that journalism needs to be viewed as a corpus. Nothing related to the UFO phenomenon emerged or transpired in isolation; rather, the phenomenon was dynamic and reflected the interconnectedness of media, culture, and society in time.

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<sup>65</sup>Strentz, 279.

<sup>66</sup>*We Are Not Alone*, narrated by Edward P. Morgan (August 10, 1967; New York: ABC News), Television Broadcast.

Accordingly, in contrast to well-documented journalistic hoaxes such as the *New York Sun's* Great Moon Hoax of 1835 and Orson Welles's faux-journalistic *War of the Worlds* hoax in 1938, the postwar UFO phenomenon was not a journalistic hoax.<sup>67</sup> This observation represents one of the present study's most central findings. Although in some cases UFO news coverage involved public-generated hoaxes, the news phenomenon reflected genuine, significant journalistic concerns. Most notably, post-1947 UFO waves were not animated by fear of extraterrestrial invasions, even as popular culture exploited this perspective. Instead, much of the public's concern originally traced to fear of communism, Soviet invasion, and nuclear attack.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, the UFO issue commanded interest at the highest levels of the United States government, and UFO sightings became a legitimate issue of public affairs reporting and science journalism. Furthermore, unlike the *War of the Worlds* and moon hoaxes, publicly reported UFO sightings were not short-lived, one-time situations; rather, the phenomenon has persisted and evolved for seven decades.

Several findings highlight the relationship between news organizations and the UFO phenomenon. Journalists effectively named the phenomenon, and the attendant news coverage legitimized otherwise ambiguous and problematic situations and views. Additionally, news reports naturally directed the public's attention skyward where mysterious phenomena are abundant and, in the absence of a good science background, easily misinterpreted. As members of the public reported these experiences, journalists routinely combined unrelated situations and generated a faux national phenomenon. Then, as James E. McDonald, atmospheric physicist at the University of Arizona, lamented to Strentz in 1967, news organizations not only failed to adequately investigate these reports, but also journalists demonstrated a "propensity to poke fun and to twist into feature-story humor the seriously reported sightings that many citizens have made."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>John Gosling, *Waging the War of the Worlds: A History of the 1938 Radio Broadcast and Resulting Panic, Including the Original Script* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009); Brian Thornton, "The Moon Hoax: Debates about Ethics in 1835 New York Newspapers," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 15, no. 2 (2000): 89–100.

<sup>68</sup>Strentz, 170–75. Fear of communist infiltration was among the key cultural dynamics that influenced the UFO phenomenon for years. Of significance, in early 1953 a secretive scientific panel chaired by H. P. Robertson, a theoretical physicist at California Institute of Technology, met to review government UFO research. The panel concluded, in part, that there was little to be gained by scientific study of UFOs. But the discussion, which included CIA representatives, worried that UFO hysteria might, "in these parlous times, result in a threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic." So instead of terminating Air Force involvement, the panel called for continued government action to educate the public and debunk UFO reports in light of the perceived communist threat.

<sup>69</sup>Strentz, v.

Such critiques underscore other problematic issues that emerged from the present research. Journalists helped establish and facilitate one of the most compelling social-scientific issues of the era, but they often failed to follow up on many relevant news angles. In general, news organizations did not address the issue strategically, and assimilative “big picture” coverage was rare. Consequently, most UFO coverage was tactical, poorly coordinated, and reactive. Moreover, journalists evidenced little ethical or professional reflexivity in these contexts. Yet not all publications fell prey to these shortcomings, and this reality indicates that journalistic dysfunction need not have prevailed. For example, throughout the 1950s, *Saturday Review* produced insightful features on UFOs.<sup>70</sup> However, few news organizations followed this path; consequently, journalists overlooked several important public affairs issues related to UFOs. These issues include the need to better delineate the roles of science and the government, weaknesses in science education, and—most glaring—the paucity of Air Force UFO investigations. At a practical level, most researchers acknowledge that at least ninety-five percent of UFO reports involved the misidentification of natural or human-made objects,<sup>71</sup> and because so many UFO stories involved smaller local newspapers, reporters often uncritically relied on unnamed or inexperienced sources.

Such insights point toward larger challenges and opportunities for journalism historians. Of significance, the first decades of UFO journalism highlight the vital affiliations between local newspapers and wire services in the mid-twentieth century. This relationship proved critical in shaping journalistic coverage of scientific phenomena that crossed human-drawn geographic and temporal boundaries. Additionally, the preceding study underscores the value of examining journalism history through an appropriate conceptual framework. In this instance, the study depicts particular historical conditions that changed significantly as the 1970s progressed. Future research into related phenomena needs to acknowledge this reality and employ different conceptual lenses as appropriate (e.g., theories of postmodernism). From all perspectives, the flying saucer phenomenon ultimately reflected more about what was happening in society than it edified mysterious phenomena in the sky. As such, the topic remains a revealing cultural mirror that warrants continued historical inquiry.

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<sup>70</sup>Siegfried Mandel, “Great Saucer Hunt,” *Saturday Review*, August 6, 1955, 28–29; Donald H. Robey, “Theory About Flying Saucers,” *Saturday Review*, September 5, 1959, 51–55.

<sup>71</sup>“Unidentified Flying Objects and Air Force Project Blue Book,” *US Air Force Fact Sheet* (Washington, DC), April 25, 2003, <http://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104590/unidentified-flying-objects-and-air-force-project-blue-book/>.