

**PARANOID TIMES**  
**An Interview with Providence's PARANOIA Magazine**

**By Rebekah Bergman**

*(This interview appeared in The College Hill Independent (Brown University/RISD Weekly, October 29, 2009 – Note: The newspaper published only a small part of the entire interview and we are not sure if they liked our comments about Noam Chomsky :-)*

**What is your role at PARANOIA?**

Joan: One of my roles is covered by the phrase “huntergatheress” – a title I came up with in the early 90s because it felt like I was hunting and gathering fringe material for publication. Today I still do that, although my hunting and gathering niches are located in the more virtual ground of cyberspace. Of course, once I gather the carcass of the beast, I have to tear it apart and consume some, and give some to the other staff members to consume and make tools. We sometimes refer to it as “editing,” “proofreading” and “fact checking.”

Al: Joan and I both wear many hats. I have generally been the “numbers” guy, the “technical” guy and the “graphics/layout” guy, but not always. Editorially, Joan and I tend to balance each other out in terms of areas of interest and credulity, so I think we make a good team.

**Can you tell me about the history of the magazine? How did PARANOIA first come to be?**

Joan: *PARANOIA* was born out of the Providence Conspiracy League in my now defunct Providence book store, Newspeak, in 1992. For your readers at Brown, Newspeak was originally located on Richmond Street in 1992, and then moved to the bottom of College Hill in the Steeple Street building (above New Rivers Restaurant). It was the only book store back then that sold conspiracy books. Now conspiracy books are ubiquitous. Back then we raised some eyebrows and everyone thought we were pretty much nuts, until George “Dubya” Bush put us on the map during his nightmare twice-stolen presidency.

Al: One day, I brought a red binder into the store, and I'd pasted a big picture of Lee Harvey Oswald on the front. That became a repository for various conspiracy clippings and material, and it quickly evolved into a magazine once the binder couldn't hold any more. Joan and I invested \$500 each to have it printed, and we took it door-to-door to various independent bookstores in the Providence area. Soon, we managed to convince a few gullible magazine distributors to carry us, and we were on our way.

**How would you describe the magazine's mission? Has it changed at all since 1992?**

Al: I think our mission has always been to confuse and scare people by presenting alternative and even contradictory viewpoints, in a crafty mix of entertainment and enlightenment. We've broadened our subject matter over the years, but the mission has remained constant.

**Was there an original public need or demand for a conspiracy magazine?**

Joan: Well, we thought there was, in order to counter the mainstream, but also to counter the leftists, who had a problem with “boundaries”, in other words, who they could touch or what they could talk about. We were arched somewhere between the left and the right, somehow subsuming both of them and struggling to show people how the two polarities didn’t really exist, except where they were meant to divide and conquer and keep us arguing. Consider that there was not yet an internet, and the newspapers, even supposed leftist newspapers, were still parroting the mainstream media’s explanations, and some still do, for instance, you still have Noam Chomsky arguing against 9/11 conspiracy theories and JFK conspiracy theories. So we felt back then and still do that the left wasn’t going far enough in its analysis. So in our broaching of these untouchable subjects, we were often mistaken as “right wing.” But over the years, by mixing left and right points of view into our fringe analysis, people finally caught on that we weren’t right wing at all, we were just trying to get them beyond right-left thinking.

**Was there any publication *PARANOIA* was using as a model?**

Joan: Not that I can think of because we were the only periodical that was willing to touch a lot of the “untouchable” material and mix it in with absurd kookiness and really scrub out the brain of all earlier assumptions. As the book buyer for Newspeak, I was able to get my hands on conspiracy books, and these book titles became more and more ubiquitous as the years rolled by and as the juggernaut rolled out its New World Order plans; for instance, the most popular book in the land in 1994 was William Cooper’s *Behold a Pale Horse*. However, if we were mimicking anything in popular culture it may have subconsciously been the tabloids. If you look at the first four issues of *PARANOIA* (posted as PDFs on our website), you’ll see the early tabloid style: black and white covers where several stories start right on the cover. In fact, this style made many people wonder whether we were serious or tongue-in-cheek. The answer to that conundrum is that we were both, but we were also protecting ourselves from lawsuits under the “parody” clause of the Constitution.

