

Mutual mistrust may have added a few X-files to the UFO era

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A UFO photographed over Minneapolis in Minnesota in October 1960. Credit: CIA.gov

Uncloaking the flying saucer movement in the United States could offer historians a snapshot of Cold War attitudes at work in society, as well as

insights into how science communication may be tied to current denialism and conspiracy theory movements, according to a Penn State historian.

Scientists, military officials and amateur unidentified flying object investigators—often called ufologists—have clashed almost since the start of the modern flying saucer era, which began in 1947 when aviator Kenneth Arnold spotted what he claimed were nine silver flying discs in the Cascade Mountains of Washington, said Greg Eghigian, associate professor of modern history, Penn State.

"From that event, this very quickly explodes and becomes a focus of media attention, but the question for me as a historian is why haven't historians been more curious about what took place and what has been going on for some time now," said Eghigian. "It's had clear impact on the way people think about science, the way people think about technology and the way they think about government and authority."

Eghigian, who reports his finding in a recent issue of *Public Understanding of Science*, said that the UFO phenomenon has ebbed and flowed since the late 1940s, but has recently died down from its height, something he attributes to the end of the Cold War.



'Flying saucers' spotted over Sheffield in March 1952. Credit: CIA.gov

"I think there is evidence that it's not the same phenomenon that it once was, at least as a mass movement that people are mesmerized by," said Eghigian. "It was Cold War anxieties—but also Cold War enthusiasms and passions—that had a direct impact on this."

According to Eghigian, in a sample of 25 newspapers, the number of headlines mentioning UFOs or flying saucers has fallen to less than 20 headlines each year in the post-Cold War era. Prior to the 1990s, there tended to be more than 40 headlines about the phenomena annually.

"The United States is coming out of World War II, so the country is concerned about national security and still has a war-like mentality," Eghigian said. "It's a world that is rife with secrecy and preserving secrecy, so this helps inform both how governments and militaries deal with evidence."

Mainstream scientists were almost immediately dismissive of the UFO movement, and the ufologists' response to that dismissal, in many ways, mimics current debates on climate change and vaccination.

"One of the things that marks the long history of this movement is the question of mistrust and I see this as part and parcel of some of the skepticism we see out there today," said Eghigian. "Although there are some differences, the UFO debate was kind of the granddaddy of them all and could be a model for looking at some of these other controversies."

Scholars and scientists tend to believe that when lay people disagree with scientific findings, they are either biased or that they are ignorant about science, Eghigian said. However, ufology does not easily fit that framework, he added.

"My experience with the UFO phenomena and the history of ufology is that these amateur investigators have not at all been ignorant of science," said Eghigian. "This goes with other theories that it's less that people distrust science than that they distrust scientists and scientific institutions—that is the disconnect that needs to be explained."

In many cases, after being shut out of mainstream scientific research, amateur UFO investigators formed separate groups that emulated scientific method and tried to copy it in their own studies, he said.

"Ufologists didn't try to take over scientific fields or institutions,"

Eghigian said. "What they did was to create parallel institutions and mimic what academics did, create organizations, hold conferences and do research and investigations."

The over-reliance on the UFO community's own research, however, only further bolstered academics' mistrust in the research results of these enthusiasts.

"The study really isn't meant to weigh in on the question of whether UFOs are possibly extraterrestrial in origin," said Eghigian. "I think the bigger point is how scientists, officials and ufologists have attempted to understand each other."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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