THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE:

THE X FILES, THE 1990S, AND AMERICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

By

Jennie Epp

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in History

Middle Tennessee University

May 2015

Thesis Committee

Dr. Amy Sayward, Co-chair

Dr. Kristine McCusker Co-chair

In Memory of Peggy Parker
Friends are the family you choose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since this thesis is a study of television, it would be remiss of me not to thank the extraordinary cast of individuals who have made this thesis possible. The Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) History Department has been amazing during this entire process. I was fortunate enough to be awarded the Thelma Jennings Scholarship twice during my time as a graduate student. This award made it possible for me to take two summer classes, which I would have not been able to afford without assistance. In addition, the faculty and staff within the History Department have gone far beyond what they are required to do in their willingness to help, not only myself, but the entire graduate student community. I speak for all of the graduate student body, when I say that we could not survive this grueling process without you. Thank you.

The individuals who helped bring this manuscript before you are many. I would like to take the time to thank Dr. Pippa Holloway, for her tireless and often thankless work as graduate coordinator. I am very grateful to have been your student and teaching assistant. I hope to one day be as good an instructor as you. Thank you for all of your help these past two years.

About five years ago, two MTSU History professors decided that there was something worth working with in a community-college transfer student. Their dedication to my success now spans two educational degrees, and there is no scenario where I would be where I am without their unwavering encouragement and assistance. Dr. Amy Sayward and Dr. Kristine McCusker, you both have taught me what it means to be an ardent historian, a good professor, but above all, what those skills look like when accompanied by genuine desire for the success of students. I am so grateful to have had

the opportunity to be one of those successful students, and I hope to one day say I influenced a student as much as you both have impacted me. Thank you does not seem enough.

My family has supported me throughout this entire process, and I could not have finished this thesis without their love and support. My parents, Brad and Karen Epp, instilled in me, at a young age, the importance of education and a lifelong love of learning. My brother Chris continuously inspires me to keep moving forward even through setbacks. I love all of you so much. My relatives from Nebraska and Tennessee, thanks for being amazingly supportive. Likewise, huge thanks to my friends who have helped keep me caffeinated and focused. Graduate school has been the best experience of my life, and I owe much of that joy to the individuals who I have studied alongside and stressed out with these past two years. Specifically, those who I have worked with as a teaching assistant and those of you who I sat alongside with in graduate seminars. I am excited to see all of your published works at future American Historical Association conferences.

Lastly, I would like to thank Jeanna Kinnebrew for being the best support system, friend, and colleague that anyone could ever want. I did not know when I showed up to Cold War Seminar that I would meet my kindred spirit. You have inspired and kept me going more than you will ever know. Thank you for reading countless drafts, talking through my writer's block, and making me laugh every single stressful day. Next stop, world domination.

ABSTRACT

Premiering on September 10, 1993, *The X Files* offered television viewers an alternative message to the prevailing optimism and triumphalism of the post-Soviet landscape. *The X Files* shadowed that bright world by questioning all forms of authority. It asked its audiences to question all forms of authority--whether that authority was science, god, or the state--and these questions, though not unique to humanity, were unique to the post-Cold War television set. The program represents an America in transition, and its successes are indicative of the unease that existed in society between the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1993 and the beginning of the U.S. War on Terror in 2001.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE: *THE X FILES* AND COLD WAR AMERICA

On a warm September day, the United States of America entered into conflict with a new and borderless enemy, one previously unfamiliar to the majority of the population. Its citizens tuned their televisions and witnessed the end of innocence and security. This abrupt shift in national consciousness did not occur, as one might assume, on September 11, 2001. Instead, this revolution began on September 10, 1993, the evening *The X Files* television program premiered on the FOX network. For much of the twentieth century, Communism, personified by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), had represented the enemy of the free world. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the people of the United States found themselves the sudden victors of a decades-long Cold War. The Cold War had enveloped the U.S. Government's domestic and global rhetoric with policies of containment and eastern distrust. When capitalism and democracy emerged victors from the frigid shadows of a divided globe, some wondered what the cost of "winning" the Cold War had been for the United States. Others were uneasy with the disappearance of "the other" against which the U.S. had so long defined itself. *The X Files* animated these uncertainties, questionings, and currents of unease.

Premiering on September 10, 1993, *The X Files* offered television viewers an alternative message to the prevailing optimism and triumphalism of the post-Soviet landscape. *The X Files* shadowed that bright world by questioning all forms of authority. At the time of the show's inception in 1993, the United States was

experiencing high global popularity as the perceived victor of the Cold War conflict against Communism and a successful military operation against the forces of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in Kuwait. A hot domestic war replaced the global Cold War in many ways. The United States, during the nineties, experienced race riots, high profile scandals among athletes and presidents, and school shootings and bombings, and it was within this media landscape that *The X Files* premiered. The American people did not have a recognizable, formal, enemy after 1992. Instead of seeing foreign fears and invasions on their screens, television audiences witnessed the disturbing unknowns within their own country. These viewers turned out en masse to watch a show that ten years earlier likely would have only received the attention of recovering *Star Trek* fans. *The X Files* asked its audiences to question all forms of authority--whether that authority was science, god, or the state--and these questions, though not unique to humanity, were unique to the post-Cold War television set. The program represents an America in transition, and its successes are indicative of the unease that existed in society between the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1993 and the beginning of the U.S. War on Terror in 2001.[1]

Chris Carter, creator of *The X Files,* was himself a product of the Cold War. Born in 1953, he is the antithesis of a stereotypical, science fiction, conspiracy theorist. A surfer turned television producer, Carter was mystified by the lack of scary programing on television during the 1980s and early 1990s. Influenced by *The Twilight Zone*, *Kolchak*, and *Night Stalker*, he set out to create a show that offered viewers terrifying

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[1]*The X Files* received numerous Golden Globes, People's Choice, and Emmy awards during its tenure. It saturated popular culture during the 1990s, with media spreads, merchandise, and cultural references within other popular culture media.

possibilities. Carter pitched the concept of *The X Files* a couple of times before he came

across a Harvard sociologist's research on the three percent of American people who

claimed they had been abducted by aliens. In a 1993 interview with the <u>Los Angeles

Times,</u>[2] he expounded on his understanding of the findings. Carter explained that with

such a high percentage of the population admitting to experiencing this sort of

extrasensory or personal abduction, experience and the necessary precondition of

believing in the existence of extraterrestrial life, he had the basis for the on-going

mythology, or story arc, for *The X Files*.[3] The show blended traditional "monster-of-the-

week" episodes, programs that needed no other viewing to understand the plot, with these

mythology episodes that connected to broader character and story development.

Nevertheless, every episode linked back to the overall theme of unease and suspicion

prevalent in every episode. Carter noted in an interview how important the current state

of Americans' distrust was to the show. He saw himself as being directly impacted by a

distrust of those in authority. Carter explained, "Watergate[4] was like the 'big bang' of my

moral universe, I was 15 or 16 when it spilled out on the American consciousness and

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[2] For the purposes of this paper and to help with readability, all newspapers will be underlined instead of the usual italics to help differentiate from the television shows being discussed.

[3] Joe Rhodes, "Fox's 'X-Files' Makes Contact with a Friday-Night Audience," *Los Angeles Times,* sec. Entertainment, December 12, 1993, accessed November 24, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-12-12/news/tv-894_1_secret-files ; T. J. Goldstein, "Within the Realm of Extreme Possibility: Creator Chris Carter on the X Files," *Cyberspace Vanguard Magazine* 121 (1993), accessed December 12, 2015, http://www.skeptictank.org/files/skeptic/x-filesj.htm.

[4] Watergate refers to the cover-up by U.S. President Richard Nixon's cabinet of the 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Convention headquarters during the election. It led to Congressional hearings, the eventual resignation of Nixon, and further disillusionment of the U.S. people with their government.

conscience. So the idea of questioning authority, trusting no one, is part of the fiber of my being."[5] Little grey men and men in black combined set the stage for early episodes and overall series. In the fall of 1993, FOX Television had enough faith to give the program a half-season contract. Notwithstanding the three percent of the spatially abducted population, The *X Files* was a gamble by a network that, by the nineties, had nothing to lose.[6]

FOX television—a new network—had only had a handful of comedic hits when it decided to produce a show about aliens. The success of *The Simpsons* had not given the upstart the legitimacy of a "real" network on a plane with the more established National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). FOX Television, created by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, was an edgy network known for producing shows that catered to a target demographic of 18-24 year olds. Carter wrote of the network, "FOX was being seen as the more creative more imaginative . . . more off beat place to do television."[7]Carter in a later interview explained that

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[5] "Confessions of a Mad Surfer," interview with Chris Carter January 1, 1993, accessed October 12, 2014, http://www.eatthecorn.com/itw/1993/01/.

[6] Joe Rhodes, "Fox's 'X-Files' Makes Contact with a Friday-Night Audience," *Los Angeles Times,* sec. Entertainment, December 12, 1993, accessed November 24, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-12-12/news/tv-894_1_secret-files ; T. J. Goldstein, "Within the Realm of Extreme Possibility: Creator Chris Carter on the X Files," *Cyberspace Vanguard Magazine* 121 (1993), accessed December 12, 2015, http://www.skeptictank.org/files/skeptic/x-filesj.htm.

[7] Douglas Kellner, "The X Files and the Aesthetics and Politics of Postmodern Pop," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no.2 (Spring 1999): 5.

> Each episode will function as a complete story. We put information out there and [the two main characters] learn things that are going to shape our characters. They're not going to go backwards once they see something. They're not going to then not believe in it later on, so there will be an accumulation of knowledge and experience . . . unlike mainstream television where, at the end of an episode, the world essentially returns to precisely the state it was in before the opening credits rolled.[8]

In addition, Carter argued that the program would also tackle issues of the paranormal and authoritarian distrust.

The two main characters, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Agents Fox Mulder, played by David Duchovny, and Dana Scully, played by Gillian Anderson, offered the network executives something on which to base their commitment to the offbeat show. Mulder and Scully represent polar opposites and in many ways are representative of the television audiences that watched them solve their strange and mysterious "X Files." These "X Files" cases were opened by the FBI but that seemed unsolvable due to their strange nature. Mulder, assigned to the "X Files" by choice, had been a highly proficient FBI profiler before he had a mental breakdown while dealing with the mysterious disappearance of his sister, Samantha, fifteen years earlier. After the collapse, he became obsessed with proving the existence of aliens and finding his sister (who he believed had been abducted by aliens). Even in the face of evidence to the contrary, he preferred to believe in all things paranormal and weird. On the other hand, Scully, a medical doctor, joined the FBI against her father's wishes. Originally, Scully's assignment was to monitor Mulder for the upper echelons of the bureau and to debunk his theories. However, as the program progressed, audiences witnessed how their

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[8] Goldstein, "Within the Realm of Extreme Possibility."

relationship became one of respectful disagreement about the paranormal but sincere personal trust.

This chasm between trust and denial is a key feature of the show's tenure. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the American public found the borders of the new world unsettling. The most traditional expression of the program's authorial distrust focused on examinations of the U.S. government. Conventionally, *The X Files* is viewed as a show about aliens and government conspiracies, seemingly the topics of late-night chat rooms, not as representative of the American public. However, the immediate success of the program demonstrated that Carter had touched a nerve with audiences. In a 1994 interview, he explained that "'Trust no one' was one of my personal philosophies . . . I believe that people as well as governments are self-motivated and self-interested and that things run that way. I've connected with an undercurrent of distrust and paranoia that seems to be pervasive right now with the public."[9] The pervasive paranoia was a central tenet of the program. The message of *The X Files* is to trust no one, because even if the truth is out there, it cannot be reached because of the corrupted authoritarianism that controls all. Throughout the show's duration, it challenged audiences to question all forms of authority, from governmental and societal authorities to scientific and religious leaders.

This thesis provides a historically based examination of the success of *The X Files*. It builds upon the twin foundations of the historiography of the Cold War and

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[9] Hester Richies, "*The X Files* and Chris Carter," *Vancouver Sun*, Entertainment Section, December 17, 1994, accessed October 12, 2014, http://www.eatthecorn.com/itw/1994/.

television analysis scholarship, specifically Lynn Spiegel's monographs. It hopes to provide greater understanding and use of television as a primary source for developing a fuller historical understanding of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Scholars from anthropology, English, and other social studies have embraced the study of television, but many scholars have largely been content to view it simply and simplistically as a reflector of the larger society. My research intends to treat television as a complicated medium that has played both a causal and catalytic role in national societal shifts such as the one that happened with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Sadly, historians are mostly absent from the discussion of television's influence. Those brave few who do attempt to study the medium focus on television as a mirror in which to examine topics of gender or race during the 1960s and 1970s. Within these monographs, television exists simply as an imitation of larger issues within American society.

