

Pizzagate 1.0: The Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic of the 1980s

Amanda Pursell

University at Buffalo

When the modern American thinks of moral panics, we tend to think of sex, drugs, and alcohol. News reports of “rainbow parties,” “vodka tampons,” and strange new drugs that turn ordinary teens into face eating zombies flash through our minds. We like to think we’ve gone beyond fears of demonic forces lurking in the night, but that isn’t necessarily true. From the Salem witch trial to today, moral panics tend to be spiritual in nature, and often result in witch hunts that have lingering effects on not just the individuals accused, but society itself.<sup>1</sup> These panics usually occur in periods of great social change and economic stress and work as a release valve.<sup>2</sup> After the Great Depression and World War 2, a witch hunt, in the “Red” and “Lavender” scares of the 1950s ruined the lives of countless people who were blacklisted for their suspected “Communistic” leanings and sexual preferences. In the 1980s, an economic downturn, the civil rights movement, and the culture wars that began in the 1960s came together in the form of the Satanic Panic. Fueled by tabloid stories of child abductions, sexual abuse, cults, and “recovered memories,” the very real threat of pedophilia collided with the spiritual threat of a vast network of Satanist lurking in America’s heartland, praying on children left in their care. This panic took the country by storm for several years, led to the most expensive trial in American history, and left countless lives destroyed, just to fizzle out as quickly as it started. Despite the societal impact of this event, it is only recently that scholars have begun to take a serious look at it. Oddly, similar forces have once again come together to create a conspiracy similar to the one that fueled the panic. While the “satanic” nature is often downplayed in the case of Pizzagate and Qanon, it still lurks at its heart and is taken quite seriously by those sucked into the conspiracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Goode and Ben-Yehuda; *Moral Panics: Culture, Politics, and Social Construction*; 1994; paraphrased from main argument

<sup>2</sup> Stevens, Philips Jr.; *The Demonology of Satanism: An Anthropological View; The Satanism Scare*; 1991; page 22

Popular culture paints the 1960s as a very chaotic decade. Anyone who lived this period will have at least one story that reflects this. For our purposes, we won't rehash the 1960s, as there are countless books and films that do this, but we will briefly mention key events that set the stage for our subject. Economically, Europe and Japan had completely recovered from the war, and America's stint as the world's sole industrial powerhouse was coming to an end. Socially, the impact of the civil rights movement cannot be understated. With the end of segregation brought the birth of the "new right" (something else that is only now being seriously studied), a resurgence in feminism, and new civil rights movements, like the LGBT movement. Culturally, young people began to look away from traditional branches of Christianity in favor of more mystical or Eastern traditions. Pop culture looked to the occult for inspiration and stories of magic and demonic forces flooded screens and shelves. Young people left the church in droves for new religions, declared "cults" by the media and their outraged parents.<sup>3</sup> Stories of teens and young adults "brainwashed" into dangerous activity by charismatic and dominating leaders would become staples in the media throughout the 1970s and into the 1990s. Amid this religious experimentation emerged Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan. More of a showman than a religious leader, he used the media to create a name for himself as a high priest of Satan and became a darling of the Hollywood counterculture scene, landing roles in movies like *Rosemary's Baby*. LaVey's church didn't actually worship Satan, they, like radicals before them, used the image of Satan as merely an avatar for the questioning of society. He is *the accuser* after all. Rituals performed by LaVey and his church did not involve murder or violence at all, and were merely performed for shock value. LaVey Satanism is "based on a Social Darwinian

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<sup>3</sup> Robbins, Susan P.; *The Social and Cultural Context of Satanic Ritual Abuse Allegations; Issues in Child Abuse Allegations, Volume 10, Number 2; 1998; page 2*

philosophy espousing rugged individualism, ego gratification and magical powers,” and is atheistic.<sup>4</sup> However, this nuance did not take hold in the public consciousness, and as far as middle America was concerned, all their worst fears about what their children could be getting into were coming true. It is no wonder Evangelical Christianity, a key player in the New Right, became politically active in the early 1970s.

