

Credibility, Conspiracy and Comets

How manipulating ambiguity and rhetoric fans the flames of conspiracy

On July 1, 2025, a small, fast-moving object flashed in the night sky as the Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System (ATLAS) survey telescope, a NASA-funded project, noticed its movement. Later identified as 3I/Atlas—named after the program which had detected its presence—the space rock was officially declared a comet the following day due its comet-like nature, such as possessing a coma (the atmosphere of gas and dust that surrounds a comet) and potential tail (the stream of gas and dust that points away as the comet gets closer to the Sun).

Not long after, several major space agencies, including NASA, would affirm the definition, citing similar aspects of the object which matched previously documented phenomena of other comets. However, shortly after this development, speculators online quickly began to decipher the definition as a falsehood, claiming it to be a coverup for the truth that 3I/Atlas is not a comet, but rather an alien spacecraft coming to either visit, observe, enslave or annihilate our species.

In this report, readers will find a brief breakdown over the 3I/Atlas conspiracy, including how and when it started, along with a discussion over how the controversy was emboldened. Specifically, this paper will tackle Avi Loeb, a notable spokesperson of extraterrestrial theories, and how he contributed to the current development of the conspiracy through rhetoric, framing and speculation to transform ambiguity into an alien coverup narrative. Finally, readers will also discover how studying the situation, and its associated texts, can help decipher just how conspiracies come into being.

What is the 3I/Atlas Conspiracy?

As mentioned previously, 3I/Atlas was first discovered and defined as a comet in mid-2025, specifically in July. However, the conspiracy that the interstellar object was an alien spacecraft being “covered up” by major space agencies, such as NASA, came just as quickly as the discovery itself. Online forums, such as Reddit and Twitter, immediately took to speculating the object’s potentially more sinister goals and meanings, with terminology such as “Another interstellar visitor...we’re being watched” and “They’re not telling us everything,” according to the r/aliens and r/UFO subreddits.

Following these first sparks of speculative conspiracy, online influencers who specialized in the realm of space and science began to keep up with and inform their viewers over the ongoing 3I/Atlas developments as the time. While some simply presented what NASA, the ESA (European Space Agency) and other programs had found—mostly being fuzzy images taken from satellites and Martian probes—some began to notice the speculation across various forums. Not long after, many of these influencers would just as similarly discuss the more conspiratory aspects of the comet along with the more scientific ones, predominantly on YouTube and TikTok.

Now, while it might seem to be another conspiracy theory that appeared out of thin air, the reality is much more evidential. When the discovery was first made, the speculation was innocent enough, mostly being the classic conspiratory claims one might expect with any new found theory, typically citing any interstellar object from outside of our solar system as a potentially extraterrestrial visitor. However, as time went on and 3I/Atlas came closer to Earth (though the comet won't be at its closest point until Dec. 19, 2025) agencies around the globe began producing images of the comet, typically noting its peculiar trajectory through our system as well as its odd but obviously comet-like characteristics.



Figure 1: Photo of 3I/Atlas taken from the Hubble telescope July 21, 2025 (NASA).

Yet, many of the speculators online were not happy with the images on hand, mostly claiming said pictures were not clear enough or there were too few of them. This quickly led to many online jumping to the conclusion and assumption that there *must* be something being hidden from the general public. Many rapidly assumed NASA and other agencies were deliberately hiding knowledge about 3I/Atlas as it was an alien spacecraft coming to spy, or perhaps destroy, our species and they wanted to keep the world calm. Yet, many were just as quick to disregard the fact that many of the photos came during the United States' government shutdown across the entire month of October, of which NASA is a part of, or the fact that space agencies *were* constantly releasing updates over 3I/Atlas, as well as new images whenever they became available.

Many individuals online disregarded the space agencies' claims due to a variety of reasons, such as the growing number of individuals who deny major scientific claims or the growth of postmodernist thinking where authority figures are challenged on the basis of simply being authority figures, as cited by Lee McIntyre in *Post-Truth*. However, they were further emboldened by a pillar in the current community of extraterrestrial theories: Avi Loeb.

Who is Avi Loeb?

Loeb, a theoretical physicist and astronomer, is known for his work with the world of astrophysics and cosmology. Particularly, he is renowned for being the former chair of Harvard University's astronomy department, as well as being the founding director of the college's Black Hole initiative, the first interdisciplinary research center focused purely on the study of black holes. However, he is also well known for being a proponent of extraterrestrial theories, such as his previous assertion that 1I/Oumuamua, the first interstellar object from outside of our solar system detected by Earth, to be an alien spacecraft.