However, blindly assuming that television simply mirrors larger political and social trends of the post-1945 world ignores how the medium shaped culture and how culture shaped the medium. Television, like all popular culture, does not simply become an amorphous entity once its images are transmitted. The viewers and creators are in constant connection. Most scholars of television tend to view the medium as a direct current of bombarding images and completely ignore how technological shifts in the 1980s and 1990s reconfigured more of an alternating current that had profound effects on the producer-consumer relationship.[10] Mass consumption of products – whether they be

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[10] To understand the contexts of my usage of this term, see Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 1-8.

cultural or otherwise – stands as one of the major hallmarks of the post-1945 era. Television is not exempt from mass consumption, as it is both consumed on a mass scale as well as shaped by the power of consumers.

This thesis seeks to rectify the absence of television within the historical scholarship and maintains that *The X Files* in particular represents the alternating current of culture after the Cold War. *The X Files* could not have succeeded in any other time than the period between the Cold War and the U.S. War on Terror. The program represented a dramatic shift in television programming, but it also represents a unique moment in time for American society. *The X Files* is indicative of the tenuousness of the 1990s. After September 11, 2001 and the cancellation of *The X Files* in 2002, audiences were forced to transition from a program that suggested its viewers to question everything to another FOX product that sold an unrestrained approach to U.S. homeland security, *24.* Historians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries predominantly examine how political and social movements of the late Cold War affected the incoming millennium. However to only examine political and social movements through lenses of traditional economic, governmental, or cultural movements while ignoring the pivotal effect of mass media ignores the importance of popular culture within society.

Chapter 1, "A Toaster with Pictures," begins by evaluating the role and perception of television within the scholarship on popular media. I argue that within the historiographical framework there is a bias against fully examining the complexities of the medium. The television is vital when studying the post-1945 era, but television scholars and historians have been slow to acknowledge this. My research builds upon

scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s that viewed television as a mirror in which to witness larger societal and cultural shifts after World War II. Other scholars have viewed television as either negative or positive in terms of its relationship with the viewer. This chapter challenges that notion and instead argues that the complexities of the medium militate against such a dichotomy. Within this chapter, I probe how a postmodern approach to television viewers and producers reevaluates the importance of the producer-consumer relationship and is indicative of the technological shift that occurred in the 1990s.

Chapter 2, "Welcome to the Wonderful World of High Technology," introduces the technological shifts that allowed for the very existence of the program. Within this chapter, I argue that technological advancements, specifically the Internet, created a community of believers who repositioned the traditional narrative of television programming and the connection to viewership. The rise of the "super fan" was not unique to the 1990s, but technology allowed fans to invest in *The X Files* in ways that previously were not possible.

Chapter 3, "I Want to Believe," assesses how the program questioned all forms of authority. I argue that within the program, there was a space for conversations that questioned all authority, and nowhere was that more evident than in episodes dealing with religious subjects. Religious faith, as an object of doubt, would not have been possible on network television before the 1990s nor could any other show have tackled it with such brazenness. This chapter consists of specific evaluations of *The X Files'* use of religious faith as an object of doubt and questioning, which contrasted sharply with what audiences who were used to viewing--stand-alone, feel-good, religious-themed episodes.

Chapter 4, "Deny Everything: Government Conspiracies, *The X Files*, and the War on Terror," examines the most recognizable facet of the program, the pervasive mistrust of the American government. I maintain that the program's taut hold on the American consciousness ended in 2002, not because of ratings, but because of September 11th and the creation of *24.* By the last season of *The X Files* in 2001-2, the program no longer offered viewers a realm of extreme possibility that they were willing to entertain. The world of shadowy government figureheads and grotesque monsters paled in comparison to hijacked planes, foreign wars, and chemical warfare. *The X Files'* "Trust No One" motto was quickly replaced by *24's* unofficial motto of "In God, Jack Bauer, and America We Trust."

Chapter 5, "To Boldly Go," concludes the thesis with a summation of the importance of *The X Files* within historical scholarship. It is more than just a cult television program offering viewers shiny tin foil hats.[11] *The X Files* represents the interwar period of the 1990s. The program is bracketed by the fall of the Soviet Union and the War on Terror. The technological, political, and episodic innovations that created the uniqueness of the program are either no longer possible or now exist as worn out media clichés.

The X Files tapped into the apprehensions of the American people and offered audiences the space and freedom to question all forms of authority. Questioning tenets of perceived stability, the program offered a different frontier: one that was not a brave new world, but one that was filled with lies and deception. The program exists as a larger

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[11] "Tin foil hats" refers to the trend of certain members of the human population wearing metal on their heads for the goal of preventing the government from reading their minds.

representation of the decade, an amalgamation of latent Cold War fears and larger trends

regarding faith and doubt.

CHAPTER I

"JUST A TOASTER WITH PICTURES": HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TELEVISION
STUDIES

Edward R. Murrow, an early television journalist, once said, "Television in the

main is being used to distract, delude, amuse, and insulate us."[1] Of course, cultural

historians of the recent past know that the television set is far more complicated than

consumer culture and entertainment run amok. Like Murrow, some early commentators

thought television was little more than an appliance—"just a toaster with pictures"—that

was similar to the radio, offering melodramatic programming subsidized by advertisers.

However, in the last decades, scholarly understanding of television has revealed its nature

and purpose as far more complicated than a simple distraction and conveyor of

advertising.[2] Instead, television represents the face of the twentieth century. On the

television set, viewers witnessed civil rights gained and foreign wars fought; they

imagined futures in space and in an idealized suburbia. It offered its viewers a window

into worlds both imaginary and tangible.

From its inception, however, its critics saw television as a cold, industrial

medium.[3] Marshall McLuhan, in his work *Understanding Media,* argued famously that

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[1] Edward R. Murrow, *This I Believe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 5.

[2] Research on gender and television is supremely indebted to Lynn Spigel's work.
See specifically her *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); and *Make Room for TV: Television and the
Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[3] Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and
American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xii.

"the media was the message"[4] and that films were "hot" in terms of their demand on the senses, but television was cool because it required more interpretation by the audience, and was therefore more difficult to clearly define.[5] In addition, films were less regulated and were able to use images more readily in order to offer analysis of social or global themes, without the fear of governmental fines or loss of advertising revenue. Comparatively, scripted television was not as easily able to respond to domestic or global issues, as all forms of television programming were regulated by the U.S. government and walked a tight-tope taut line between fines from the government and the risk that advertisers would pull their sponsorship. As such, television apparently did not have the same existential attractiveness as film, which seemed to regularly challenge the status quo in race and gender relations as well as foreign policy. Films offered audiences critiques of society in ways that television did not seem to attempt. This condescension coalesced with a general unease about the campiness of early television comedies and game shows and convinced critics the television was a visual blight. Scholars, however, have recently begun to evaluate television as a reflector of culture and society during the late twentieth century. These academics--predominantly sociologists, anthropologists, musicologists, and scholars of film and English--have challenged the impression that scripted television did not have a major cultural impact. Yet, television still suffers, as Lynn Spigel (a professor of television studies at Northwestern University) puts it, from historical "cultural prejudices against television [that] still significantly impact debates on

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[4] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 4.

[5] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 5.

the medium. The continued denigration of television as a hopelessly 'low' medium has the unfortunate effect of making us blind to its successes and potential." In other words, those who have studied the media seriously tend not to take television seriously.[6] On the other hand, historians, who are usually vocal on all subjects, remain largely silent on the topic of television, and historians, who have tried to take television seriously as one historical source among many, have not generally engaged the literature and theory in media studies that would promote a more nuanced and complex understanding of television's place in society.

Historians have generally utilized television as a source to provide important interpretations of gender roles and race relations in the United States. However, their conclusions tend to remain at the level that television's portrayals of gender and race on television were not representative of the larger society. These scholars were instrumental in using television as a primary source, but within their scholarship, television existed only to promote nostalgia or to sustain static gender and racial norms. While these historians failed to examine the complexities of the medium, their works offer groundbreaking analysis of gender and race in Cold War America.

Historian Stephanie Coontz's work, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, assesses the role of television in shaping cultural perceptions of nuclear families that have sometimes served as a false measure against which current familial units are measured. She argues that using television to form modern perceptions of the past ignores the complexities of the post-World War II era. She contends, quite

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[6] Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 250.

tongue in cheek, "that contrary to popular belief, *Leave it to Beaver* was not a documentary" and that "contrary to the all-white lineup on the television networks and streets of suburbia, the 1950s saw a major transformation in the ethnic composition of America."[7] Using 1950s television programming, Coontz unpacks the wistfulness of a seemingly perfect era and demonstrates how television did not portray actual family dynamics, gender roles, and race relations. Coontz shatters preconceived ideas of the early Cold War family, but she uses television as a malevolent, nostalgic force instead of looking at the complexities of television. Most simply, she fails to acknowledge that audiences likely understood that *Leave it to Beaver* was not a 1950s documentary.

Susan Douglas, author of *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media,* goes further than Coontz by arguing that not only did television promote inaccurate portrayals of race and family dynamics in Cold War American society, it also actively harmed young women's psyches. Douglas argues that audiences are so bombarded with images of what they are supposed to be like that even the most self-aware fall under the spell of the television's warm, commercialized glow that offers viewers instant access to content. Douglas ascertains, correctly, that television offered women a schizophrenic world where they were to be "pliant, cute, sexually available, thin, blond. . . . But it is easy to forget that the media also suggested that we could be rebellious, tough, enterprising, and shrewd."[8] However, Douglas' argument again falls into the pitfall of examining television as a nefarious tool of patriarchal technology, so

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[7] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 29-30.

[8] Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994), 9.

she fails to account for the intelligence of the audience and the ways in which television viewers are apt to subvert the messages in order to form a different meaning than the one originally intended by producers of the content.

On the other hand, Lynn Spigel in her book, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, analyzes the origins of the television within the American home in the early Cold War. She argues in a similar vein to Coontz and Douglas that advertisers used television to sell gender roles (along with the accompanying products) to middle-class women after the Second World War. Television sets had entered U.S. homes after World War II, and advertisers saw them as an ideal way to show middle-class women additional technological advancements that would make their lives easier. Considered a feminine technology, early television sets within the home existed as little more than picture-producing vacuum cleaners. Early marketers primarily advertised products to benefit the 1950s' homemaker. However, unlike Coontz and Douglas, Spigel shows how television provided guidance to middle-class, white women through specific programs and advertising about new suburban social norms, as their connections to extended family were stretched by the move to the suburbs. This is important, Spigel argues, because as the television moved to the suburbs, it offered a brave new world of information to its viewers and became a part of the familial ritual. While Coontz argued that these television images were entirely negative, Spigel argues in a more nuanced fashion that television was an important factor in how the American woman defined her family and her place in the new post-1945 suburban U.S. society.[9] Spigel's *Make Room for TV* was groundbreaking in cultural history and television studies

[9] Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 35.

because of its examinations of "postwar visual culture," and the goal of early television

producers to offer artistic expression on the small screen, from Shakespearean plays to

documentaries featuring art from around the world. Spigel evaluates the television's

effort to merge "high" and "low" art, and its deeper examination of television shows.[10]

Although highly influential to the field, *Make Room for TV* still limits television as a way

to explore mass culture and its connection to Cold War gender roles. Spigel's work

examines familial roles in American society through television, but she does not limit

television to a one-dimensional object of ridicule. Spigel's *Make Room for TV* recognizes

the complexities of a medium that existed in over two-thirds of American homes. When

television reached a majority of households it became an intricate part of the daily lives

of American citizens during the Cold War. [11]

Scholars, particularly sociologists, have argued *mass* culture is culture produced

by individuals or organizations, usually in a capitalist framework, who imbue that culture

with their own meaning. By contrast, *popular* culture is any form of entertainment taken

by the public and used in ways both intended by the producer and unintended. John

Fiske, one of the foremost media scholars of the last forty years, argued for the

importance of popular and mass culture within the context of television. He maintained

that understanding television and its meaning to Americans required also understanding

that different individuals interpret culture differently.[12] Although teaching in the United

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[10] Lynn Spigel and Jan Olson, *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 250.

[11] Ibid.

[12] John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1-25.

States, Fiske had been a student of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England. This Centre problematized the connections between producers and consumers by arguing for a postmodern interpretation over previous media scholars' work that had defined the meaning of media based on a reading of the author's intent. Postmodern interpretations in television studies, on the other hand, recognize the complexities of the medium and of the audiences who view it, understanding that if every audience member consumes the object of mass culture differently then audiences can also potentially produce their own personal connections to that form of culture. A postmodern reading of television argues that there are multiple interpretations of culture and that each individual interprets the art form differently. Within this postmodern interpretation of television, two different types of theoretical frameworks coexist.

