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## **Disproving MH370's Russian Hijacking: Media, Evidence, and Psychology**

**Abstract:** In March 2014, Flight MH370 of Malaysia Airlines went missing with 239 people on board. Many theories have been formulated since that time in an attempt to explain what had occurred. Another very widespread, yet controversial, theory suggests the plane was hijacked by Russian intelligence and remotely controlled in order to hide at some location. In this theory, Russia was seeking to divert the attention of the rest of the world from the invasion of Crimea which was occurring at the same time. This theory gained more popularity following the publication of an article by a journalist called Jeff Wise, who quoted a Russian passenger as having assisted in the hijacking.

This paper investigates the extent of facts that might prove the theory that MH370 could have been remotely hijacked by the Russian intelligence along with paper applies qualitative content analysis of official investigation reports, scholarly research on media framing, and conspiracy psychology and culture research. In the wake of a formal report of investigations into the incident and opinions of experts, it seems that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that Russia was involved. The majority of investigations suppose that the flight possibly was diverted either by the pilots or by a malfunction in the system. This study will demonstrate how these conspiracy theories become popular when there are no obvious answers provided by authorities. Finally, this paper will state that the Russian hijacking theory may be acceptable to other people, despite the fact that there is no concrete evidence that MH370 was hijacked by Russians, because this theory is primarily generated by people who are unable to find an answer to their questions.

One of the most mysterious and devastating incidents in the history of the contemporary aviation is the disappearance of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 that took place on March 8, 2014. The Airplane Boeing 777 disappeared during a flight between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing which was travelling with 239 passengers and crew. Although numerous international searches were held and spanned millions of square kilometers in the Indian Ocean as well as various official studies, the exact fate of the plane remains unclear. The main investigation was conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Transport which concluded that there was no conclusive evidence in explaining the disappearance. Due to the lack of clarity, a lot of conspiracy theories emerged and people attempted to provide answers to those questions that were not answered. One of these theories that picked up special attention was the Russian hijacking accusation. According to this theory, the plane had been hijacked by Russian agents without the knowledge of other passengers, who flew the plane to some remote place due to political motives. The case received extensive media coverage and aroused the attention of people with no definite evidence.

The popularity of the theory is mostly associated with confusion and unclarity of the case. All the official investigations failed to track down any evidence of Russian interference. They instead indicated greater possibilities like pilot action or technical failure. Nevertheless, the conclusions were rejected by many people who tried to find other explanations which appeared more dramatic or even meaningful. The role of media coverage in the spread of Russian hijacking story was quite dominant. An example of this can be found when journalist Jeff Wise published an article that connected unusual satellite data ping to a potential clandestine flight path to Kazakhstan to connect

it with the Russian political activity in Crimea at the time. Although Wise knew that his ideas were speculative and had no direct evidence, his article was convincing, and contributed to the popularity of the theory. In addition to the media effects, it is also psychologically proven that a lot of people believe in conspiracy theories. Where the official answers are absent or incoherent citizens become reluctant and they strive to take ownership of the situation by believing in the stories whose explanations are clear in spite of the fact that these explanations may not be scientifically confirmed. This paper disproves MH370's Russian hijacking theory by highlighting absent evidence, speculative media, and psychological conspiracy drivers.

### **Literature Review:**

This essay breaks down the argument that Russia shot down MH370 as evidence, and explains the official, technical, media and psychological inferences on the evidence, framing and why the theory gained widespread adoption despite the poor evidence. The databases (OpenAthens, JSTOR, Google Scholar) and official websites (Malaysian MoT, ATSB, Inmarsat) were searched with terms such as MH370, Inmarsat, BTO/BFO, media framing and search techniques and included eight articles/reports (2014-25). The methodology: check report facts, media framing, conspiracy psychology and data corroboration by technical reports.

**Official Investigation and the Lack of Evidence for Russian Hijacking:** The most complete and reliable report on the disappearance of MH370 is a report issued by the Malaysian Ministry of Transport (2018). It examines carefully the search results, flight data and even satellite signals to arrive at its conclusions. More importantly, the report does not see any grounds to explain the

hijacking or the remote control of the plane by Russia or anyone. Rather they propose more likely causes like pilot intervention or technical failure (Malaysian Ministry of Transport, 2018, p. 136). This report forms the basis of my investigation as it creates the firm factual background, citing the absence of hard evidence to support such conspiracy theory as Russian hijacking hypothesis.