**At the time, were there any competing conspiracy publications or any other magazine whose readership you were hoping to catch? How about now? Have other publications followed your lead?**

Joan: There were a few conspiracy magazines we were aware of in 1992. But mainly we had our own ball to roll up the hill and we were rolling it in our own freestyle. I don’t think anyone has ever captured that style and I don’t think the style has a name, except for “*PARANOIA*.”

Al: The thing is, we started this thing with no magazine publishing experience whatsoever and just kind of closed our eyes and jumped into it. Concepts like competitive analysis, reader demographics, and advertising revenue were completely foreign to us. We just wanted to publish a cool magazine.

**How, if at all, was *PARANOIA* responding to current events in 1992?**

Joan: Initially, in 1992, we were responding to the Ruby Ridge event in Idaho, where the FBI and federal marshals had a violent confrontation with the Weaver family, culminating in the

killing of Randy Weaver's pregnant wife. This event was followed by the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, and the FBI siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco. These events sparked a huge outpouring of citizen paranoia, and we were there to take notes. We also covered the man-made AIDS theories, which the left wouldn't touch, as well as many historical conspiracies, like the JFK and RFK assassinations, Jonestown, Watergate, the Kent State massacre, the Pine Ridge massacre and Leonard Peltier—usually getting to issues that the left wouldn't address, for instance, that the victims who died at Jonestown were killed by mercenaries, not by Kool-Aid.

**Do you think the magazine was at all influenced by the surge in 'zines' in the 1990s?**

Al: It was more like various technological and economic forces were influencing lots of people at the same time, and at some point we all realized that there was a 'zine scene. I view the 'zine surge as part of a larger trend towards DIY/prosumer culture, the relative democratization of media production.

**How did you start soliciting writers? Has your network of writers grown?**

Joan: The first few issues of *PARANOIA* were actually written by the members of the Providence Conspiracy League. Then after the magazine got out there by newsstand distribution, we began to establish relationships with other writers. So if you notice on our free PDFs on the website, the original writers were Joan d'Arc, Al Hidell, Mark Westion, and various other pseudonymous individuals from the Providence Conspiracy League. Back then, I had to write to people using pen, paper, and stamps and wait a long time for a reply. Submissions were often handwritten and I had to type the articles myself. So as you can imagine, yes, since the internet and email, our pool of writers has grown enormously, and also, we don't have to type as much.

**How would you describe your writers? What drives them to submit their theories to *PARANOIA*?**

Al: I think our writers are driven by the same forces that drive most writers—the desire to express and share their view of the world. They are passionate about their ideas, but they generally don't fit the stereotype of the wild-eyed, rambling kook. We're all rather boring and ordinary, actually, although we still receive the occasional ream of dense, rambling, pages written in tiny, shaky handwriting.

**What was your first circulation? What is your current circulation?**

Joan: First circulation was a zine we had xeroxed at Kinko's on the east side of Providence near Brown. Maybe at most 100 copies. We sold it at Newspeak. But when we mailed it to a few magazine distributors, they suggested more pages and a heavier print stock. So we had to find a real printer. We did both of those things and by the second issue we were distributed to newsstands mainly on the east coast. Once larger distributors got on board the circulation grew to as high as 15,000 copies. We printed about 10,000 copies of issue 51, the current and last issue in magazine format.

**Where can a person get the current issue or back issues of *PARANOIA*?**

Joan: The best place to get current or back issues is directly from us at [www.paranoiamagazine.com](http://www.paranoiamagazine.com) or POB 1041, Providence, RI 02901 (each issue is \$7). The website also contains several free PDF downloads of sold out back issues. If you felt like taking a road trip, there are now two libraries where one can see a complete set of all 51 issues of *PARANOIA*: Baylor University Political Archives in Waco, Texas, and University of RI, Special Collections, in Kingston, Rhode Island. If Brown University would like a complete set, we can perhaps arrange that.