The first, reception theory, states that there is no inherent meaning in any produced medium. Instead, each member of the audience develops the meaning for himself or herself. Audience participants contribute their own background and context to the specific medium. Created by sociologist Stuart Hall, reception theory challenges the omnipotence of the text and argues that instead the context in which the text is viewed defines the value to those receiving the text or images. The second theory, textual criticism, states that within the text scholars can attribute larger cultural signifiers to seemingly innocuous aspects of popular culture. Popularized by Henry Jenkins, textual criticism is the opposite of reception theory. In the former, the audience is the deciding factor for cultural importance; in the latter, the text can have multiple meanings, but it does not change based on the audience; it is dependent upon the producer of the content. Together, reception theory and textual criticism offer historians of popular media an

invaluable analytical framework in which both the audiences *and* the cultural medium are treated as vital. [13]

Television is a source of entertainment, but the implication of television within society is unfortunately buried in how academics dismiss television as a weak framework in which to examine historical events. Although television is a complicated medium for historians to evaluate, the importance of a technology that intersected with the everyday lives of millions of citizens across decades is crucial for examining politics, social constructs, and changes in cultural perceptions.[14]

For the most part, historians are currently absent from the discussion of television. Those brave few who have attempted to study the medium focus on television as a mirror in which to examine topics of gender or race during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. While this is certainly a valuable endeavor, the method continues to place television below other textual records and assumes that television simply mirrors larger political and social trends of the post-1945 world. Such an approach ignores how the medium has shaped culture and how culture has shaped the medium in a dynamic process. Within *The X Files*, the program did magnify larger issues of unease that existed within American society of the 1990s, but without the program there would not have existed space for audiences to vocalize those frustrations.

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[13] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, rev. ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 1-5.

[14] Rob Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 4-17.

As with all popular culture, the process of defining the meaning of television does not end as its images are transmitted across the airwaves. Each audience member receiving it interprets those images differently. By the 1990s, technology and society had reached a unique moment in which the consumer-producer relationship was about to be completely changed by the advent of a program that questioned everything.

CHAPTER II

WELCOME TO THE WIDE WORLD OF TECHNOLOGY: *THE X FILES* AND THE
1990s

The X Files is bound to the decade of the nineties, premiering at a time in

American history when technological advancements coincided with a relatively peaceful

global time for the United States. The program warned viewers to "Trust No One," and in

the 1990s, this admonition spoke to a broad audience in new ways. However, this new

warning, though extremely cutting-edge for a television program, could not have had the

impact it did without the global connection fans were able to make to the show and to one

another through the Internet.

The information super-highway came of age during the show's tenure. Begun in

the 1950s as a way to fight the Soviets, the technology that became the worldwide web

did not reach the public until Tim Berners-Lee created hypertext transfer protocol (http)

and with it the earliest webpages in the late 1980s.[1] Previously, the Internet had linked

only universities and computer-based businesses. However, with Berners-Lee's creation,

people throughout the world who shared similar ideas or interests could connect to one

another. The earliest articles about *The X Files*' obsessed fans all stressed the role of the

Internet's various online means in making their voices heard to producer Chris Carter.

Acknowledging this onslaught, Carter commented in 1995, "It's been an interesting year

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[1] David Crowley, *Communication in History* (New York: Allyn and Bacon Publishers, 2011), 240-71.

for online people. There's a proprietary tone in the air. They feel it's their show now, not mine."[2] However, obsessive fandoms were not new to the twentieth century.

Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins, in his seminal work *Textual Poachers,* details the history of fandoms and the frequent derision that they have faced. Jenkins argues that scholars should examine the fanatics, because they are more than "mindless dupes, social misfits, or mindless consumers." Instead, Jenkins argues that fans are "active producers and manipulators of meanings."[3] Super fans did not magically arise once the Internet left the hallowed halls of academia and entered the public forum. The earliest references to literary fandom come from the 1890s, when fans of Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" character rioted when the Doyle had Holmes killed off. These early fans created organizations and even authored their own early versions of fan-fiction around the deerstalker-wearing detective until Doyle brought the fan-favorite back from the dead. Scott Brown, columnist for the tech magazine *Wired*, explains that the fans of Sherlock set the definition of fandom. He writes, "It was the dawn of fandom as we now know it— zealous, fractious, hydra-headed, and participatory."[4] Though sometimes dismissed by other fans as going too far, fandoms are often vital to the popular success of various media. Fans come and go, but fandoms routinely stay committed to the object of

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[2] Phil Kloer, "Atlanta Journal Q and A: Online and On Record with 'X Files' Mastermind," *Atlanta Journal,* December 24, 1995.

[3] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York: Rutledge, 2013), 23.

[4] Scott Brown, "Scott Brown on Sherlock Holmes, Obsessed Nerds, and Fan Fiction," *Wired Magazine* 17, no. 5 (April 4, 2009), accessed March 16, 2015, http://archive.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-05/plbrown.

obsession in ways that typical fans do not attempt. Fans of a show are not necessarily apt to spend hours combing over every production detail or transcribing entire episodes for other fans to act out. Consequently, what separates the fan from a fandom is the excessive, possessive nature that fandoms exhibit toward the object of their obsession.

The earliest television fandoms centered on Gene Rodenberry's cult science-fiction television program of the mid-1960s *Star Trek.* After the program was cancelled in 1969, fans took to organizing conventions and writing their own stories centered on the main characters. These conventions allowed for like-minded fans to gather together---often in costume---to discuss plot points, listen to guest speakers, and debate aspects of the program. While extremely important, these early television conference audiences were limited by their locations, which in turn determined how accessible they were for other fans to attend. *Star Trek* fans also wrote new non-canonical material featuring new explorations for the lead characters, Captain James T. Kirk and Mr. Spock. [5] These first stories were magazine-based and consisted of the two male characters exploring their romantic feelings toward each other.[6] These stories subverted the original authorial intent of the producers---one that depicted Kirk and Spock as both heterosexual---by depicting their relationship as something different than what the producers had originally written.

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[5] See Nancy Reagin and Ann Rubenstein's, "'I'm Buffy, and You're History': Putting Fan Studies into History," *Transformative Works and Culture* 6, no. 3 (month? 2011): 54-69.

[6] For further reading, see P. J. Falzone, "The Final Frontier Is Queer: Aberrancy, Archetype and Audience Generated Folklore in K/S Slashfiction," *Western Folklore* 64, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2005): 243-61; Michael Hemmingson, "Sex and Star Trek: Amorous Androids, Interstellar Promiscuity," *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (November 2009): 572-77; and Anne Cranny-Francis, "Sexuality and Sex-Role Stereotypes in 'Star Trek,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 12, no. 3 (November 1985): 274-84.

While groundbreaking, Kirk/Spock fan-fiction was limited to dissemination via mail subscriptions and therefore its audience to those who were willing to subscribe. Jenkins argues fanfiction "is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk."[7] While an extensive examination of fan-fiction's history and importance is not possible now, it is vital to recognize how groundbreaking the creation of new fictionalized media was when fans began to write on the Internet about *The X Files.*[8]

Within the fandom of *The X Files,* traits of earlier fandoms obviously exist. However, the difference between earlier fandoms and fans of *The X Files* is how the instant connection between audiences and producers through the Internet created a new type of dialog between and among consumers and producers of entertainment. With the advent of the Internet participation online soon became the "true" definition of a fan. As one participant on an *X Files* message board wrote, "You are only REAL if you are online."[9] If, as ardent fans argued, true fandom required the use of technology, then fans of *The X Files* were the pioneers in linking television and the Internet together in unique ways that fed off of one another. Internet fan-fiction also allowed connected individuals

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[7] Amy Harmon, "In TV's Dull Summer Days, Plots Take Wing on the Net," *New York Times,* August 18, 1997, accessed March 28, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/18/business/in-tv-s-dull-summer-days-plots-take-wing-on-the-net.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

[8] For further reading see, Katrien Jacobs, "Academic Cult Erotica: Fluid Beings or a Cubicle of Our Own?" *Cinema Journal* 46, No. 4 (Summer, 2007): 126-129 and Catherine Tosenberger , "Oh my God, the Fanfiction!": Dumbledore's Outing and the Online Harry Potter Fandom," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly,* 33, Number 2, (Summer 2008): 200-206,

[9] Wooley, "Visible Fandom," 31.

who sought an outlet for their written work away from the convention halls. Part of the

success of Internet fanfiction is that it allowed writers and readers a place of safe

anonymity. Amy Harmon, in a piece for <u>The New York Times</u>, explains that fan-fiction

> reflects the power of the Internet as a grass-roots publishing platform, making every viewer a potential contributor. . . . But the recent outpouring of digitized fan scribbling -- one "X-Files" Web archive has accumulated 6,000 stories in its 18 months of existence -- seems to signal the genesis of a cultural movement with a much broader appeal.[10]

Fans of *The X Files* inherited the format of fan-fiction but then utilized the Internet to

blaze a new trail for others to follow.

Additionally, *X Files* fans utilized the Internet to introduce a new and almost

instantaneous form of communication between fans and those responsible for the creation

and distribution of the program that created a sense among fans that they were co-creators

of their beloved program. In previous decades, fans wrote letters to television shows and

hoped for a return missive. With the Internet, fans could comment and potentially receive

comments from a program's staff within the same electronic format. Carter, again in an

interview from 1995, explained

> Our audience is a very computer-literate audience mostly, I'm imagining. So, it's a natural that we would be, I think, really the first show to have such a great following. I've used it as a tool; they use it as a tool. It's a great way to interact immediately with your audience, hear what they're thinking, and to tell them what you're thinking.[11]

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Richard Van Syckle, "Interview with Chris Carter," *Sci-Fi on the Net*, August 12, 1995, accessed February 26, 2015, http://www.eatthecorn.com/itw/1995/08/12/sci-fi-on-the-net/.

This connection between audiences and the producers of mass media was not new at the

inception of *The X Files* (since viewers had previously written in), but the means of

connection was new, much more interactive, and far more widespread, making the

program different from shows that had preceded it. In an article for the London-based

Observer newspaper, the columnist noted that "Sometimes it seems as if the Internet was

purpose built for fan cultures'[sic] everyone from TV cultists arguing over *The X-Files* to

football fanatics."[12] Message boards and fan websites were rife with conversations about

the cases and about the directions of the show's mythology. Discussing the program's

future was just one of many topics discussed on the early "X File" message boards. Soon

these self-titled "X Philes" used these message boards and early fan websites to connect,

to converse about plot points and character development, and to argue over various

aspects of the show. One LA Times newspaper article from 1993 exclaimed, "[Producers]

have gotten word of a growing 'X-File' cult not only from letters and phone calls but also

from a flurry of activity on computer-modem bulletin boards."[13] Fans of *The X Files*

argued for a sense of ownership of the show and the characters---an instant sense

ownership and connectedness that was impossible before the Internet.

    The X Files fans also believed they were not only speaking to one another but also

to the show's producers and writers; as a result, they believed that their comments and

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[12] "Cyberspace: Bulletin Board." *Observer* (London, England) May 14, 1995, 65.

[13]Joe Rhodes, "Fox's 'X-Files' Makes Contact with a Friday-Night Audience," *Los Angeles Times,* December 12, 1993, accessed November 25, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-12-12/news/tv-894_1_secret-files.

complaints shaped the development of story-lines and character development.[14]

Commenting on the barrage of emails and fan mail about the show that he and his team

received on a weekly basis, Carter, in a 1995 interview, explained

> The feedback I get is just from a lot of hardcore enthusiastic folk who are not
> always out there just to tell you their brush with the paranormal or their alien
> abduction experiences . . . I think we're the first show to experience such
> immediate feedback from the viewers. The Internet's a really great thing, because
> it gives me a connection with my very opinionated audience.[15]
>
> The writers, directors, and producers of *The X Files* used the Internet to gauge

public opinion about story-arcs, character development, and the fandom's perception of

the show. Audiences were able to connect with the creators, but their comments and

concerns were more than just received--they were entertained as directions on where the

show should not attempt to go. Newspaper columnist Laurie Zion, in her interview with

Carter, exclaimed that "People who believe their input on the Internet just drifts off into

some black hole are dead wrong." The interview goes onto talk about one of the most

discussed aspects of *The X Files*, the relationship between the two main characters.

"Chris Carter, now entering his fourth season with the popular show, insists he is not

escalating the relationship between Fox Mulder and Dana Scully because of his fans on

the Internet. 'I had such a hostile reaction from the Internet folk when I even talked about

it. I'm afraid for my life if I ever put them in a compromising position.'"[16] The producers

and writers of *The X Files* paid close attention to what the fans liked and disliked about

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[14] Christine Wooley, "Visible Fandom: Reading the X Files through X Philes," *Journal of Film and Video* 53, no.4 (Winter 2001): 29-34.

[15] Lawrie Zion, "Chris Carter's out There, on the Wave of Truth," *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), November 30, 1995, Lifestyle section, p. 8.

[16] "X Files boss caught in Net," *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, New South Wales, Australia), September 23, 1996, p. 64.

the program, even inserting specific things into episodes based on Internet fan

comments.[17] The producers of the program utilized the Internet to deliberately talk to

fans, even naming an original character after a fan who had passed away after a bout with

cancer.[18] Rick Marshal, an online media columnist for *Mental Floss,* argues that the

program not only represented the new way of communication between producers and

consumers of popular media, it also "became the model for subsequent series looking to

connect with their online fan base."[19] Through their connection and conversations with

the staff of the show, *X Files* fans redefined the relationship between fans and producers

for the 21st mass media experience.