With the occult everywhere and once marginalized groups making gains, Evangelical Christianity began to embrace a roll both as a cultural and political force. Evangelism, saw a resurgence in the 1970s and 80s as televangelists took to the airwaves and became both household names and political king makers. At the same time, a new star was rising in the Evangelical movement, a “former hippie” who had gotten into Satanism through drugs and “dabbling” in witch craft, and had risen through the ranks to become a high priest of Satan, in charge of all of California before overdosing and finding Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Mike Warnke was one of the first Evangelists to use the “Satanic high priest” gimmick that would later become cliché, and basically introduced the notion of a vast network of organized Satanists working in the shadows. In Warnke’s book, *The Satan Seller*, he details how he he went from dealing drugs to Satan on the campus of a Southern California university, and rose through the ranks of Satanism, partying with celebrities and controlling the local drug trade. To a skeptical reader, his stories don’t pass the smell test. His Satanists are in bed by midnight and make drug runs in broad day light. He holds down a job at a local fast food place while running a Satanic coven and supplying drugs to all of California, all while addicted to heroin and speed. At one point he claims to have visited

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<sup>4</sup> Anton LaVey Obituary; *Spin Magazine*; 1998, page 64

<sup>5</sup> Warnke, Balsinger, and Jones; *The Satan Seller*; Bridge Publishing; South Plainfield, New Jersey; 1972

the Manson family. Yet Warnke was one of Evangelical Christianity's biggest stars and would be treated as an authority on Satanism by both religious and secular authorities during the panic.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Feminist movement was also making gains politically. Thanks to the Feminists, child and sexual abuse was now being taken seriously and openly discussed in public. However, there was a push to medicalize this abuse and consider it a mental condition cured with therapy, not prison time.<sup>6</sup> In 1974, congress passes laws requiring states to investigate claims of child abuse, but these investigations will be conducted by social workers rather than police officers.<sup>7</sup> As today, investigations could be incredibly sloppy or culturally biased. Likewise, as obscenity laws were loosened, this led to an issue where child pornography accidentally became legal, and possibly sold at regular adult bookstores. At the time, the Feminist movement was very anti-pornography, and actually joined with the Evangelicals on the issue. Leading anti-porn crusaders, like Judianne Densen-Gerber, testified that there were vast rings of pedophiles producing child pornography and snuff films, which "is readily available in any adult bookstore around the country."<sup>8</sup> She also claimed child pornography specifically was a several billion dollar a year industry. A skeptic would find it both unlikely that such a taboo would be readily available in brick and mortar stores, or that in 1977 it would be a billion dollar a year industry, when the top grossing Hollywood movies of that year, the year *Star Wars* came out, barely add up to a billion dollars<sup>9</sup>. Raids by the FBI would find no child pornography being

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<sup>6</sup> Nathan and Snedecker; *Satan's Silence*; Basic Books; New York, New York; 1995; pages 11-12

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pages 14-15

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pages 39-42

<sup>9</sup> Data from [Boxofficemojo.com](http://Boxofficemojo.com)

distributed in mainstream stores, nor was there much evidence of an underground trade in the material.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time visiting a psychiatrist was becoming de-stigmatized and people were now visiting on their own accord to deal with depression and past abuse. Of course quacks quickly moved in on this market. While many well intention psychiatrists bought into the concept of recovered memories, or memories that can only be accessed under hypnosis, it offered both a quick solution to mental health issues and a reason for patients to return over and over again, making it an attractive practice for scam artists. But, these tales of recovered memories captivate the public imagination were regular subjects of the budding “infotainment” genre. In 1980, *Michelle Remembers* was published. Supposedly based on memories recovered with the help of her psychiatrist, Michelle Smith, a regular Canadian housewife, recounts her childhood as part of a Satanic cult that operated out of her hometown and details lurid stories of being trapped for days in a pit with snakes, the sacrifice of babies and children, and most shockingly, an eighty-one day long ceremony in which Satan himself appeared.<sup>11</sup> The book was heavily marketed through tabloids like *People* and *The National Enquirer*, and its co-Author, Lawrence Pazder (Michelle’s psychiatrist and later husband) became a regular guest on the emerging talk show circuit. There were even talks of a movie deal. Like *The Satan Seller*, Michelle’s story has massive holes. Rituals take place in a local, public cemetery surrounded by housing. Murders leave no evidence. Several scenes seem lifted from popular horror movies like *The Exorcist*. Like Warnke’s magical ability to hold down a burger flipping job while also being a drug kingpin/Satanic high priest/heroin addict, Michelle never missed a day of school while attending

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<sup>10</sup> *Satan’s Silence*, page 42

<sup>11</sup> Smith and Pazder; *Michelle Remembers*; Pocket Books; New York New York; 1980

the marathon ritual.<sup>12</sup> Because of legal threats from Michelle's family, a film is never made despite the book's popularity.<sup>13</sup> The idea of multi-generational networks of Satanists operating in shadows of small town America was now on the general public's mind.