Similarly to this first instance, Loeb once again believes that this year's interstellar object, 3I/Atlas, is another alien spacecraft. He has spread this assertion through several mediums, such as online talk shows, media outlets and social media. However, the most notable instance of Loeb's theorizing the true design, details and intentions of 3I/Atlas, came in his personal blog post on Nov. 7 titled "The Inspiration Delivered by 3I/Atlas to Our Doorstep."

In this discussion, Loeb's notes the peculiar features of objects such as Oumuamua and Atlas before transitioning into these mysteries opening the door to new theories of how the universe works. In particular, he theorizes the potential for these objects to be extraterrestrial and artificial in origin, as opposed to the natural assertions that most of the scientific community agrees upon. Specifically, he cites "anomalies that are inconsistent with past paradigms" as opening the hypothetical Pandora's box for humoring the idea of alien involvement (Loeb, 2025).

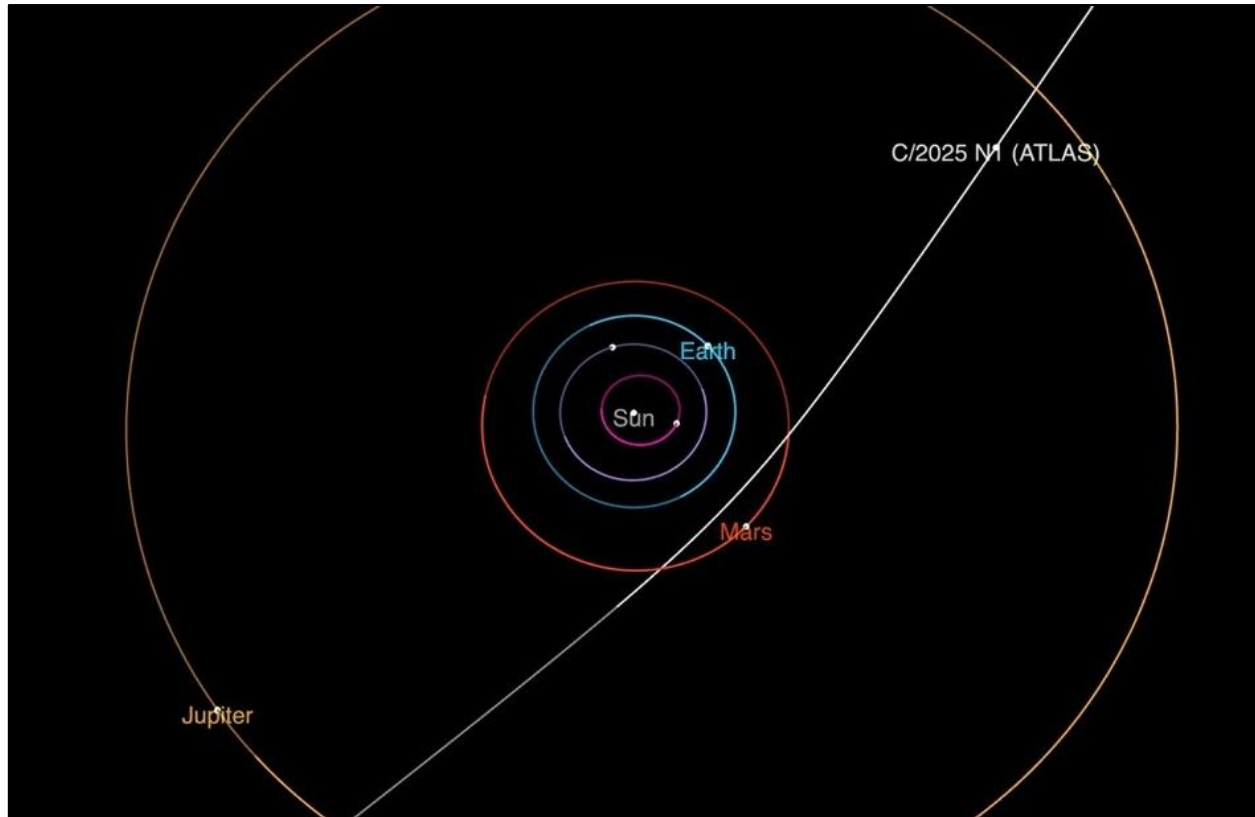


Figure 2: A diagram depicting the projected trajectory of 3I/Atlas through our solar system. It was closest to our sun in mid-late October (NASA).

Though most of these assertions are innocent enough, mostly relying on rhetoric appealing to logos in which Loeb proposes that the scientific community should refrain from being close-minded to the idea of aliens, he simultaneously makes claims that could be seen as attacking the inherent fear factor and mystery surrounding such ideas. With terminology such as "Let's hope that 3I/ATLAS will not deliver us unwanted gifts for the holidays," Loeb poses the comet's devious intentions as a potential alien spacecraft just as much as he implores the scientific community to remain open-minded toward the subject matter (Loeb, 2025).