Although *The X Files* fans certainly utilized the new technology of the world-

wide-web, they were more than just the usual stereotype of a "geek" or "nerd." As early

as 1994, a year after the show premiered, other viewers less likely to watch an episode of

Star Trek were tuning in to *The X Files*. "You don't have to be a sci-fi fanatic to get

caught up in *The X-Files*," maintained one reporter, Mike Duffy. In his article evaluating

the impact of technology on the success of the show, Duffy revealed that the barrage of

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[17] For example, fans often commented that Agent Mulder always seemed to be dropping or losing his gun on "X File" cases. Chris Carter and the producers noticed this conversation occurring on the message boards. In an obvious nod to fans in multiple cases they would have Mulder drop his main weapon, only to pull out another weapon as a backup.

[18] Leyla Harrison was a fan-fiction writer who passed away, after battling cancer, in 2001. One of the writers, Frank Spotnitz named a reoccurring character after her because of her long-time love and devotion to the show.

[19] Rick Marshall, "The Seven Things We Should Thank the X Files For," *Mental Floss,* January 10, 2015, accessed March 13, 2015, http://mentalfloss.com/article/52646/7-things-we-should-thank-x-files.

emails and fan mail showed that these fans were as disparate as the "X Files" cases themselves. In a 1996 article, fans ranging from doctors and chemists to real estate brokers and college students explained that they found the show engaging, even organizing their Friday evening schedules around the show. These aforementioned "X Philes," while a small sampling, are representative of the wide range of fans who found the program more realistic than other science-fiction programs. Echoing Duffy's piece, a viewer from Memphis, Tennessee argued that, "In Star Trek, the entire environment is fantasy . . . [but] The X-Files plants a seed of probability. Maybe some of these things exist. Maybe the government is hiding some files from the public."[20] The post-Cold War world allowed for audiences to connect through their mutual of a television program, but it also---through technological advancements---allowed for fans to connect with producers.

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[20] As quoted in James Blake Cox, "Buried Deep in *The X Files* Lurk Ritualistic X-Philes," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 18, 1996, Arts and Entertainment section.

CHAPER III

I WANT TO BELIEVE: RELIGION AND *THE X FILES*

The X Files advertised itself as smart and sexy. As such, many would not immediately define the program as also groundbreaking in terms of its discussions regarding faith and doubt. However*, The X Files*, in its subsequent nine seasons, continuously explored (through story arcs and stand-alone episodes) how questions of spiritual matters interacted with one of the main mantras of the show, "I Want to Believe." Agent Fox Mulder and Agent Dana Scully's F.B.I. cases involved the strange, the unexplained, and the downright weird. However, Mulder and Scully were more than just two attractive television stars investigating improbable crimes on Sunday nights during the 1990s; these two characters offered audiences a window into important, nation-wide conversations regarding faith and doubt. *The X Files* was more than a just an escapist television show. It was a symbol of a society coming to terms with a changing Cold War as well as evolving definitions of America and what it meant to be American. These shifts began in the 1970s and 1980s but matured to fruition in the 1990s. *The X Files* offers historians an opportunity to examine popular culture and by extension American ideas concerning religion during this time. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof noted that during the 1990s America was at once both "the most religious and the most secular."[1] No place is this dichotomy between religiosity and secularity better demonstrated than within *The X Files*.

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[1] Wade Clark Roof, "God Is in the Details: Reflections on Religion's Public Presence in the United States in the Mid-1990s," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 150.

The X Files' approach to religion within its episodic framework represents larger cultural, societal, and political shifts that occurred in the United States during the 1990s. Popular culture—films, television shows, and books—expressed the public's overall inquisitiveness about spiritual matters during the decade. On the political scene, America moved from a global fight against godless Communism to an internal culture clash. Political discourse represented an increasing divide between liberals and conservatives, each using religiously styled rhetoric to justify their respective party battle lines. *The X Files* offered a unique contrast to other mass media and social trends of the decade, by depicting situations wherein Molder and Scully handled questions regarding faith and doubt with the same harsh analysis and unyielding optimism bestowed on all of their cases. The program's successful navigation of major spiritual questions clearly connected it to the America of the 1990s but simultaneously sets it apart from other popular media of the decade.

Conversations between Mulder and Scully about religion and spiritual matters offer a unique counter-balance to the cases involved in the program. The characters of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, self-described as the FBI's least wanted, appeared on millions of television sets throughout the decade.[2] Through these characters, the creators of *The X Files* challenged and questioned all authorial control in a way no television show had attempted to do before. Throughout the show's run, Mulder was the staunch believer in all things paranormal but while Scully was the ardent skeptic within the religiously-themed episodes the roles between the characters were reversed. Dialog

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[2] *The X Files,* season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," directed by Chris Carter, aired September 10, 1993, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2004), disc 1.

between Mulder and Scully offered a mirror to their audiences on how perceived polar opposites and contradictions could exist within these characters and within society. They engaged in a dialogue about faith and doubt within these episodes that allowed the viewer space to doubt things perceived as constants. The show was known for its blatant questioning of the American government. "Trust No One" was the catchphrase for show. However, by pushing the envelope, *The X Files* argued within the episodes on religion and spirualty that *everything* should be questioned. Exploring the boundaries between faith and doubt offered the writers of the program a chance to continue creating a space within the fictional universe for doubt and for civil disagreement.

Episodes using religion and spirually--from the beginning of the show's existence to the end of its nine-year run-- were a prominent feature of the cases that the agents investigated. In the first-season episode, *"Conduit,"* Mulder finds himself at the end of the episode with no answers for the disappearance of his sister, Samantha. The episode, though a traditional "X File" in the sense that the agents investigated unexplained phenomena, contained several scenes that indicated the show's difference compared to other fictionalized media of the decade. Most striking was a scene of Mulder below a Christian cross crying in a church. He had followed information that hopefully would lead to the truth about his sister's disappearance; instead, he was left with only more questions. Other media, such as *The X Files* time-slot competition *Touched by an Angel,* offered viewers a formulaic interpretation of faith, wherein questions regarding the supernatural were always neatly wrapped up by the end of the episode. Comparatively, Mulder's quest for truth, about his sister and the existence of alien life, dominated the program throughout seven seasons of the show. As such, every time

Mulder found himself close to discovering the truth, his truth was taken from him, either by shadowy government organizations or in finding the truth simply a fabrication of a larger conspiracy. As the series progressed, Carter's vision that the program would question everything, not just the government or little grey men, came to fruition as the writers and producers advanced the character of Agent Scully.[3]

Scully served as an intellectual foil for Fox Mulder. She offered scientific reasoning for every possible case that the two investigated. However, within their relationship, Scully represented the skeptic who believed in a god, while Mulder represented the believer who doubted any deific existence. In the first season of *The X Files,* two episodes within the first half of the season discussed religion. The first, "Miracle Man," is a typical "X File" case.[4] This episode offers an interesting commentary about the show's willingness to discuss religion in its early episodes but is more of a caricature of southern Pentecostals. The two agents investigate a case involving a faith healer in the rural south and---as with the early "X File" cases, Mulder unequivocally believes and Scully doubts. Among fans and scholars of the program, most choose to discount "Miracle Man," because it did not offer audiences anything new to contemplate, not the least because it depicts southerners as backwater hillbillies. "Miracle Man" also shows a program still finding its footing. Comparatively, the episode "Beyond the Sea" dealt specifically, and for the first time in the show's run, with the balancing of faith and

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[3] Little grey, not green, men are routinely referred to within the program as the correct description of extraterrestrial life.

[4] "Miracle Man" is typical because it is what would be termed normal. Mulder does want to believe and Scully offers a scientific voice of reason.

doubt.[5] The episode examined how Scully dealt with both the death of her father and a death-row psychic. This episode is particularly interesting, because Scully is the one who believes, while Mulder offers the voice of caution and skepticism. At the time of her father's death, Scully witnessed him sitting in her living room at the exact moment her mother called to tell Scully the news. Simultaneously, the episode deals with Luther Lee Boggs (played by Brad Dourif), a serial killer previously arrested by Mulder and sent to death row. Boggs claims to have psychic visions about a pair of recently kidnapped teenagers. Mulder does not believe Boggs' "act," but as the Agents turn to leave, Boggs says goodbye to Agent Scully using the pet name her father called her, "Starbuck." Boggs, seemingly as Scully's father, then asks her if she received his message and begins singing the lyrics to her father's favorite song "Beyond the Sea." This rattles Scully to the point that she is willing to follow Boggs' psychic suggestions to where the victims are held. Boggs accurately depicted through psychic interpretation where the couple was held, and offered Scully the opportunity to know the last words her father had wanted her to hear. However, although tempted by Boggs' promise, Scully decides to let her scientific side take over and believe that her father's last words were of pride and love. Subsequently, Carter argued that for "Beyond the Sea" he and the other producers wanted to challenge the traditional narrative of the show---best represented within the earlier episode "Miracle Man"---and that religion was a great way to do so.[6] "Beyond the Sea" offered audiences a different side of Scully and Mulder's characters, but it was not a one-

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[5] *The X Files,* season 1, episode 13, "Beyond the Sea," directed by David Nutter, aired January 7, 1996, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2005), disc 3.

[6] Ibid., disc 3.

off, as many episodes after it also dealt with the complexities of faith and doubt in a religious context.

The role of religion contains one of the many dichotomies within *The X Files.* Sacred versus secular connects to the broader questions of truth. Is "it" out there, or is "it" an illusion? The first two seasons of the program demonstrated a willingness to address extreme possibilities, but it would take until season three for the "show runners" to again reference Agent Scully's tenuous grasp on her Catholic faith. The long space between religious episodes is in part because of the ongoing mythology of the program during the end of the first and the entirety of the second season. At the end of the first season, Scully is abducted by aliens but has no memory of the event, and the second season deals mostly with finding Scully and dealing with the aftermath of that event. Two seasons after "Beyond the Sea," *The X Files* writers and producers again pushed the envelope with the episode "Revelations." In this episode, the writers again specifically address an "X File" case related to Scully's Catholic faith. "Revelations" is about stigmata, the Catholic belief that true believers may be gifted by God with the "wounds of Christ" and bleed from their feet, side, and hands. The episode begins with a sermon by a preacher who pretends to have the stigmata. Reverend Findley preaches, "[People] expect proof for all that they see, but miracles are wonders by nature. They need no rationale, no justification. You must witness the miracles of the Lord without question." Fans of the show quickly picked up on this line in Findley's sermon— "most people today tend to vest themselves in science and cynicism"—which was *the* perceived audience definition of the Mulder-Scully relationship, represented by the steadfast yet

cynical believer and skeptical scientist. After Findlay's expositional sermon, he is

murdered in the church's alcove, and his body now shows the true signs of stigmata.

Mulder and Scully, investigating Findley's death, find another potential stigmatic,

a young boy named Kevin. Scully believes that miracles, such as Kevin bleeding from his

hands and feet, can occur within the context of science. She maintains that even if science

cannot explain miracles, faith allows doubt and belief in a god to coexist:

> SCULLY: I don't know.
> MULDER: Scully, those stories you're referring to are mostly regarded as
> hagiographic fabrications, not historical truths, just like the occurrence of the
> stigmata.
> SCULLY: Well, what do you think this is?
> MULDER: This man? He was rather abnormal in life, maybe he's decomposing
> abnormally.
> SCULLY: Well, isn't a saint or a holy person just another term for someone who's
> abnormal?
> MULDER: Do you really believe that?
> SCULLY: I . . . believe in the idea that God's hand can be witnessed. I believe He
> can create miracles, yes.
> MULDER: Even if science can't explain them?
> SCULLY: Maybe that's just what faith is . . .

Mulder, usually staunch believer in all things occult, questions her motives in her blanket

trusting of the boy Kevin as a pure vessel for God. Later Mulder chides,

> I wouldn't let faith overwhelm your judgment here. These people are simply
> fanatics behaving fanatically using religion as a justification. They give bona fide
> paranoiacs like myself a bad name. They're no more divine or holy than that
> ketchup we saw on the murdered preacher.