**Can you tell me about your reader-base? Who is the typical *PARANOIA* reader? What motivates them to read your publication?**

Al: We eventually made some feeble attempts at gathering demographic data from our readership in order to be more effective at attracting advertisers, but the whole thing went against our grain and it kind of petered out. Also, most of our readers probably aren't particularly eager to reveal their personal information anyway. I mean, we're a conspiracy magazine.

**What are you hoping to give the reader with each issue?**

Joan: A third eye in their forehead that gets bigger and bigger with each issue.

Al: Again, it's a mix of entertainment and enlightenment. God knows which is which. We always say, "We let the reader decide."

**Who decided to name the magazine *PARANOIA*? Why?**

Al: I came up with the name. It seemed like a good in-your-face name, a way to throw the coincidence theorists off balance. It was like saying, "Yeah, we're paranoid. And we have good reason to be. What's your point?"

**Why do the editors use pseudonyms?**

Joan: To protect us from people who throw pies.

Al: And from Noam Chomsky.

**In a note from the editor in Issue 1, Al Hidell wrote, "*PARANOIA* is about the news they don't print in Newsweek, the people they don't cover in People. We're an antidote to media coverage." In the early years, do you think people were open to receiving the alternative news offered in your magazine? How about now?**

Al: Oh, these days people are definitely more open to alternative news and views. They see that a lot of the crazy things we ranted about in the 1990s are coming true!

**In your opinion, how has the mainstream media changed since 1992? Has news coverage expanded or narrowed?**

AI: The mainstream media has become slightly more accepting of conspiratorial viewpoints, but not by much. They've become more polarized towards the Right and Left, certainly. Under Bush, the liberal conspiracy theorists got more coverage. Now, under Obama, it's those on the Right. But the point is, the mainstream media has become less relevant since 1992. People have access to more information sources now.

But there's still been nothing quite like going into Borders and seeing *PARANOIAS* amongst the *Newsweeks*. In that sense, the newsstands are still one of the most level playing fields for alternative viewpoints. Every magazine browser can pick up and examine both magazines. The shelf that *Newsweek* is on does not get millions more passersby than the shelf that *PARANOIA* is on. The problem is, there's not a whole lot of shelf space available, and that space is still controlled by one or two big distributors.

**How have people's attitudes toward mainstream media evolved in light of developments in the Internet and web-based news? How would you describe the current societal demand for alternative news venues like *PARANOIA*?**

AI: In 2009, you don't have to publish a physical magazine anymore. Every conspiracy theorist can have their own website, their own blog, their own podcast, their own YouTube video, and their own print-on-demand book, all without having to spend thousands of dollars. So the barriers to the creation of alternative content have come way down, which is great. The Internet has also brought down the barriers to the distribution of alternative content, at least in theory. But even on the web, most of the top 15 news sites are still controlled by major media conglomerates. A few top Hollywood movies and a few bestsellers still generate most video and book sales. People still, by and large, limit themselves to a few mostly mainstream news sources. That's if they are even interested enough to consume news reports of any kind. A lot of people still have their head in the sand.

**How is today's society searching for different explanations to cultural phenomena? Compared with the 90s, do you think people today are more or less complacent to accept what the media tells them? Why?**

AI: I think people are definitely more suspicious and less trusting than in the 90s. But the suspicion and lack of trust is still largely along ideological lines. In other words, Fox News viewers tend to be very skeptical of MSNBC's "liberal bias," while MSNBC news viewers don't trust Fox News. It's a kind of ideologically selective paranoia, which I guess is better than none at all.

**Can you tell me more about the submission process? How do you decide which submissions to accept? Do you believe every theory you publish?**

AI: The submission process is chaotic and often serendipitous. And, no, we don't believe every theory we publish.

Joan: Right, we often let synchronicity rule! If a conspiracy theory is internally logical and

consistent, it does not have to match any external template or worldview, or something like that.