Lastly, and most importantly, the 1970s were the beginning of an economic slow down that continues to this day; and a major recession, at the time, the worst since The Great Depression of the 1930s. Aside from the oil crunch, which caused massive inflation, millions either lost their jobs or saw their wages stagnate. The 1950s and 1960s had seen an economic boom in the US that was unprecedented in American history, as the only industrial center to not be wiped out by World War 2, it used its manufacturing capacity to become an economic power house. The average American saw their wages rise, and was practically guaranteed a good union job no matter their education level. This practically evaporated over night as manufacturing jobs moved overseas. Likewise, these conditions lead to a shift toward deregulation, on the part of both parties, and in 1980s, the FCC would be deregulated.<sup>14</sup> Television networks were now free to offer more advertising during their programming, and the line between entertainment and actual news began to blur. Since the 1960s, networks had been lengthening their news broadcasts, and as a way of distracting from the unpleasantness of "real" news, increasingly focused on sensational human interest stories.<sup>15</sup> The line between hard news and tabloid exaggeration became blurred, and now networks were free to rely less on absolute facts and veer more into speculation and feeling. Even today, the general public trusts local network news

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<sup>12</sup> *Michelle Remembers: The Debunking of a Myth; The Mail on Sunday*; September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1990 edition; London, England

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, Sarah; *Tabloid Monster: American Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000*; *Journal of American Studies*, Volume 51, No 3; 2017; Cambridge, England; page 706

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, page 702

broadcasts more than other sources for news.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, networks increased sensational coverage of stories once relegated to the super market tabloids, as they sought profit over credibility. Cable networks, which also began appearing in American homes during the 1980s, were never held to the same standard and were free to broadcast almost anything they like.

This brings us to the panic itself. Tabloids and afternoon talk shows regularly featured guests like Lawrence Pazder, Mike Warnke, and countless others who claimed to have been involved in Satanic cults. Often, actual members of the Church of Satan, usually Zeena LeVey and Michael Aquino, were brought on to explain themselves, just to be shouted down by the “victims” of Satanism or the studio audience. It should be stressed these weren’t relegated to shows most would consider trashy, such as *Maury* or *Jerry Springer*, but shows your typical soccer mom wouldn’t be embarrassed to be seen watching, like *Oprah* and *Larry King Live*. Reports of “Satanic” crimes began appearing around the country. Nearly every crime imaginable from petty vandalism, usually in the form of pentagrams or the names of metal bands spray painted in a public place, to missing pets and children, were attributed to Satanists. Murders by self-proclaimed Satanists like Richard Ramirez, or *The Night Stalker*, were also heavily covered in the media.

In 1983, Judy Johnson, a mother in the middle class suburb of Manhattan Beach California, accused her husband and a teacher at the McMartin Pre-school of molesting her son. The mother, who was later found to be schizophrenic<sup>17</sup>, also accused workers at the preschool of bizarre crimes and witchcraft. Regardless, the local chief of police sent a letter to the parents of children at the preschool letting them know about the allegations and asked that they question

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<sup>16</sup> Guskin, Emily; *Americans are Scattered and Divided Over Which Source They Most Trust for News*; Washington Post; December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, page 697



their children to see if they might also be victims.<sup>18</sup> Several hundred children from the school would be questioned by therapists from the Children's Institute International, using methods that are now widely discredited. The children were asked leading questions, repeatedly. Many were coerced into testimony, and seem to be telling their therapists what they had wanted to hear. All children had their testimony taken at face value, even ones who are clearly too young to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Watching interviews that aired on television, or reading "warning signs of Satanic abuse" that appear in therapist and parental guides, one gets the impression these therapists have never actually been around children. That excited, reality blurring way in which small children talk about media they enjoy is taken not as the fanciful imagination of a child, but as reality. The grounds of the preschool were dug up in search of tunnels after one child testified he'd "been flushed down a toilet to a dungeon." But to someone with experience with children, this sounds like a small child describing a level of *Super Mario*. This sort of evidence would appear again and again in Satanic abuse cases. Children at the McMartin school testified that not only were they sexually abused (sometimes with knives and swords), they saw their teachers fly, murdered animals, and sacrificed a baby to Satan at a church.<sup>19</sup> They also claimed to have been filmed. Despite the lack of evidence, the owners and several teachers at the school were arrested and charged with three hundred and twenty one counts of child abuse on forty-eight children.<sup>20</sup> No evidence of tunnels, child molestation, pornography or sacrifice have ever been found. The trial lasted for three years and was the most

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<sup>18</sup> Kuhimeyer, Harry Jr; *Letter to McMartin Preschool Parents*; September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1983

<sup>19</sup> Reinhold, Robert; *The Longest Trial – A Post-Mortem, Collapse of Child Abuse Case: So Much Agony for so Little*; The New York Times; January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1990

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

expensive in American history.<sup>21</sup> All defendants were found not guilty or had charges dropped due to a lack of evidence. Sadly, they were the lucky ones.

