

# A proposal to end conspiracy theories among scientists

by Tim Baumgartner

## **Abstract**

There is a growing number of scientists<sup>1</sup> who believe in conspiracy theories regarding 9/11. They often call the well researched<sup>2</sup> background of the terror attacks the "official conspiracy theory" and they tend to euphemistically call themselves "skeptics"<sup>3</sup> of this theory.

This article presents a promising experiment to use interviews with physics professors to effectively fight the further rise of conspiracy theories among scientists. Additionally, it makes a proposal to derive a professional survey from the initial experiment that would be useful to reach the proposed goals on a broad level of the scientific society.

## **A new strategy**

This work is not the first proposal to deal with the conspiracy theories problem. Cass Sunstein called for a tax for their spreading and for the cognitive infiltration of conspiracy groups by the government<sup>4</sup>. While the author has not seen any evidence this proposal might have been implemented, he is aware of a negative consequence it might unleash: Because of it being available to the public in the form of the original article, it might rise the suspicion that the government is not even willing to treat conspiracy theorists and their statements in a "fair" way. There is a potential danger that theories even become absurder because of this.

Because this article focuses on conspiracy theorists in science, a new strategy has been chosen – with the goal to refute certain theories that are relatively scientific in their nature. Those theories can be openly discussed in a scientific way and thus convincingly be refuted.

An ad hoc poll among physicists has been performed and will be presented here. It's goal was to find physical errors in a rather popular conspiracy theory. Since this experiment did not lead to the desired result, a proposal for a professional survey will be derived from it. This survey among scientists is expected to irrefutably show the nonsense of the theory being subjected. Because conspiracy theorists might criticize the survey and call it onesided, which might even further strengthen them in their thoughts, it is of vital importance to include some leading conspiracy theorists in the process of deriving the survey.

## ***The ad hoc poll – telephone interviews with physicists***

The author talked to five randomly chosen physicists in June 2012. Among them were four professors from german universities, three of which were heads of their departments. The fifth one was an english speaking, british sounding scientist whose academic grade was unknown to the author. The goal of the conversation was to get to know the assessments of the physicists regarding a rather popular conspiracy theory which we will call the "free fall theory".

The free fall theory is not exactly a conspiracy theory because it does not include any conspiracy. But since it is a relatively scientific sounding theory and it is often part of larger conspiracy theories, it has been chosen anyway.

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1 Like the Scholars for 9/11 Truth & Justice: <http://stj911.org>

2 FEMA: <http://www.fema.gov/rebuild/mat/wtcestudy.shtm>

9/11 Commission: <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911>

NIST: <http://www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc>

3 In order to get a feeling of how conspiracy theorists think, it is an interesting experiment to read this article while replacing "conspiracy theorist" with "skeptic" and the articulation of conspiracy theories with "doubt".

4 Conspiracy Theories, Cass R. Sunstein, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1084585](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1084585) (2008)

**The free fall (conspiracy) theory:** *The official report for the collapse of WTC 7 is false because for physical reasons, a high-rise cannot fall with free fall acceleration due to office fires<sup>5</sup>.*

The physicists were being asked a politically apparently neutral question in order to ensure they would give an answer purely based on science. Political interference was not desired. The conversations can be categorized like this:

For the first scientist, the obfuscation did not work. He immediately knew the question was about WTC 7. He turned out to be a conspiracy theorist claiming he did not talk to colleagues about his theories. He even tried to defend himself by calling them his "private opinion".

The other four physicists didn't have any knowledge about WTC 7. Nevertheless, in some conversations the World Trade Center was being mentioned. Surprisingly, two of them immediately ruled out the possibility of a free fall due to fire in a high-rise. Another one called it "problematic", yet another one "devious" ["abwegig" in german].

## **Analyzing the poll**

At first sight, the results of the ad hoc poll seem not to completely refute the free fall conspiracy theory. This might be caused by the choice of physicists being questioned. Or it might be caused by the interrogation technique being used. To get precise answers to these questions, the author proposes to start a new professional scientific survey. This survey should be developed in cooperation with both normal scientists and conspiracy theorists being involved. The reason for this is that the ignoring of the conspiracy theorists in the development of the survey might result in attacks calling it onesided, finally perhaps even leading to a theory that the survey in itself was yet another conspiracy. In this survey, a large number of physicists should be questioned in order to eliminate statistical accidents like the one leading to the wrong result in the above ad hoc poll.

About the author: *Tim Baumgartner, born in 1974, has a degree in mathematics from the university of Bonn, Germany. He has been working for more than seven years as a software engineer. Since May 2011, he extensively researched the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. He tries to fight them by an open scientific discussion without ad-hominem arguments.*

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5 WTC 7 was a 47-story high-rise that collapsed at 5:20 pm on 9/11. The official report NIST NCSTAR 1A found fires to be the collapse reason. In section 3.6, it contains the information that the building was in free fall for 2.25 seconds.

The report online: [http://www.nist.gov/manuscript-publication-search.cfm?pub\\_id=861610](http://www.nist.gov/manuscript-publication-search.cfm?pub_id=861610)