Throughout the episode, the Agents witness strange, seemingly miraculous events,

surrounding Kevin. The boy appears in multiple places at once, bleeds from his hands,

feet, and side, and is able to know aspects of the Agents' relationship that he was not

privy to. Scully, again in an argument with Mulder, is willing to believe that the child

needs to be protected. However, Mulder is unwilling to believe that anything nefarious or

miraculous is occurring:

> SCULLY: How is it that you're able to go out on a limb whenever you see a light in the sky, but you're unwilling to accept the possibility of a miracle? Even when it's right in front of you.
> MULDER: I wait for a miracle every day. But what I've seen here has only tested my patience, not my faith.
> SCULLY: Well, what about what I've seen?[7]

After Kevin is rescued from those who were trying to kill him, Scully confesses to

a priest for the first time years. She explains that she wants to believe in the paranormal

occurrences she has witnessed but is upset that Mulder does not offer her the same

support in her religious beliefs that she offers him in his beliefs about the occult and

government conspiracies. By extension, she begins to doubt what she has witnessed

within the case. Scully's questioning of her tenuous faith is an interesting juxtaposition to

the earlier portions of the episode when she wholeheartedly believes in Kevin's

supernatural abilities. Scully's conversation with the priest is partly based on the very

nature of her out-of-character belief in a miracle and Mulder's skepticism:

> SCULLY: No, I'm talking about events that defy explanation. Things that . . . I believe helped me to save a young boy's life. But now I wonder if I saw them at all. If I didn't just imagine them.
> PRIEST: Why do you doubt yourself?
> SCULLY: Because my partner didn't see them. He didn't . . . he didn't believe them. And usually he ... he believes without question.
> PRIEST: Maybe they weren't meant for him to see. Maybe they were only meant for you.
> SCULLY: Is that possible?
> PRIEST: With the Lord, anything is possible. Perhaps you saw these things because you needed to.

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[7] Ibid.

Scully's fear, vocalized to the priest "is that God is speaking . . . but that no one's listening," is more than simple dramatics.[8] The episode, like "Conduit" and "Beyond the Sea" in the first season, does not end with a dramatic declaration of faith, nor does it end in complete denial. Instead, it ends with the idea that the "truth" that the Agents doggedly search for, perhaps is right in front of them, and by extension in front of the audience. The program delved into the very existence of a higher power and offered no definitive proof for existence or nonexistence, but unlike its fictionalized counterparts on television, *The X Files* left it up to the audience to decide if their own personal truth did exist.

The conversations between the two characters by the end of the main story arc of season three become situations wherein the two characters agree to disagree about religious matters. Throughout the fourth and fifth seasons, a transition of the Agents' relationship is occurring. By the fourth season, Scully has been diagnosed with an inoperable pharyngeal malignant mass. This diagnosis coincides in the show with Mulder finding his "god": true evidence of alien life forms in the world. Within the fourth season penultimate episode "Gethsemane," both characters find themselves in a crisis of faith. The episode, written by Chris Carter, finds the two characters on divergent paths, Scully on the path toward acceptance of her disease and seemingly imminent death and Mulder supposedly finding the proof of alien life that has so long eluded him. Within the first moments of the show, the agents find themselves performing the gymnastic debates that made their relationship so famous. Scully argues:

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[8] *The X Files,* season 3, episode 11, "Revelations," directed by David Nutter, aired December 15, 1995, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 4.

SCULLY: Proving to the world the existence of alien life is not my last dying wish.
MULDER: What about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny? This is not some selfish pet project of mine, Scully. I'm as skeptical of that man as you are, but proof . . . definitive proof of sentient beings sharing the same time and existence with us, that would change everything. Every truth we have. My world would be shaken to the ground. There's no greater revelation imaginable, no greater scientific discovery.
SCULLY: You already believe, Mulder. What difference would it make? I mean, what would proof change for you?[9]

The religious conversations in "Gethsemane" are not only representative of the two characters' divergent belief systems but also how the show was moving throughout the program's arc. Fans and scholars of the program often cite the end of season four and the middle of season five as the apex representation of *The X Files.* The growing difference witnessed between the two characters, concerning religious faith and doubt, comes full circle in the middle of the agents' conversation. Mulder asks Scully,

MULDER: If someone could prove to you the existence of God, would it change you?
SCULLY: Only if it were disproven.
MULDER: Then you accept the possibility the belief in God is a lie?
SCULLY: I don't think about it, actually, and I don't think it can be proven.
MULDER: But what if it could be? Wouldn't that knowledge be worth seeking? Or is it just easier to go on believing the lie?[10]

However, by the end of the episode, Mulder is contemplating suicide because the truth of his "aliens" turns out to be a hoax. Scully, on the other hand, has renewed her faith as she begins the process of coming to terms with her, own supposedly, imminent death. Season

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[9] *The X Files,* season 4, episode 24, "Gethsemane," directed by R.W. Goodwin, aired May 18, 1997, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 6.

[10] Ibid.

five starts with Mulder choosing not to kill himself at the end of season four and Scully's

miraculous recovery from her terminal cancer.

In season five Scully and Mulder again switch roles of believer and skeptic

involving a case of fallen angels and evil forces. "All Souls" is a Scully-centric episode.

For reasons that do not bear exploring at this juncture, this episode builds upon an earlier

episode in the season, "Emily."[11] "All Souls" is as much a vehicle for discussing religion

as it is an opportunity for Scully to grieve the death of her child, while examining the

deaths of three of a set of paraplegic quadruplet teenage girls discovered with their eyes

burned out and stricken in a position of prayer. Mulder believes a defrocked, former

Catholic priest, Father Gregory, to be guilty of the girls' murders. However, Scully does

not believe that the priest is the murderer, believing instead that the murders are being

committed by another force. Mulder, on the other hand, tries to goad the priest into

confessing:

> MULDER: What are you asking for, Father? Mercy or forgiveness? You know
> they say when you talk to God it's prayer, but when God talks to you, it's
> schizophrenia. What is your God telling you, Father?
> FATHER GREGORY: I pray for the girls' souls.
> MULDER: You pray for their souls now. That's convenient.
> FATHER GREGORY: I'm immune to your mockery. You're not interested in the
> truth.
> MULDER: I am only interested in the truth. I would like to know why you did
> what you did to three defenseless, helpless young girls. What in your sick mind
> would possess you to burn their eyes out! Did they see you for who you are, like I
> do? (Pushes upside down cross pendant toward him.) What does this mean,
> Father?
> FATHER GERGORY: (directed toward Scully) Tell him what it is.
> FATHER GREGORY: St. Peter. You know the story. St. Peter on the cross.
> SCULLY: St. Peter would only be crucified upside-down out of humility towards
> Christ.

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[11] Scully discovers she has a daughter of whom she was unaware, but the child is
sick and succumbs to a rare genetic disease before the end of the episode.

FATHER GREGORY: I've risked my life to protect their precious souls, which the devil has sought to claim for his own. He took two before I could reach them. I was too late to save the third.[12]

In this conversation between the priest and the Agents, Mulder---as with all episodes dealing with religion---was uncharacteristically the skeptic. He does not believe the priest to be anything but a greater and truer representation of organized religion in general, in other words a fraud. The irony of Mulder telling Scully that she needed to step back to scientifically analyze the situation is even more dubious when one considers the episode directly preceding "All Souls."

In the previous episode, the agents had investigated the ability of a completely blind woman to see things with her mind's eye.[13] Mulder unequivocally believed that the blind woman could see, despite scientific evidence to the contrary, but by the next episode, he is totally unresponsive to the potential that the quadriplegic young girls are Nehalem, fallen angels, primarily because he is unable to accept the possibility that God exists. He badgers Scully: "Why do bad things happen to good people? Religion has masqueraded as the paranormal since the dawn of time to justify some of the most horrible acts in history."[14] The religious dichotomy, wherein Scully believes without significant proof and Mulder doubts even though his character should believe, is one of the key features of the program, but also why many audience members tuned in week

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[12] *The X Files,* season 5, episode 17, "All Souls," directed by Allen Coulter, aired April 26, 1998, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 5.

[13] *The X Files,* season 5, episode 16, "Mind's Eye," directed by Kim Manners, aired April 19, 1998, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 4.

[14] *The X Files,* season 5, episode 17, "All Souls," directed by Allen Coulter, aired April 26, 1998, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 4.

after week. Within these episodes, the characters offered audiences difficult dialog, wherein God existed in the realm of extreme possibility alongside the existence of alien life. However, religious episodes in *The X Files* demonstrated to audiences that any exploration of the unknown should be tempered with a balance of faith and doubt.

Later in season five, Scully argues to Mulder that, "I am a scientist; trained to weigh evidence. But science only teaches us how . . . not why."[15] While a seemingly innocuous conversation regarding the importance of science as a base on which to lay all claims of the unknown, the conversation between the two characters represented something different for both television and the viewing audience. Not only does the character admit that there are things that science cannot answer, but Scully also understands that any belief, whether in the scientific method or in a higher power, must be willing to accept any potential evidence to the contrary.

Throughout the program's nine-season run, both characters wrestle with what they consider their "gods." Under Carter's direction in the writing process, these "gods" were consistently challenged within the program. As seen from this and previous episodes, both characters are paradoxes. Mulder and Scully's complexities of character allowed for dichotomies and contradictions that made them realistic and intriguing to audiences. While previous television shows might have questioned authority in one or two isolated programs, *The X Files* broke new ground by questioning everything most

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[15] *The X Files,* season 5, episode 17, "All Souls."

Americans held sacred.[16] Deepak Chopra, writing for the New York Times in the fall of 1995, argued to his readers that it was not the sexy banter or the "will they or won't they" tension that kept viewers such as himself tuning in each week. Instead, it was the lead characters' quest for truth, despite continuous conspiracy theories, that offered audiences a welcome respite from the standard tropes in other television programs. Chopra maintained that he "found *The X Files* soothing in its anxiety" and wrote that he would "rather be touched by Mulder's paranoia than by an angel."[17] Lisa Millman, writing for New York Times, echoed Chopra's sentiments. She agreed it was not governmental espionage that increased viewership from an initial seven million at the show's premiere to its peak of some thirty million viewers. Instead, it was the American people's "renewed interest in all things spiritual, from doomsday prophesies to fundamentalism, from the cabala to angels."[18] To an American public recovering from the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the sudden collapse of the Communist threat, the question of whom, or what, to trust loomed large. Subsequently, many turned their attention toward the divine or spiritual in order to garner some type of meaning from the rapidly changing world. However, *The X Files*' conception of truth offered a vision very different from that of other popular culture entertainment.

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[16] Later religious episodes offered audiences a similar formula, one that mirrored the taut dialog reversal between the two main leads. As such, the author hopes to examine them at a later juncture.

[17] Deepak Chopra, "The X-Files," *New York Times Arts Magazine*, September 20, 1998, p.1.

[18] Millman, "'The X-Files' Finds Its Truth."

Television that truly wrestled with questions relating to faith and reason, belief and doubt, truth and distrust was unheard of during the Cold War. In the decades preceding *The X Files*' premiere, aside from stand-alone episodes of a few programs or week-to-week, family-friendly, Friday-night programming, no television show dealt as directly with the complicated nature of religion as a part of a greater dramatic dialog. The absence of religion from network programming of the pre-*X Files* era is striking, but not without foundation. Before the nineties, the Federal Government strictly regulated television networks. Not until the late twentieth century were these restrictions lessened.[19]

The Communications Act of 1934 set foundation for the regulation of public programming for over fifty years. Begun during the 1950s, television regulation established guidelines for what could and could not be talked about and shown on television. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) guidelines regarding television were intended to limit the control advertisers had on the programming but also to limit programming that was deemed unseemly.[20] As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the television set existed in the home as feminine technology because of its placement. As such, a main goal of the FCC revolved around combating questionable content that could potentially harm the fragile psyches of women and children, the original intended audiences of the television set. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, only a few programs

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[19] Heidi Young, "The Deregulation of Commercial Television," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 12, no.4 (January 1985): 373.

[20] Communications Act of 1934, Public Law 416, 73rd Cong., (June 19, 1934), sec 2, b.

actively attempted to test the boundaries of what the FCC deemed good taste. It dictated what television programs could or could not talk about and responded with fines and censure for those programs that did not comply. For example, in the 1950s television comedy classic *I Love Lucy,* the married couple could not be shown sleeping in the same bed, for fear audiences would see it as a condoning of sexual intercourse. During the early 1960s, the regulations of what was good taste remained largely in tact. However, by the mid-1960s shows such as *The Brady Bunch* finally were able to show the lead married couple sharing, and sleeping, in the same bed. However, the incremental changes regarding sex, language considered obscene, and controversial topics remained largely the prevue of other popular media.