News of the McMartin Preschool accusations and the lengthy trial were widely covered in the media, which led to countless other allegations around the country. Most famously a babysitter in Florida,<sup>22</sup> a daycare in Texas (also instigated by a mentally ill mother with similarly wild claims),<sup>23</sup> and in Arkansas, where three teenage metal heads were accused of the Satanic murders of three children.<sup>24</sup> These people, and countless others whose crimes only made local news, spent decades in prison for impossible crimes. Those who raised doubts, whether in the media or the general public, were thought to be hiding something and in some cases brought investigations on themselves,<sup>25</sup> in classic witch hunt form.

In 1988, at the height of the panic, NBC aired *Satan's Underground*, a primetime special hosted by Geraldo Rivera on the "wave of Satanic crime gripping the nation." Once again the line between news and entertainment was blurred. The two hour special is to this day the highest rated "documentary"<sup>26</sup>, was viewed by 1/3 television viewing households that night.<sup>27</sup> The special was protested by NBC's news division and had no outside sponsors aside from various

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<sup>21</sup> Crocker, Lizzie; *What Fueled the Child Sex Abuse Scandal That Never Was?*; The Daily Beast; August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015

<sup>22</sup> Nathan, Debbie; *The Public Was Shocked. County Walk Parents Demanded Action. An Election Was Near. Janet Reno Was Going to Send Someone to Jail No Matter What.*; Miami New Times; March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1993

<sup>23</sup> Dart, Tom; *Texas Pair Released After Serving 21 Years for 'Satanic Abuse'*; The Guardian; December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>24</sup> CNN Wire Staff; *'West Memphis 3' Freed in Child Killings After 18 Years*; CNN.com; August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011

<sup>25</sup> Lanning, Kenneth V; *Investigator's Guide to Allegations of 'Ritual' Child Abuse*; US Department of Justice; Quantico, Virginia; January 1992; page 1

<sup>26</sup> Romano, Aja; *The History of Satanic Panic in the US – And Why it's Not Over Yet*; vox.com; October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016

<sup>27</sup> Sharbutt, Jay; *Cauldron Boils Over Geraldo's 'Devil Worship'*; LA Times; October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1988

horror films.<sup>28</sup> In this spectacle, Geraldo interviews several “experts” on Satanic crime, including a former FBI agent who claims there’s a vast network of Satanists operating in the heartland, a “Satanist” turned Evangelical on death row for murder, Ozzy Osbourne (who he immediately cuts off when Ozzy tries to explain he’s not a Satanist, merely a product of bad circumstance), along with several “victims” of Satanic ritual abuse. Every commercial break is followed by Geraldo begging the audience to turn away lest they be exposed to the unspeakable acts of Satanism. Critical voices are shouted down and parents are warned to look out for signs their children may be involved.

Like the Salem Trials before it, the panic fizzles out just as quickly as it begins. Why? Its not easy to explain why any fad fizzles out, but there are a number of factors. Pop culture tired of horror films and the occult in general. Heavy metal would be wiped out by less over the top grunge bands in the early 1990s who looked to the real world for inspiration rather than the esoteric. The McMartin trial ended in a hung jury just for the judge to dismiss all charges due to a lack of evidence. The FBI ended its investigation to find there was never any evidence of organized, theistic Satanism, never mind committing crimes<sup>29</sup>. And most importantly, tabloids and other media moved on. While the 1990s were a golden age of “trash tv,” tabloid media of the 1990s was dominated by celebrity scandals and sensationalistic, although non-occult crimes. Finally, the religious right lost its social capital after a series of scandals involving prominent Evangelists; it also lost quiet a bit of political power as the Democratic party won back control of the government. Satanic conspiracies were once again relegated to the fringe.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Lanning

At this point, I'm sure you're saying this sounds familiar. And if you have used the internet, it probably is. The internet has thrown the world head first into an endless pool of information, most of it useless, much of it complete garbage. At the time of the panic, it took a lot of effort to get your message out, and there were gatekeepers. The gatekeepers, beholden to fear of both lawsuits and sponsors, may not have always acted ethically, but they did throttle the amount of "news" available to a trickle. None of this exists anymore, for good or bad, everyone has a platform. Everyone has trouble sorting good from bad information in this new environment, and the fact that what we see is controlled by a computer that sorts this endless information based on what it thinks we like and dislike complicates matters. We are now in our own walled garden where reality is defined by what we want it to be.