**Media Framing and Its Role in Popularizing the Russian Hijack Theory:** The theory that the Russians hijacked the plane is largely popularised by journalist Jeff Wise (2015). He suggests that MH370 was hijacked by Russian agents to divert the attention of the world in the Crimea crisis. Despite Wise freely admitting that no direct evidence exists and that a lot of his theory is based on inference and circumstantial evidence, his article aroused the attention of people (Wise, 2015, para. 22). In support of this, Cheong and Wong (2016) compared newspapers in Malaysia, China, and the United States and found how different media presentations of the MH370 story had radically “framed” the story in different ways. Such opposite framings had an impact on the population and contributed to making conspiracy theories, like the Russian hijacking hypothesis, more plausible to many people (Cheong & Wong, 2016, p. 623).

**Psychological Drivers of Belief in Conspiracy Theories:** Researchers find that the chances of people believing in conspiracy theories grow when they face uncertain times. In situations when they cannot find any answers, they seek stories that enable them to have a sense of control and make sense of the situation, even though the stories might be grounded in facts (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017, p. 539). This goes some way to explaining why so many had believed in the Russian hijacking theory. It provided a full story when officials could not provide a straight answer, making people less confused.

**Psychology and Culture:** The psychology research reveals why individuals continued believing the MH370 hijacking narrative despite the lack of evidence. When feeling unsure or helpless, folks turn to conspiracy theories as a way of feeling in control and having answers (Douglas et al., 2017). Cultural study concurs and describes these stories as contemporary urban legends which persist due to their ability to provide communities with thrilling shared narratives to fill gaps in facts (Marjanić, 2023). In general, the necessity to have some certainty and dramatic meaning preserved the Russian hijack myth.

However, other authors believe that Russia was driven by a geopolitical agenda in its 2014 annexation of the Crimea peninsula and thus had a motive to fly the plane off course in Central Asia (Wise, 2015). Nevertheless, in comparison with satellite timing information, a BTO/BFO limitation, radar coverage, and Bayesian search models, the northern-route theory fails to comply with the technical realities (Ashton et al., 2015; ATSB, 2017; Davey et al., 2015). So political motive cannot be a testament and the most accurate data that can be used is a southern ocean crash and not a Russian hijacking.

Firstly, the most cogent reason why the Russian hijacking theory should be turned down is that it is not supported by any credible evidence. The official Safety Investigation Report Malaysia Airlines Boeing B777-200ER (9M-MRO) was a meticulous search of all known radar traces, satellite handshakes, radio communications, and fragments of debris. The investigators, who carried out the international examination over a period exceeding four years, found that “*there is no evidence to support the hypothesis of hijacking or remote control of the aircraft*” (Malaysian Ministry of Transport, 2018, p. 136). Moreover, they came to the conclusion after analyzing

satellite data in great detail, comparing it with ocean drift models that were cross checked by experts in various countries. Thus, the official report offers a strong factual ground in which the flight did not deviate towards Russia or Kazakhstan.

Nevertheless, proponents of the theory frequently refer to satellite pings that have no explanations as an indication of an uncharted route to the north. However, the aviation experts explain that these pings merely indicate that the aircraft remained on course for several hours and say nothing about who was at the helm and where it landed (SKYBrary Aviation Safety, n.d.). Moreover, there is not a single confirmed radar trace south of the southern arc and no separate debris trail has ever been identified along a north south line. The statement regarding the Russian diversion fails under pressure since none of them have ever been discovered (Malaysian Ministry of Transport, 2018; SKYBrary Aviation Safety, n.d.).

Secondly, another difference between the lack of evidence and media coverage was that media coverage aided in giving the hijacking story worldwide coverage. In the initial hectic weeks following the disappearance of MH370, the media was under pressure to deliver answers to the population who were desperate to know what had happened to the plane. One consequence of this was that several of the outlets employed so-called mystery frames, focusing more on mystery and secrets rather than facts that are proved. Bier, Park, and Palenchar (2017) demonstrate that such frames prevailed in Malaysian, Chinese, and American news, and Cheong and Wong (2016) explain that references to the lack of knowledge were repeated, and, therefore, conspiracy

explanations became more attractive. Sensational framing therefore formed fertile speculation ground.

A remarkable instance of the process is the article by Jeff Wise (2015), who indicates that there is a possibility that Russian agents could have flown the plane secretly to Kazakhstan. Wise was publicly a speculator, but his rich maps and theatrical account were soon replicated in the media and on social media. In fact, according to Bier and colleagues, “*media framing can transform a lack of information into a narrative of intrigue that audiences accept as plausible*” (2017, p. 162). In defense, there were journalists who said they were merely reporting all possible leads; however, the emphasis on speculation gave the impression that it was evidence, which was incorrect. Thus, the social media inflated sensational reporting making a barely supported hypothesis a story heard worldwide.