**I know *PARANOIA* will soon be publishing in book format. Why the change?**

Joan: Well, in a word, it's the economy. In 2008, 525 magazines ceased publication; in 2007, about 590 of them went under. There's actually a website that's keeping track (magazinedeathpool.com). Essentially, the magazine is a throwaway luxury item and a vehicle for advertisers. Books went digital a few years ago, but that didn't happen with magazine distribution, which is still stuck in the old consignment paradigm. Although we pay to print all of them, more than half are destroyed by the retailers. Chain bookstore buyers order way more than they can sell, simply because they're free eye candy for their shelves. So think of it this way, digital press is eclipsing the old consignment model, and we're switching tracks before the magazine distributors rip us off entirely. We like to think our foresight is as sharp as our hindsight.

**Do you think the book layout will change your readership at all? How?**

Joan: Yes, we're hoping the readership will grow since the book will be available on Amazon, and any web catalog or book store that wants to sell it will be able to buy it through Ingram or Baker & Taylor, two of the largest booksellers in the U.S. Currently, our subscribers have been trading in their subscriptions toward the new book format, and they seem to be on board one hundred percent. They understand the economics we're dealing with, and they're just glad we found an alternative way to continue what we've been doing for 17 years.

**Over the years, what articles have you enjoyed the most?**

Joan: My personal favorites are the JFK assassination articles we've published over the years. But on a more playful note, I loved the article in issue 45 claiming that Edgar Allan Poe faked his death in 1849 and lived out his life in France. Next time you think you're having a bad day, remember that Poe was drugged by the "repeaters" in Baltimore and forced to vote nearly a dozen times the same day. I'll always wonder who he was forced to vote for. I also loved the article in issue 47 about Betty Hill's infamous "star map." You think you've had bad road trips, in 1961 Betty and Barney Hill were the first to report an alien abduction in America, which occurred in Exeter, New Hampshire while returning home from a trip to Canada. They were both given a full medical exam on board the alien spaceship. I also loved the article in issue 33 about Charles Manson, who claimed the Beatles were beaming subliminal messages directly to him with songs from the White Album.

**Which theories, in your opinion, are the most well-founded?**

Joan: The most well founded conspiracy theory revolves around the mystery and enigma of Lee Harvey Oswald, who in issue 45 we call "Fortean Man." Every single piece of his existence has been investigated in depth by conspiracy geeks the world over, and none of it fits. He seems to walk through walls like a shapeshifting media structure. The only thing that makes sense is the one thing he was able to state publicly with TV cameras rolling, "I am a patsy."

**Which theories do you not believe?**

Joan: I personally do not believe David Icke's theory that the ruling elites of the planet, like the Queen Mum, are able to shapeshift into their reptilian-human extraterrestrial counterparts at sordid retreats like the Bohemian Grove. Not that I don't believe the elites partake in occult rituals at such secretive locations, but if there are any reptilians around, I would say they're masks.

**What does being paranoid mean to you? Would you describe yourself as paranoid?**

Joan: Paranoia is side vision, the ability to see out the corners of your eye, and not allowing consensus reality to put blinders there. We are all beset by such blinders from our parents, teachers, media, church, and television, from the moment we're born. I prefer to describe myself as a "conspiracy geek" but I'm not particularly opposed to the term "paranoid." Paranoia is defined as "an unfounded or exaggerated distrust," or the "belief that someone is plotting against them." While I don't believe someone is plotting against me personally, I do believe someone is plotting against the people of America. You have only to look at the recent Wall Street debacle to know that the rich people of this country aim to break our backs as they're walking on them to get to the bank.

**It's nearly Halloween. What should we be afraid of?**

Joan: Some things that you should be spooked about this Halloween: Some pet food contains the remains of other people's dead pets; The world is run by extraterrestrial reptilian shapeshifters; There is depleted uranium in your backyard; There are sinister forces in American politics; Codex Alimentarius is coming!; There are invisible pulsating space critters in the sky; The Virgin Mary is Isis warmed over; The dollar is crashing and we're heading for the Greatest Depression the world has ever known; but luckily, the Elves are here to help us, just look around and you'll see them. Incidentally, these spooky things were all published in *PARANOIA*.