In addition, we face many of the same social factors that faced the people of the 1970s and 80s. The world economy was once again plunged into the *worst recession since The Great Depression*, in 2008. While we are officially "recovered" most saw their wages depressed or were forced into lower paying jobs. Minorities have made incredible social gains. Also in 2008, the first black president was elected. A woman came within a hair in 2016. Gay marriage was legalized nationwide in 2015. Issues of police brutality against the black community, sexual assault and harassment against women, and transgender rights are at the forefront of the national conversation. And once again, we have seen backlash to these gains. Once again, pop culture is obsessed with the occult. Once again, crimes against children are making headlines, in this case, a pedophile ring in which the British elite both participated and worked to cover up for decades was exposed in 2012 and thanks to the internet, it was known around the world.<sup>30</sup> Not long after,

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<sup>30</sup> Easton, Mark; *Jimmy Savile Scandal: How Will it Effect Future Abuse Cases?*; BBC.com; Janurry 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013

conspiracy theories about a similar ring catering to the US elite began springing up on social media. In 2016, fueled by leaks of the Democratic party's internal emails, *Pizzagate* began making the rounds online<sup>31</sup>. The theory claims that references to "pizza" and "hot dogs," along with various other foods in party emails are actually references to children, whom are being used for sex. Some of the emails mention "Spirit Cooking," an art project by a controversial artist heavily inspired by tales of Satanic rituals and witchcraft, which gave the story its satanic angle. These crimes are supposedly being carried out in the secret basement of a DC pizzeria called "Comet Ping Pong." Believers scour the social media posts of those believed to be involved and count everything from comical photos of tied up children to banal tweets about current events as evidence. Everyone from politicians to beloved actors are said to be involved. This theory has taken on a life of its own online, and mutated into something called "Qanon," in which President Trump and others in his administration are secretly working to take down the perpetrators, many of whom have already been arrested or executed. These arrests and executions, they claim, are being kept secret in order to prevent the public from panicking, and the truth will be revealed gradually over the next few years. These theories spread through social media, most prominently on Facebook where they are shared by believers and bots alike; and Youtube, where they will often pop up as recommendations for completely unrelated videos. Like the chat shows and tabloids of the 1980s, these articles and videos often feature lurid and ridiculous tales of Satanic rituals performed by the American elites, featuring everything from pedophilia to cannibalism. Like *Michelle Remembers* these stories often seem lifted from popular films. Missing children, especially prominent cases like Madeline McCann, are said to have been taken by these elites for

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<sup>31</sup> Kroll, Andy; *John Podesta is Ready to Talk About Pizzagate*; Rolling Stone; December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

their rituals. At this time, Pizzagate and Qanon aren't exactly mainstream. Social Media sites are finally attempting to stop the sharing of "fake news" by attempting to ban the accounts of prominent conspiracy theorists and their followers, and stop their algorithm from recommending such content,<sup>3233</sup> but it seems to be a case of too little too late. As much of the content being purged is right wing in nature, it has not only created a backlash among those who lean right,<sup>34</sup> but caused believers in conspiracy theories like Pizzagate and Qanon to double down. The same thing happened when these topics were banned from Reddit and 4chan, both places where theorists gathered to speculate. While neither theory is taken seriously by the mainstream, as of this writing, only time will tell if Comet Ping Pong becomes the McMartin Preschool of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>32</sup> Martineau, Paris; *Facebook Bans Alex Jones, Other Extremists – But Not as Planned*; Wired.com; May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019

<sup>33</sup> Dwoskin, Elizabeth; *Youtube is Changing its Algorithm To Stop Recommending Conspiracies*; Washington Post; January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019

<sup>34</sup> Lima, Christiano; *Facebook Wades Deeper into Censorship Debate as it Bans 'Dangerous' Accounts*; Politico.com; May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019

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