Thirdly, human psychology can be referred to as the reason why the Russian hijacking theory remains appealing. Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) demonstrate that individuals who experience uncertainty over a long period of time or feel helpless tend to espouse conspiracy theories more often since these narratives give them a sense of control and order. Likewise, the mystery of MH370 produced just such conditions, relatives of those onboard and the general population waited months as official searches produced very few findings.

With time every negative news item found its way to the fruitless updates, making a dramatic explanation more appealing. As a result, it was easy to point the finger at a strong nation

like Russia and find easy ways to blame it as an emotional relief. According to Douglas and colleagues (2017), this is a need of cognitive closure, the wish to solve uncertainty with a concrete narrative in the absence of evidence. Thus, it is obvious that psychological reasons also contributed to the preservation of the hijacking story.

Fourthly, the Russian hijacking theory is a new myth that even continues to exist after it has been proved to be wrong. According to Marjanić (2023), these MH370 conspiracy theories are referred to as urban legends having a paranoid matrix, social stories to rationalize tragedies. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia in 2014 offers geopolitical drama, thus making it believable.

Nevertheless, correlation does not equal causation, cause the Ministry of Transport of Malaysia (2018) discovered that there were no Russian connections or intelligence. However, the theory exploits international anti-Russia suspicions and more effectively finds its way in documentaries, podcasts, and social media because people like dramatic villain stories more than more ordinary ones such as mechanical failures or pilot suicides. Cultural narratives and human need to have exciting stories reinforce this misconception even though they are contradictory (Marjanić, 2023).

In conclusion, in this essay it has been established that the argument of a Russian hijack of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 is false and lacks good evidence to back it up. Neither radar nor satellite data or physical debris indicate that the plane was rerouted to Kazakhstan or under the control of Russian agents, as the official Safety Investigation Report indicates. Rather, the theory propagated due to the sensational media framing which focused more on mystery and speculation

compared to verifiable facts, and because of psychic needs to certainty that made a dramatic explanation more appealing when the search turned up no results. The continued political conflicts with Russia and the tendency of people to spread dramatic stories about the culture contributed to the fact that this fake story continued to gain momentum. It became a contemporary myth that lingered despite the fact that specialists disproved it. Through revisiting these elements, lack of evidence, speculative reporting, and human cravings to see and hear simple stories, this paper reinstated its thesis that the Russian hijacking story became more speculative than factual. Realizing that uncertainty can be turned into conspiracy by fear, media pressure and cultural prejudice is crucial in safeguarding the people in their trust in aviation investigations and ensuring that truth is not confused with rumor.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

*Safety Investigation Report Malaysia Airlines Boeing B777-200ER (9M-MRO) 08 March 2014 / SKYBraryAviation Safety.* (n.d.). <https://skybrary.aero/bookshelf/safety-investigation-report-malaysia-airlines-boeing-b777-200er-9m-mro-08-march-2014>

It is the richest and most reliable report on the investigation of the flight MH370. It gives a chronological overview of the events and closely examines accessible technical evidence such as radar and satellite signals. According to the report, there is no evidence that the plane was hijacked by the Russians or anybody else remotely. Rather, it proposes that it could be the disappearance of the plane itself due to the pilots or perhaps due to some aircraft system breakdown. This report can be trusted because it is grounded on in-depth analysis by professionals

and teams around the world. This is a very relevant source to my essay as it presents the official data against which conspiracy theories such as that of Russian involvement in the hijacking can be contrasted and proven to be unsubstantiated.

Wise, J. (2015b, February 23). *How crazy am I to think I actually know where that Malaysia Airlines plane is?* Intelligencer. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/02/jeff-wise-mh370-theory.html>

In the present article, journalist Jeff Wise postulates that the MH370 may have been secretly seized by Russian intelligence services and a change in course was made to ensure MH370 remains undiscovered. He links the evidence in the form of satellite signals to the time at which Russia attacked Crimea to give reasons as to why Russia may be doing it. Although the theory created by Wise is interesting and many people pay attention to it, Wise says that there is no strong evidence and most of his story is a guess with several professional interpretations. This article is effective since it reveals how the media can generate and propagate conspiracy theories by providing dramatic explanations that its audiences desire to believe in particularly in cases where the authorities cannot provide explanations. This source is also important in my essay to explain how the Russian hijacking theory gained popularity among people even though there were not so strong evidences.