Just as arguably as ambitious, Loeb then goes on to speak with the New York Post where he details the lacking abilities of national space agencies, such as NASA, to produce stronger images of 3I/Atlas. He doesn't make many extraterrestrial claims in this article, but he does imply that government agencies are withholding information from the public, mostly citing NASA's silence to his request to have access to critical data over the comet (notably, he doesn't seem to acknowledge how his reputation as an extraterrestrial theorist could've played into this data denial, at least in this article). Regarding this lack of communication, he even goes on to claim, "It's much more likely not

to be related to extraterrestrial intelligence, but to terrestrial stupidity (*Cost, 2025*),” showcasing a starkly pathos-like appeal in contrast to his blog’s predominantly logos one.

Therefore, though Loeb initially seems to rely on logos, mostly through his scientific credentials, he quickly jumps to pathos when things are not going his way. His blog, which is not the first major post he’s made positing 3I/Atlas as an extraterrestrial object, cites a more evidence-based, open-minded approach to the subject, which seems to be an innocent exploration into the possibility of alien life. However, in examples such as the New York Post, and partially in the blog itself, Loeb is also prone to using more pathological approaches, such as fear factor and appeal to the unknown, to attempt to sway the community to his side. It is this contrasting rhetoric which has fanned the flames of the online conspiracy surrounding the newest visitor to our solar system.

How Do These Texts Function as Conspiracism?

Loeb emphasizes the unknown implies the possibility of alien life, leading to the implication that 3I/Atlas was “designed” as opposed to naturally existing. This is a claim which many online conspiracists echo; however, hearing this assertion come from an authority figure with scientific, and therefore reputable, credentials only adds fuel to the already existing flames.

Furthermore, hearing such an accredited individual criticize major authority figures in the space realm, such as NASA, with language such as “stupidity” eerily mirrors much of the rhetoric used online in speculative forums and groups. Also, though the New York Post acts from a non-biased perspective, giving Loeb a platform to spread such language and criticism has only added to the ideas of 3I/Atlas being a conspiracy online. Specifically, Loeb cites the lack of high-resolution images from major agencies as “evidence” of a coverup, much like his many non-accredited digital counterparts.

Therefore, between Loeb’s personal blog—and his other outlets—and the New York Post’s article over his accusation and criticism of the space agency industry, he has framed himself in a very ideal position. His theories and discussion over the subject of 3I/Atlas being extraterrestrial in origin comes at a time when there is plenty of discourse from individuals online who lack any form of credentials or credibility. This means that his appeals to the comet’s ambiguity through his blog’s logos contributes to the common fear factor of the unknown, which is a concept that almost always occurs during talks of such extraterrestrial items. Not only this, but his contrasting usage of pathos in parts of his blog, as well as in the New York Post’s article, presents Loeb as a whistleblower or “truth-teller,” attempting to get all the information for the “little guy.” This eerily echoes an appeal to the already-existing distrust of government authority figures, to which NASA is included, often criticizing them as “liars” or “tyrannical.”

For these reasons, though it could still be unintentional, Loeb’s blog and the New York Post’s article piggyback on the lack of abundant existing data (though NASA and other agencies are still realizing updates to 3I/Atlas) and spin it into a story of authority, lies and mystery – concepts which the ongoing alien conspiracy surrounding the comet continue to echo.

How Do These Texts Help Us Understand Conspiracism?

The conspiracy surrounding 3I/Atlas began like many other similar theories: non-accredited online individuals speculating the unknown and how it plays into authority, only exasperated by the fact that aliens could be involved. Interstellar objects already evoke mystery given their many unknown qualities, but a lack of public knowledge can only worsen such speculation. This, combined with existing scientific uncertainty, becomes fertile ground for even more conspirative speculation, especially amongst non-credible sources (not to mention the fact that mistrust of authority figures, such as government space agencies, will worsen these symptoms).

Therefore, though it might not be intentional on the part of Loeb or the New York Post, choosing to pose and platform such theories, accusations and criticism during a time of discourse and speculation only added to the existing conspiracy that has been circulating online. This is because ambiguity, as previously mentioned, is grounds for conspiracy to form alone, and with the credibility of Loeb's framing and rhetoric, the flames of speculation could only be expected to worsen.

For these reasons, the involved texts contributed and helped to circulate the online theory of 3I/Atlas, an interstellar object defined by the wider scientific community as a comet, as an alien spacecraft, along with such information being "hidden" by space agencies such as NASA. Specifically, Loeb's contrasting rhetoric and appeal to both logos and pathos, only contributed to how ambiguity, although not inherently harmful, can easily snowball into misinterpretation and speculative thinking without any notable credibility.

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