By the 1970s, social movements within American society---such the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war protests, and feminism---had all vocally sought more recognition within popular media. These groups desired more diversity and better representation. Films, since the beginning of the 1960s, had been challenging racial relations, gender norms, and American involvement in foreign wars. The top films of the late 1960s and early 1970s ranged from *Midnight Cowboy* (1968), *Harold and Maude* (1970), and *The Godfather* (1972) to *Apocalypse Now* (1978), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *The Deer Hunter* (1979). While these films seem diverse, they represented a clear move by film executives seeking to represent larger cultural and social shifts around race, gender, and war. However, within the regulated television landscape there existed little room for critical societal analysis existed. By contrast, television shows of the late sixties and early seventies stagnated around formulaic shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1972), *Happy Days* (1974-1984), and *Bonanza*

(1959-1973), just to name a few. Television also wanted to speak to changing social

relationships, but until regulations relaxed, those programs that did attempt social

commentary were few.[21]

During the 1980s, television moved from a highly regulated, privatized industry

to a less restricted, public one. The prohibitions placed on the medium transitioned

dramatically during the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan's administration saw the rise of

cable technology as the perfect time to transition television toward fewer government

restrictions and more free market control. Mark Fowler, the FCC chair appointed by

Reagan, argued that the 1980s represented the changing definition of what television

would be for future generations. He argued that the television was nothing more than a

"toaster with pictures,"[22] and as such, it should be as free from regulation as any other

capitalistic enterprise. Part of Fowler's push for deregulation was to increase competition

between the networks. He believed that allowing stockholders and advertising

corporations to control television programming would lead to self-regulation as they

sought to develop the type of television that large audiences would choose to watch. As a

result, the network producers saw the opportunity to discuss previously taboo topics on

their network-television channels for the first time without the fear of FCC fines or

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[21] Most television programs that pushed the envelope of what was allowed were during the late 1970s. *Maud*, *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, and *M.A.S.H.* were the most popular and prominent. However, one should note that within the television landscape of the '70s and '60s audiences were far more inundated with programming that did not push for political or social change.

[22] Joseph A. Palermo, "The FCC, Net Neutrality, and Corporate Power," *Huffington Post*, May 21 2014, accessed November 29, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-a-palermo/net-neutrality-corporate-lobbying_b_5368019.html.

reprisal. Most television programs took advantage of the relaxing in governmental

regulation and offered audiences programs more in line with the majority of the mood

within the country.[23]

      With the decrease in governmental regulation, television producers were able to

emphasize what audiences wanted to view on their television screens.[24] This is evident

with the run-away success of programs such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *China*

Beach (1988-1991), *Married…with Children* (1987-1997), *Designing Women* (1986-

1993), and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), all successful television shows that began

pushing the boundaries regarding previously obscene language, taboo topics, and sexual

situations during the late 1980s and 1990s.[25] Each of the aforementioned programs

represents a small sampling of television producer's intent to offer programming that

stretched the boundaries of what was previously allowed on network television.

Hollywood executives saw the newly deregulated television landscape as a place for

religion to be featured prominently while still appealing to the purchasing public (and

therefore also to advertising purchasers and the station's stockholders).

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[23] For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Charmed*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*, *Nothing Sacred*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Soul Man*.

[24] One of the downsides to deregulation has been that when television studios are built around stockholder ownership, they are often not willing to take risks because of the immense expense of financing television programs.

[25] See Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture,* (Washington D.C.: Regenry Publishing, 1994), and Harry Castleman and Walter Podrazik, *Watching TV: Six Decades of American Television,* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

Political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists maintain that after a period of

intense external conflict, television and film audiences look toward the unexplained,

either spiritual or scientific theories, to find their own place in a seemingly new

universe.[26] At the time of *The X Files'* premiere, the American public had just spent fifty

odd years fighting the U.S.S.R. When it disbanded, seemingly suddenly in 1991, the

American public was left without an enemy, an ideology, or a definite place within the

global construct. The collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with network television

taking new risks. Among those risks was allowing characters within media to have

conversations about the spiritual.[27] The influx of religiously themed television in the

1990s, combined with the anticlimactic end to the Cold War and Soviet Union left the

American people in a place of relative global prominence and unprecedented national

security. Ironically, this left U.S citizens with a general sense of unease. Religiously

themed drama programs--such as *Touched by an Angel* (1994-2002)*, 7th Heaven* (1996-

2007), and *Nothing Sacred* (1997-1998)*,* as well as the comedies *Dharma and Greg*

(1997-2002) and *Soul Man* (1997-1998)--represented a new willingness by television

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[26] Barbara Hall, "Religion, Media, and Hollywood," online lecture for USC Communication College, *University of Southern California,* January 31, 2008, accessed February 16, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGv_EObmvEc&list=PLr--xn8M3gS970B5yB8voYmsH7HJvVw7H.

[27] Congressional Research Service, *Should the Federal Government Significantly Strengthen the Regulation of Mass Media Communication in the United States?* 96th Cong., 1st Session, House Document 96-167 (Washington, DC: U.S. government Printing Office, 1979); Leeland Johnson, *Toward Competition in Cable Television* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); Lucas Powe, *American Broadcasting and the First Amendment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Jeremy Tunstull, *Communications Deregulation: The Unleashing of America's Communications Industry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Leonard W. Weiss and Michael W. Klass, eds., *Regulatory Reform: What Actually Happened* (Boston*:* Little, Brown Publishers, 1986).

producers to use religion as a way to increase viewership.[28] Even "traditional" dramas

like *The West Wing* (1999-2006) and *ER* (1994-2009) featured episodes and characters

dealing with specific issues of faith. Films, too, embraced the divine during this decade.

Romantic comedies such as *Keeping the Faith* (2000), animated religious stories like

DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), and the singing nuns in *Sister Act* (1992) all

dealt with matters of faith, while grossing high profits for the studios.[29] Even the decade's

sci-fi hit *The Matrix* (1999) included significant comingling of spiritual elements from

Christian and Eastern religious traditions. The trend in selling religion to the masses was

not simply limited to the screen. Two of the best-selling book series of the 1990s and

early 2000s were explicitly Christian—the Evangelical apocalyptical series *Left Behind*

and the feel-good, southern-religious charm of *At Home in Mitford.* As such, the cultural

climate of the 1990s was, to quote New York Times columnist David Brooks, one "of

moral self-repair."[30] Additionally, Colin Harrison, a cultural historian, argues that during

the 1990s, "Americans needed urgently to fix the meaning of the present before they

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[28] See Scott H. Clark, "Created in Whose Image? Religious Characters on Network Television." *Journal of Media & Religion* 4, no. 3 (July 2005): 137–53, Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture,* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), and Barrie Gunter and Rachel Viney, *Seeing is Believing: Religion and Television in the 1990s,* (London: University of Luton Press, 1994).

[29] *Keeping the Faith* grossed $239 million, *The Matrix* $172 million, and *Sister Act* $140 million. *Prince of Egypt* grossed $102 million.

[30] David Brooks, "The Virtues of Virtue," *New York Times,* August 7 1996, accessed March 19, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/07/opinion/07brooks.html?_r=0.

could live in it."[31] The desire for some sort of a clearly defined place in the changing

global landscape of the decade was indicative of a fractured sense of place that plagued

people throughout the nineties.

Politically, the United States was increasingly divided, as many of the domestic

ideological differences between liberals and conservatives previously masked by a

consensus on Cold War foreign policy came back into focus.[32] The 1992 U.S.

Presidential election between George H. W. Bush and William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton

dictated the political dialogue for the rest of the decade. During that election, Republican

Patrick Buchanan famously declared that America was facing a new war between

cultures and ideologies within the United States itself. Buchanan, in his speech to the

1992 Republican National Convention argued that, "there is a religious war going on in

our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation

we will one day be as was the Cold War itself."[33] His hyperbole notwithstanding, the

religious lines drawn between Democrats and Republicans demonstrate the desperation

that underscored the political and cultural climate the 1990s. Within the speech,

Buchanan argued that a battle was being waged for the soul of America: "Politics is the

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[31] Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 1.

[32] For further reading Michael J. Hogan, ed. *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Susan Myers-Shirk, *Helping the Good Shepherd: Pastoral Councilors in a Psychotherapeutic Culture, 1925-1975*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

[33] Patrick J. Buchanan, "1992 Republican National Convention" (speech, Superdome, Houston, Texas, August 17, 1992), accessed March 15, 2015, http://buchanan.org/blog/1992-republican-national-convention-speech-148 .

last contested battlefield of our culture war, for only through politics can the new cult, a

militant and intolerant secularist faith that will abide no other, impose its values on us."[34]

The Democratic Party countered by arguing that using such religious rhetoric only

divided the country. Clinton, in his acceptance speech for the Democratic Party's

nomination in 1992, argued, "This country is very divided today. We're divided by race

and region, by income, by age, by gender. We are all cut up. And I'm telling you, we can't

fake it. There's only one President. There's only 535 members of Congress. There are 250

million Americans. We have got to say we want to be one nation again."[35] The language

of both political parties' convention speeches set the stage for a domestic culture war

between conservatives and liberals that continued throughout the decade. Both parties

sought to connect the electorate to larger issues regarding "hot button" domestic issues

that characterized the polarity of the decade. Conservatives faced off against liberals on

to issues surrounding abortion, homosexuality, domestic aid programs, and school

prayer.[36] Subsequently, liberals and conservatives utilized religious language as

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Gwen Ifill, "The 1992 Campaign: Clinton's Standard Campaign Speech: A Call for Responsibility," *New York Times,* April 26, 1992, accessed April 6, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/26/us/the-1992-campaign-clinton-s-standard-campaign-speech-a-call-for-responsibility.html?pagewanted=1.

[36] See Andrew Kohut, John C. Green, Scott Keeter, Robert C. Toth, *The Diminishing Divide: Religion's Changing Role in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), Geoffrey Layman, *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), Martin William, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America,* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), and Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds. *God is in the Details: American Religion and Popular Culture,* (London: Routledge, 2010).

justification to win the support of the electorate and to offer validation for their global

and domestic policies. However, *The X Files* argued that those people and institutions in

power—elected or organizational—offered no openness or honesty to the American

people, and that touched on an overarching suspicion of those in power within the

populace.[37]

The United States has a complicated history regarding religion, specifically with

the intersection of religion between the public and private spheres. During the Cold War

these practices dramatically changed. There was a religious resurgence during the 1950s

when America saw itself as the antidote to "godless Communism."[38] The U.S.

government used religion as a way to create a black-and-white picture of why the

American people were better than the Soviet Union. By the 1970s and 1980s, faith

practices became even more intricately connected to the motives of public actions and

political stances. Many in America, led by folks like Pat Robertson, turned to

conservative religion as an apparent antidote to the uncertainty that widespread

disillusionment with the Vietnam War, changing gender roles, and political mistrust had

wrought.

This trend continued throughout the 1990s. At the beginning of the decade, many

felt that the decade represented an opportunity to increase Cold War America's tarnished

prestige abroad and an opportunity to address many of the societal ills that plagued the

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[37] Paul A. Cantor, *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 167, 168, 204, 234, 243.

[38] Stephen J. Whitefield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1-8.

nation. However, as the decade progressed, this optimism was replaced by economic

downturns, greater income inequality, and continual clashes between conservative and

liberal social movements. As such, many Americans sought security and stability within

traditional and nontraditional faith practices. Poll numbers, inflated or otherwise, give

justifiable credence to political and popular media's recognition of the greater importance

of a large, paying demographic of spiritually inclined individuals.[39] For example, The

Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan think tank and polling initiative, showed that 69% of

Americans saw themselves as religious, and of that, an even higher number said they

attended religious services regularly.[40] Another poll shows that the number of Americans

professing to believe in God also rose dramatically during the 1990s to over 90%.[41]

Popular culture addressed the increase in spiritual belief trends within the media

landscape. However, most of the mainstream popular media offered little substance.

Instead they offered sappy, watered-down messages regarding issues of faith in between

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[39] For further reading, please see Mark D. Brewer, Rogan Kersh, and R. Eric Petersen, "Assessing Conventional Wisdom about Religion and Politics: A Preliminary View from the Pews," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (March 2003): 125-36; John O'Sullivan, "The Role of Media in a Time of Global Crisis," *International Journal on World Peace* 21, no. 4 (December 2004): 69-79; and C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves, "What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance," *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 6 (December 1993): 741-53.

[40] Alan Cooperman, "Religion among the Millennial: Less Religiously Active Than Older Americans, but Fairly Traditional In Other Ways," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, February 17, 2010, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/02/millennials-report.pdf.

[41] L. Street, "Trends in Attitudes toward Religion and Social Issues: 1987-2007," *Pew Research Center*, October 15, 2007, accessed March 12, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/10/15/trends-in-attitudes-toward-religion-and-social-issues-19872007/.

moments of entertainment. Comparatively, *The X Files* did not fall into the trap of using

motifs of spirituality as a crutch for more ratings or simply as a cardboard representation

of conversations surrounding faith and doubt. Audiences connected with *The X Files*'

unique message regarding faith topics, as demonstrated in the rapid ratings increase. With

the immediate success of the program, FOX executives moved *The X Files* to a prime,

Sunday-night slot where it competed with CBS's *Touched by an Angel.* Although

mentioned, it is important to define the program as a very successful, long-running

program that featured stand-alone episodes of three Christian angels serving humanity in

some capacity. Every episode featured a similar format. The angels arrive someplace on

earth, usually in the United States, to find a person or group of people in need. After a

crisis, the angels reveal themselves as the Lord's messengers and then the characters are

able to move forward with their lives. *The X Files* was the antithesis of *Touched by an*

Angel. In no episode, least of all the ones dealing with religion or matters of faith, were

situations wrapped up neatly by the closing credits. Instead, they ended with more

questions than they had begun with. Again, Millman points out that

> Mulder wanted extraterrestrials to be real so he could solve the mystery of his
> disintegrating family. Scully placed her faith in science, yet she wore a small gold
> cross around her neck; unable to rationally explain how she survived an incurable
> cancer, or became unexpectedly pregnant after she was diagnosed as "barren," she
> fell back on the comfort of her Roman Catholicism and considered them
> "miracles.[42]

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[42] Joyce Millman, "'The X-Files' Finds Its Truth: Its Time Is Past," *New Times*,
May 19, 2002, accessed March 5, 2015,
http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/19/arts/television-radio-the-x-files-finds-the-truth-its-
time-is-past.html.