Bier, L. M., Park, S., & Palenchar, M. J. (2017). Framing the flight MH370 mystery: A content analysis of Malaysian, Chinese, and U.S. media. *International Communication Gazette*, 80(2), 158–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048517707440>

This research examines the reporting of MH370 in newspapers and media in Malaysia, China, and United States that was very different.. One part of the media concentrated on facts and cool reportage, as the other displays dramatic or suspect angles, or even promoted concepts of accountability and conspiracy. The framing of the story that is how media intended to differentiate what facts and emotions to focus on was also instrumental in influencing how people perceived the incident. This source is significant since it demonstrates that misleading and sensationalistic media reporting contributed to the establishment of the environment that allows conspiracy theories such as Russia being involved to thrive and gain a sense of legitimacy. This helps in reinforcing my thesis statement concerning the effect of unclear or dramatic news on the beliefs of the people.

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>

The article describes the factors that make humans to believe in conspiracy theories, even when they have limited or even no evidence. It states that when humans get confused or frightened, they wish to know more and have greater control over the situation. When they do not find clear solutions, they resort to overdramatic and complex stories since such stories still give a feeling of an explanation believes or not. The article will be useful to my essay, as it provides a powerful psychological explanation of why the Russian hijacking theory gained so much popularity due to the fact that many individuals felt lost in the official silence and lack of answers, they came to

believe a complicated narrative is true.

Marjanić, S. (2023). *Conspiracy Theories as Urban Legends with a Paranoid Matrix*. Questa Soft.

<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1135126>

This article examines MH370 conspiracy tales as the contemporary variation of urban legends. It says that when people don't get the real information, they make up their own stories, that were told only by fear, suspicion and fabricated plots. The author demonstrates how the concept of Russia stealing the plane can be regarded within the framework of the specific kind of storytelling. Such stories circulate because they allow people to interpret confusing phenomena, though they may not be necessarily true. The source will be beneficial in my essay since it aids in understanding why the Russian hijacking theory remains so popular despite the fact that people seek an answer, and they form an idea that they then consider complete, regardless of whether there is good evidence or not.

Malaysian Ministry of Transport. (2018). *Safety investigation report: Malaysia Airlines Boeing B777-200ER (9M-MRO) 08 March 2014*. Malaysian ICAO Annex 13 Safety Investigation Team.

Retrieved from SKYbrary.

It is the official safety investigation document that gives the factual chronology, radar data, ACARS/satellite records and conclusions of the investigation team. It lacks evidence of an external or state backed hijacking and lists the likely circumstances and indicates areas where information is lacking. It is my basic factual foundation of my essay and is very dependable

since it is a compilation of official technical information and multiagency contributions.

Limitations: it is incapable of completely resolving the final cause in the absence of the wreckage.

Ashton, C., Shuster Bruce, A., Colledge, G., & Dickinson, M. (2015). The search for MH370.

*Journal of Navigation*, 68(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S037346331400068X>

This is a technical paper (Inmarsat/AAIB team) on the BTO/BFO analysis and the reasons why investigators sent the satellite signal to the southern Indian Ocean. It is mandatory in learning what the satellite data actually reveal (duration of flight, range arcs) and why a northward flight cannot be taken due to signal/ Doppler limitations. I will apply it to demonstrate the technical constraints that are against a landing in Kazakhstan.

Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB). (2017). *The operational search for MH370 (Final report)*. [https://www.atsb.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/5773565/operational-search-for-mh370\\_final\\_3oct2017.pdf](https://www.atsb.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/5773565/operational-search-for-mh370_final_3oct2017.pdf)

The ATSB final report documents search strategy, underwater survey work, drift modelling and what was (and was not) found. It describes a model of drift and probability of search of debris. This report reinforces the statement that the most substantiated scientific evidence leads to the fact that there was no secret landing in the north. It is very plausible and can be directly applicable in cross checking any claims on any areas of possible crash.

Davey, S., Gordon, N., Holland, I., Rutten, M., Williams, J., et al. (2015). *Bayesian methods in the search for MH370*. Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG) / ATSB.

This technical book/report describes the statistical and Bayesian procedures to narrow down the search area. It demonstrates how the data (satellite, radar, finds of debris) were used to create probability maps. So to establish that search teams used sound, verifiably high quality methodologies and that such methodologies were not able to produce credible evidence to prove a secret, northern landing. Limitations are very technical and applicable well to the methodological validation.

Park, S., Bier, L. M., & Palenchar, M. J. (2016). Framing a mystery: Information subsidies and media coverage of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. *Public Relations Review*, 42(4), 654–664.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.06.004>

In this work, government information subsidies and media frames are analyzed. It is practical to clarify how unfinished official data together with proactive media narratives in the push of speculative narratives. Go through it and describe certain ways with which the Russia theory would diffuse.

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