The X Files challenged the influx of popular feel-good or fire and brimstone spiritual

media by arguing to their audiences should trust nothing, even if they wanted to believe.

     The X Files reflected the anxieties of a post-Cold War America in its portrayal of

religion. Religion was once considered one of the last taboos in American popular

television, even as allusions to faith were central to the U.S. government's rhetoric

against "godless Communism." However, by the start of the 1990s, science-fiction

programs, such as the reboots and spin-offs of *Star Trek* that also existed within the

decade did feature long-running and complicated story arcs regarding faith. However,

these programs used fictitious faith systems and were set within the fictional confines of

"space, the final frontier."[43] Science-fiction media, such as *Star Trek,* have throughout

their multiple television series and movies routinely been more likely to engage in

complicated issues regarding gender, sexuality, race, politics, and societal issues, because

they exist in a world that, although familiar, does not represent a current landscape of

realistic life. Comparatively, *The X Files* existed within a recognizable present. Within

that arena, Agents Mulder and Scully frequently and significantly engaged in

conversations regarding faith and doubt. *The X Files* offered audiences the ability to

question their faith while reevaluating all forms of authority. Religious discord on the

program offered the scores of people who watched an opportunity to see a civil discourse

between two characters who did not need to agree about faith and doubt to maintain a

close relationship. The dialog between Agents Mulder and Scully represents an American

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     [43] This terminology is attributed to Gene Rodenberry's *Star Trek* television series
from 1966.

society coming to terms with the end of the Cold War and the evolving definitions of

belief within the United States.

CHAPTER IV

DENY EVERYTHING: *THE X FILES*, GOVERNMENT CONSPIRACY, AND THE 21ST CENTURY

"It's so interesting that when I finished 'The X-Files' in 2002, the--call it the political and cultural climate in America--was one of fear, and trust of government. Because of it we put ourselves in the hands of the authority who was going to protect us."
---Chris Carter, creator of *The X Files*[1]

Keith Booker, a television scholar, perfectly sums up the importance of *The X Files* to the 1990s. He maintains that although people had perceived the world during the Cold War as ending with a whimper, "the real anxiety plaguing American society at the end of the twentieth century was that no such threats were really serious, that there were no more glorious victories to be achieved, no more frontiers to conquer."[2] With the sudden and mysterious collapse of the Soviet Union, Americans were open to questioning what the government had told them for more then two generations and more were willing to explore these fears and doubts through *The X Files.* In the first season episode, "E.B.E.," Agents Mulder and Scully search for the truth of the existence of an extraterrestrial biological entity (EBE). "Deep Throat," a mysterious man with knowledge of the upper echelons of the U.S. government, thwarts the agents from discovering the elusive truth. Deep Throat was, during the first season, the representation of the governmental cover-ups of all truths deemed too difficult for the American people

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[1] Bryan Bishop, "'*X-Files*' Creator Chris Carter on His Long-Awaited: Amazon's 'The After,'" *The Verge*, February 13, 2014, http://wwwReturntotV.theverge.com/2014/2/13/5409122/chris-carter-the-after-interview.

[2] M. Keith Booker, *Strange TV: Innovative Television Series from The Twilight Zone to The X-Files* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing, 2002), 127.

to handle and of course resonated and recalled the Watergate cover-up as the

investigative reporters who broke the story called their government informant "Deep

Throat." In "E.B.E." Deep Throat stops the agents just seconds short of seeing alien life.

He explains to Agent Mulder that

> After the Roswell incident in 1947, even at the brink of the Cold War, there was an ultra-secret conference attended by the United States, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Britain, both Germanies, France and it was agreed that should any extraterrestrial biological entity survive a crash, the country that held that being would be responsible for it's [sic.] extermination. I, uh . . . have the distinction of being one of three men to have exterminated such a creature. I was with the C.I.A. in Vietnam. A UFO was sighted for five nights over Hanoi. The marines shot it down and brought it to us. Maybe . . . it didn't know what a gun was or perhaps they don't show emotion but that . . . innocent and blank expression as I pulled the trigger has haunted me . . . until I found you. That's why I come to you, Mr. Mulder, and will continue to come to you to atone for what I've done. And maybe sometime, through you, the truth will be known.[3]

Obviously, not every television viewer saw the potential existence of alien life as a

reason to tune into the program. However, the program touched on a very raw nerve in

the American people, wherein the realm of the extreme possibility of alien life,

government cover-ups, and science gone horribly wrong seemed as possible as the Cold

War ending without bloodshed.

With the absence of a global threat, American audiences wondered if the

institutions and structures that had told them of the great danger of the Soviet Union had

had other motivations than U.S. security. The characters in *The X Files* exemplified many

of the failings and aspirations of the 1990s. Mulder and Scully are both shockingly

idealistic, even in the face of countless setbacks by those in power who are also supposed

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[3] *The X Files,* season 1, episode 16, "E.B.E.," directed by William Graham, aired February 18, 1994, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 3.

to be searching for truth and justice. Mulder believes the greatest threat to the United

States are the actions of those who operate behind the scenes---either by hiding the

existence of alien life or using the American people as unwitting participants in scientific

experiments---both without the public's knowledge. Scully, the intellectual foil to

Mulder, believes that science and progress will make the world a better place. Carter, in

an early promotional interview for the show, argued, "Now that Russia is no longer our

very recognizable enemy, we suddenly need to find other enemies and other sources of

discontent."[4] Joyce Millman, a writer for The New York Times, maintained that *The X*

Files

> was the defining series of the '90s. It hauntingly captured the cultural moment
> when paranoid distrust of government spilled over from the political fringes to the
> mainstream, aided by the conspiracy-theory-disseminating capability of the
> Internet. With its high-level cover-ups, Deep Throats and adherence to the
> watchwords "Trust no one,"[5]

As a result, audiences found themselves connecting en masse to the messages about the

need to question of all authority.

In the first seasons, in addition to "Deep Throat," audiences were introduced to

"Agent X" and most famously "The Cigarette Smoking Man." They are individuals who

lurk in the shadows and are never revealed as either good or evil. Instead, Agents Mulder

(and later in the show's tenure Scully) must decide if the shadowy figures are truly

protecting the American people from truths too terrible to bear or if they are serving as

"enforcers" and protecting individuals far more dangerous than themselves. In the final

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[4] Lisa Maccarillo, "Sci-Fi Entertainment: A Conversation with The X-Files'
Creator Chris Carter," *Sci-Fi Entertainment*, December 1994, accessed January 12, 2015,
http://www.eatthecorn.com/itw/1994/12/01/scifi-entertainment/.

[5] Millman, "'The X-Files' Finds Its Truth."

episode of the first season, the mysterious yet duplicitous Deep Throat dies after giving

information to Agent Scully. His last words set the stage for the next eight years of the

program. Deep Throat gasps out that

> In 1987, a group of children from a southern state were given what their parents
> thought was a routine inoculation. What they were injected with was a clone DNA
> from the contents of that package you're holding as a test. That's the kind of
> people you're dealing with!
> SCULLY: So why give it back to them?
> DEEP THROAT: To save Mulder's life.
> SCULLY: At the risk of so many other lives?
> DEEP THROAT: Oh, it's the tip of the iceberg. You and Mulder are the only ones
> who can bring it to light. . . . Trust no one. [6]

Such plot lines clearly depended upon the specific culture of unease that swept across the

United States after the end of the Cold War, telling the audience to abandon any trust in

the new post-Soviet Union world.

The Cold War transformed U.S. foreign and domestic policy and shaped

American culture throughout the latter-half of the twentieth century.[7] U.S. information

strategists created a new American rhetoric to fit the new circumstances that downplayed

the negative aspects of society and culture to create a homogenous narrative that was

more of a pamphlet against Communism than an actual reflection of life in the post-

World War II United States. This rhetoric and American culture as a whole, as discussed

in the previous chapter, was fraught with religious imagery to heighten the contrast with

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[6]*The X Files,* season 1, episode 23, "Erlenmeyer Flask," directed by R. W.
Goodwin, aired May 13, 1994, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2007), disc 5.

[7] Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold
War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 10-14.

godless Communism, despite the fact that the United States was not notably more or less

religious after World War II. Postwar American society built itself as the conscious

opposite of Communism by focusing on freedom, god, democracy, and capitalism, but

embedded in this belief system was an implicit and strengthened faith "in the institutions

of authority as the best preservatives of national values."[8] It was exactly this implicit and

unquestioned faith in institutions and especially the government that fueled *The X Files*.

In season one, Mulder was speaking to "Deep Throat." Deep Throat argued that the

American people could not handle the truths of what the U.S. government did during the

Cold War, because it would shatter their understanding of the world and their place in it.

Mulder exclaims,

> You mean in a sense of outrage, like the reaction to the Kennedy assassination or
> M.I.A.s or radiation experiments on terminal patients, Watergate, Iran-Contra,
> Roswell, the Tuskegee experiments,[9] where will it end? Oh, I guess it won't end
> as long as . . . men like you decide what is truth.[10]

As Mulder points out in his confrontation with Deep Throat, there obviously was doubt

and outrage toward U.S. governmental actions during the Cold War, but many Americans

had cast these questionable actions—whether military (like the Vietnam War) or

domestic (like McCarthyism)—as errors of judgment in the good-intentioned fight

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[8] Stephen J. Whitefield, *Culture of the Cold War*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 53. See also Ibid., 53-60.

[9] The Tuskegee Experiments were when the U.S. government, through the Health Department, deliberately infected rural African Americans with syphilis, and left the disease untreated in order to explore the complications. There was no informed consent for these procedures.

[10] *The X Files,* season 1, episode 16, "E.B.E."

against Communism rather than as abuses of power tied to larger structural problems in society.[11]

However, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Americans became more concerned about their government and its leaders. Without an external threat to challenge, they became very afraid of the potential repercussions of the governmental powers to which they had given assent during the Cold War. *The X Files* gave full voice to those fears and asked its audience to entertain those misgivings. In addition, the plot lines of the show led audiences to consider that the American government had kept truths from its citizens that were not related to communist threats but ran far deeper than even the most ardent conspiracist could comprehend. In the sixth season episode, "One Son," Agent Mulder was coming to terms with the realization that the American government had allowed children, including his sister Samantha, to be experimented on by extra-terrestrial life forms. Mulder exclaims that the Cold War created

> A silent enemy and a sleeping giant on a scale to dwarf all historical conflicts. A 50-years war, its killing fields lying in wait for the inevitable global holocaust. Theirs was the dawn of Armageddon. And while the world was unaware, unwitting spectators to the hurly-burly of the decades-long struggle between heaven and earth, there were those who prepared for the end; who measured the size and power of the enemy, and faced the choices: stand and fight, or bow to the will of a fearsome enemy. Or to surrender -- to yield and collaborate. To save themselves and stay their enemy's hand. Men who believed that victory was the absence of defeat and survival the ultimate ideology . . . No matter what the sacrifice.[12]

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[11] For the purposes of this essay, this scholar does not see the trend beginning until the 1990s.

[12] *The X Files,* season 6, episode 12, "One Son," directed by Rob Bowman, aired February 14, 1999, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2007), disc 1.

Mulder's argument resonated with audiences. Audiences attached themselves to the ideas of distrust and governmental deceit in large part because they had many actual bases on which to build. During the Cold War, American trust in governmental institutions eroded due to cover-ups, missteps in policies, and questionable actions of human rights.

By the ninth season of *The X Files,* television audiences witnessed the largest domestic terror attack to occur on U.S. soil, and the program's imagined threats, almost instantly, paled in comparison to the very real threats of actual terrorism, which became fodder for other network programs. *24,* FOX Television's Sunday-night replacement for *The X Files*, showed the U.S. government operating in the best interest of the American people, no matter the costs. *24* showed its characters praying, torturing civilians, and destroying civil liberties all under the guise of protecting the safety and security of the American people. *The X Files'* mantra of "Trust No One" was replaced by *24'*s, "In God, the Government, and Jack Bauer We Trust." *24* was not a short-lived FOX program; it spanned nine seasons and multiple television specials. *24* reflected the transition of American society, politically and culturally, after 9/11. *The X Files* no longer frightened audiences with the unknown or conspiracies, because the truth of terrorism, featured on programs such as *24*, was far too real.[13]

By the end of the show's run, in 2002, audiences no longer felt that the paranoid realities of *The X Files* rang true. They instead tuned in to programs that offered a secure belief that the U.S. government and its employees were fighting against the terrorists bent

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[13] Rick Marshall, "Q&A: Chris Carter on The X-Files and 'The '90s: The Last Great Decade,'" *mental_floss,* July 3, 2014, accessed March 21, 2015, http://mentalfloss.com/article/57587/qa-chris-carter-x-files-and-90s-last-great-decade; Millman, "'The X-Files' Finds Its Truth."

on our destruction. While *The X Files* asked audiences to doubt everything and everyone,

that mindset was far too disconcerting in this new age of terrorism. The American people

of the new century were instead drawn to popular culture that offered certainty. *NCIS*, *24*,

and *Chuck* all offered viewers a new, less nuanced view of the government in which

patriotism and democratic certainty reigned supreme.

Yet Carter, creator of *The X Files*, sees the trust of the early War on Terror as an

aberration. He explains that,

> It was 1974 when Nixon resigned, but I still think there was a residual distrust of
> authority, and *The X-Files* capitalized on that…. [but] I think it would work [in
> 2015], because I think our distrust has not only been reconstituted but amplified
> by current events. But I think in the '00s, though, it would not have worked.[14]

 Recently, Showtime's *Homeland*, for example, takes a hard look at how the Central

Intelligence Agency's actions in the Middle East have affected foreign policy and created

new terrorist sympathizers. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if the shock and pervasive

paranoia about government cover-ups and conspiracies that the audiences of *The X Files*

experienced will resonate with a jaded millennial generation that grew up in an age of

counter-terrorism and Edward Snowden.

During the show's run, *The X Files* asked viewers to entertain the possibility that

the only thing to fear is the government itself. However, with 9/11 the United States

faced an enemy that was not bound by geographic and diplomatic borders. Nonetheless,

the U.S. government and the American people quickly recycled their dichotomous

language from the earlier Cold War as they rhetorically armed themselves against this

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[14] Russ Spencer, "A Close Encounter with Chris Carter," *Salon,* April 28, 2000,
accessed March 21, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2000/04/28/chriscarter/.

new extremist enemy. *The X Files* had led its audiences to believe that the truth was out there but that the government was hiding it. After 9/11, Americans again chose to believe that the truth was within themselves and their government, which again was the upholder of justice, consumer capitalism, and Christian values against a nefarious force.

The motto of "Trust No One" might seem to be merely a television-ratings hook, not a deeper representation of the 1990s and American society, but historians need only examine the trends of the decade to witness the pervasive lack of confidence that characterizes a society in flux and an audience willing to entertain the possibility of previously inconceivable truths. The nineties offered *The X Files* the perfect landscape to connect with audiences, but its superstitions and successes are also indicative of the nineties; as a result, it failed to make the transition to the 21st century (at least so far).

CHAPTER V

TO BOLDLY GO:
THE TRUTH (AND FUTURE OF TELEVISION STUDIES) IS OUT THERE

"To boldly go where no one has gone before!" These iconic words invited

audiences into the Starship *Enterprise* and the beginning of the *Star Trek* television series

in 1966. However, it was truly *The X Files* that took viewers in the 1990s to a "place"

they had never before been, a place of doubt and distrust. Although the 1990s featured

other science-fiction and paranormal network television programs (such as *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer, three different *Star Trek* spin-offs, *Stargate SGI*, *Babylon 5*, and

Quantum Leap). Commentator Richard Corliss argued that, "The X-Files says there are

things to believe in: the things the government suppresses and the traditional media don't

dare reveal."[1] Even with a bumper crop of science-fiction shows, *The X Files* attracted

the largest public following from the mainstream television-viewing audience, because it

did offer viewers something that no other television show did.[2] It so permeated popular

culture that most Americans of the time, even those who did not define themselves as

stereotypical science-fiction fans, could hum the iconic first notes of *The X Files* theme

song. The show spanned nine seasons and two feature films. Its stars became household

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[1] Richard Corliss, "A Star Trek into the X-Files," *Time Magazine* 149, no. 7 (April 7, 1997): 42. See also ibid., 43.

[2] At its peak *The X Files*' audience averaged between 24 and 30 million viewers a week.

names and graced the covers of every major entertainment magazine. British journalist

Jack Rosevear contrasted this iconic pop hit of the 1990s to its predecessor in the 1960s:

> *Star Trek* illustrates the mood of the 60s: it is a program about hope, looking
> forward and new discoveries. No-one in *Star Trek* needed money, there was
> sexual and racial equality: evidently, there was a bright and better future. Contrast
> this with *The X Files* - surely the most influential series of the 90s -, which is dark
> and brooding. *The X Files* is all about fear of the unknown and cynicism for the
> past. *The X Files* begins with the messages: 'Trust no-one', 'deny everything' or
> 'the truth is out there'; quite a difference from 'to boldly go where no man has
> gone before'.[3]

The program, throughout its over two-hundred television episodes and two major motion

pictures, argued for a reevaluation of how television audiences interpreted the actions

taken by the U.S. government during and after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Within the fantastical "X File" cases, Mulder made multiple references to real-life

historical events in which the U.S. government acted in ways that were detrimental to its

citizens. In season two, He preaches to Agent Scully that,

> They've done it before. D.D.T. in the 50's, Agent Orange, germ warfare on
> unsuspecting neighborhoods.
> SCULLY: Yes, but why, Mulder? Why would they intentionally create a
> populace that destroys itself?
> MULDER: Fear. It's the oldest tool of power. If you're distracted by fear of those
> around you, it keeps you from seeing the actions of those above.[4]

The fears that *The X Files* appropriated from the Cold War era and built upon were

responsible for its success. Journalist Booker Keith explains that, "The nominal end of

the Cold War at the beginning of the nineteen-nineties added significantly to the

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[3] Jack Rosevear, "Generation X Bites Back," *The Campaign* (United Kingdom),
July 12, 1996, accessed November 15, 2011,http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/22560/

[4] *The X Files,* season 2, episode 3, "Blood," directed by David Nutter, aired
September 30, 1994, on FOXtv, DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006), disc 1.

phenomenon [of fear]."[5] The U.S. public could not dream of a future while embroiled in a

turbulent Cold War. When it ended, Americans found themselves without an enemy and,

suddenly, with an unknown future. The absence of an ongoing object of suspicion left

U.S. citizens with a gnawing feeling of doubt and mistrust. Those who had come of age

in the 1960s and 1970s had no memory of *not* fearing the continual threat that

Communism posed, an overarching and pervasive fear that included fears of nuclear war,

of a "Red invasion," and other Cold War-related global catastrophes. *The X Files* stepped

into that void for audiences of the 1990s. *The X Files* was the only science-fiction

television show to achieve widespread, mainstream popularity. *The X Files* successfully

exploited underlying fears and questioned authority, which permeated American culture

during the nineties.[6] Journalist David Hinkley explained that, "In the same way you could

say 'Titanic' was a movie about a boat ride, 'The X Files' was a show about the

investigation of potentially paranormal phenomena by two main characters."[7] The

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[5] Booker, *Strange TV*, 127.

[6] One cannot understate the influence of *The X Files* within American political society of the 1990s. As such the author's intent is to further examine—at a later date--how *The X Files* was represented by the very governmental authorities who it said not to trust. For further reading, see "Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO) - Collection Finding Aid," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 10, 2015, http://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/36389; and William Jefferson Clinton*, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1998.* Accessed March 10, 2015, http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/PPP-PHOTOS-1998-book2/PPP-PHOTOS-1998-book2-folio-A/content-detail.html.

[7] David Hinkley, "'The X-Files' Turns 20: Agents Mulder & Scully Made Us Want to Believe Serialized Genre Fare Could Thrive on TV," *New York Daily News,* September 10, 2013, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/celebrating-20-years-x-files-article-1.1451230.

complex nature of the program and the main characters make this missive just one piece

of a larger puzzle on the importance and complexities of examining a program that was--

and continues to be--so pervasive within society and culture.

Popular culture encompasses every facet of U.S. society. Pop culture, especially

television, is difficult to historicize and analyze because of its pervasive influence on

society. Television, first maligned as an artistic blight and influencer of social deviants,

now offers historians the opportunity to examine one of the seminal technologies of the

late twentieth century. After the Second World War, television sets entered the American

home, which it continues to dominate. With its inclusion in so many households, the

medium presented a complicated mass of messages. On the one hand, televised fictional

images were bound by what media conglomerates deigned worthwhile for the business of

television. As a result, the programs that audiences ended up viewing were in many ways

dependent upon processes and relationships that the audiences never witnessed. However,

those televised fictional images were not bound by the intent of the producers and

networks. Audiences internalize and produce the meaning of programs and episodes

based upon their own understanding and their own experiences. Consequently, many

historians have also been hesitant to examine television programming as indicative of

larger trends in society simply because the medium exists in a difficult and complicated

space. But examining television programming allows historians to delve deeper into the

stories of thousands of individuals who gathered to watch the same program and were

connected by their viewing.

In the past ten years, the Internet and mobile technologies have further distanced

viewers from the traditional network-television experience. Audiences are no longer

bound by the network airtime or even by the television itself. Mobile devices, computers, and nontraditional networks have dethroned network television. In recent years, cable and nontraditional networks, such as Amazon.com and Netflix, have offered viewers the freedom of television whenever and wherever the viewer wants. Although *The X Files* reappeared in movie theaters in 2009 with *I Want to Believe* and its recent reappearance within the television landscape, it no longer packs the punch that it once offered to society. Today every popular show has its own Internet message boards; afternoon soap operas, children's programming, and traditional comedies and dramas all have embraced the Internet as a way to increase fan-bases and audience participation.

Television, though consistently labeled by its critics as a purveyor of violence and increased social chaos, has weathered both technological advancements and its detractors to remain vitally important. Television audiences, with the rise of nontraditional methods of viewing and networks, are now harder than ever to categorize. However, this should not discourage historians of the recent past. The television set is no longer dependent upon the social sphere of the home, and with its transportation away from its gendered origins, hopefully the long-standing prejudices against the medium will continue to dissipate. Additionally, historians need to contribute more actively to the scholarly literature on television in order to place it within its historical context as part of larger social conversations about culture, society, and politics, rather than dismissing it simply as a form of artistic expression.   Charlotte Brunson, a television and film studies scholar, agrees that media needs to be examined by other disciplines. She argues that "Television must now be reinscribed, diachronically, within a series of histories: of twentieth-century nation states, of the electrification of the home, of serialized fiction. . . . In some sense,

television is too important to be left to just television studies."[8] Recognizing that

television is a vital part of the historical discipline is thankfully not lost on all historians.

Douglas Gomery, a historian of popular media, agrees with Brunson. He explained in a

2001 essay for the American Historical Association,

> Within film and television studies, there is a central cleavage between formalists who ponder philosophical questions about what distinguishes cinema and television from other media in terms of generating meaning, and historians who think of film and television as evidence. Film studies has its historians but they long have been in the minority. I argue that it is time to recognize that film and television historians are not only methodologically kin to traditional historians, but media historians can contribute to history, not just television and film history. . . . With the 21st century now upon us, we have accumulated a full 100 years of cinema and 50 years of television. We should begin to seriously consider ways to do research about these two dominant media of the past century.[9]

Gomery's points ring true. Long a vital part of the American experience, television is

unfortunately bound to weak historical arguments. When historians choose to recognize

the amazing importance of the medium, new cultural, political, and social histories can be

written. Gender and race have long been the go-to for historians who do attempt to utilize

the medium, but they choose to view television as merely an indicator of larger trends,

not a larger conversation between cultures. Future scholarship must examine the role of

television programs in changing and shaping larger social and cultural thoughts regarding

race, gender, sexuality, and changing societal norms.

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[8] Charlotte Brunsdon, "Is Television Studies History?" *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 137.

[9] Douglas Gomery, "Considering Research in Film and Television Archives?" *Perspectives on History* 41, no. 1 (January 2001): 2.

"A history that extends into our own lifetimes, that continues to shape our daily lives, is hard to bring to conclusion."[10] Though referring to the American consumer's republic, historian Lizbeth Cohen's remarks well serve to wrap up this study of television. When studying popular culture, one must accept that every fan and critic has an opinion on the topic. Television, to quote the idealistic character Kenneth Page from NBC's *30 Rock*, "is the true American art form."[11] Kenneth knows that television is more than just a toaster with pictures or a mass technology of delusion. The medium challenges society even as it is itself shaped and molded by the society. The complicated nature of the medium should not dissuade historians. Instead, the complications should be embraced, and within them, a richer historical narrative will emerge.

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[10] Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 401.

[11] *30 Rock*, season 1, episode 11, "The Head and the Hair," directed by Gail Mancuso, aired January 18, 2007, on NBC, DVD (Universal Studios, 2007), disc 2.

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