

Writing Project 2: How does the use of ironic discourse on the r/aliens subreddit contribute to genuine government distrust?

Intro

The subreddit r/aliens is part of Reddit. It is a digital space that changes a lot across posts and often has contradictory ideas. An outsider might see it as an echo chamber for people with conspiracy theories, and they might think it is a place where grainy photos and crazy ideas are accepted right away. However, if you look deeper, you will find a more complex social group. Humor, sarcasm, and irony are used often. They are not just for entertainment; they are important tools for building community and changing beliefs. Members truly look for proof of extraterrestrial life, but they usually talk about things using joking doubt (a form of playful skepticism where members use humor and irony to question official narratives) aimed at human authorities. This leads to a main question: How does the use of ironic discourse on the r/aliens subreddit contribute to genuine government distrust? The answer involves several stages. Ironic talk first helps smooth over social tensions and makes anti-authority feelings seem normal through what experts call "play" (De Wildt and Aupers). This setting is a perfect spot where lighthearted doubt can turn into a real belief, a process known as "irony poisoning" (Smith). This change is both supported and questioned by the community's own rules for believing and doubting. These rules are the informal system of verification that they use to validate or debunk claims outside of official channels.

Methods

To study this process, I used a qualitative method called thematic discourse coding. I collected data from the 15 most popular posts on r/aliens from the past year, and I selected the 5 representative threads that are in this paper's results. These posts are important because they had many reactions, and this high level of activity shows that the community itself decided the content was important. The main thing I studied was the change in conversation. I looked at the top-voted original comment and the first reply under it because this should be representative of the average user experience on Reddit. The top comment shows the community's most accepted first feeling about a post, and the first reply gives the most immediate new idea about that feeling. I used a qualitative framework that De Wildt and Aupers (2023) created. Each comment was placed into 1 of 2 main groups: Play (which is ironic, sarcastic, or funny comments), Belief (meaning sincere, serious, or guessed comments), and Doubt (skeptical or evidence-based comments). The central goal of this analysis was not only to label the comments but to track how the comments changed or stayed the same between these groups. This helped me map the path from joking comments to the start of real distrust. My approach is a form of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, which Susan Herring defines as "any analysis of online behavior that is grounded in empirical, textual observations" (339).

Results

The following tables are 5 representative examples of comment exchanges from the most popular posts on r/aliens over the past year. Each comment has been categorized according to the De Wildt and Aupers (2023) framework.

Table 1: NJ State Senator suggests the federal gov. Is...

Comment Text	Categorization	URL

Original Comment: "At this stage, aliens would be one of the less scary outcomes."	Play	<u>NJ State Senator suggests the federal gov. is hiding something so massive involving the "drones" that they are forced to cover it up in fear of all-out panic from the public : r/aliens</u>
Reply: "Who's going to save us? Will Smith's career is in shambles."	Play	

Table 2: donald trump set to release all secret files on...

Comment Text	Categorization	URL
Original Comment: "Didn't he already say this last time?"	Doubt	<u>Donald Trump set to release all secret files on 'UFO and potential ETs' after inauguration : r/aliens</u>
Reply: "He will release it with his healthcare plan."	Play	

Table 3: The star map drawn by Betty Hill...

Comment Text	Categorization	URL
Original Comment: "The part of that story that sticks with me is the alien saying “there’s no point telling you where we’re from when you don’t even know	Belief	<u>The star map drawn by Betty Hill after her abduction by extraterrestrials closely resembles actual star placements that were</u>

where you are" (something like that), when asked where they're from." "		<u>discovered a decade after her abduction. : r/aliens</u>
Reply: "Who knew aliens had that level of sass"	Play	

Table 4: it begins

Comment Text	Categorization	URL
<p>Original Comment: "lmao this has 15,000 upvotes.</p> <p>Thankfully, someone else has actually done the legwork to show these are, in fact, planes. Full credit to /u/No-Biscotti-5327 at this comment thread: "</p> <p>A long and detailed analysis that uses Flight24 data and YouTube video timestamps.</p>	Doubt	<u>It begins. : r/aliens</u>
Reply: "17 upvotes, compared to 1.5k for "Government drones are watching the orbs." Sad man... and people think there are bots here to complain about these posts. What gets me is, so many of these sighting are near the nation's busiest airports... like... hmmmm... what could those blinking plane-like lights near O'Hare be?"	Play	

Table 5: NASA picture that reveals possible archaeological...

Comment Text	Categorization	URL
<p>Original Comment: "Now this looks interesting. Moreso than the "face". If I was NASA I would at least be curious about this location..."</p> <p>Is there elevation data available?"</p>	Belief	<u>NASA Picture that Reveals 'Possible' Archaeological Site on Mars. Straight lines rarely occur in nature : r/aliens</u>
<p>Reply: "Right? This is I think the first time I've seen a supposed structure on Mars that actually looks like a ruin as it would be found on earth. Like, go to the middle east. That's what ancient buildings look like before excavation."</p>	Belief	

Discussion

The main purpose of ironic talk on r/aliens is to build a shared cultural identity rooted in a basic cynicism about official stories. Researchers Lars De Wildt and Stef Aupers studied groups that talk about conspiracy theories and found that "play" involves the "fun of entertaining conspiracy theories without taking them too seriously" (2023), which lets users talk about tough ideas without having to fully commit to believing them, making it easy for many people to participate. We see this clearly in the exchange from Table 1, taken from a thread about a New Jersey state senator who suggested that the federal government is hiding information about

UAPs. The comment with the most votes did not talk about the senator's claim seriously. Instead, it made a joke: "At this stage, aliens would be one of the less scary outcomes." This is a classic political joke that uses a fantastic idea to comment on the disappointing state of current affairs. Another reply reinforced this joking tone: "Who's going to save us? Will Smith's career is in shambles." This exchange performs a key social role by signaling to members that government distrust is the normal, accepted starting point for any talk. A similar pattern in Table 2, appeared in a thread about Donald Trump's promise to release secret UFO files. One user just expressed simple skepticism: "Didn't he already say this last time?" The response was pure sarcasm: "He will release it with his healthcare plan." By framing government untrustworthiness as a long-running joke, these users build friendship, creating an inner group that shares the unspoken belief that authorities are, by their nature, deceptive.

Once this base of playful doubt is set, it becomes a slippery slope where the boundaries between a joke and a sincere belief begin to disappear. This is the central action of irony poisoning, a concept writer Peter Smith described as a process by which "individuals become entangled in layers of irony and the distinction between offensive (and often hateful) humour and sincere belief becomes blurred or non-existent altogether" (Smith). On r/aliens, humor often makes extreme ideas more acceptable and easier to recall. In a thread about the famous Betty Hill star map abduction story (Table 3), one user shared a detail: "The part of that story that sticks with me is the alien saying 'there's no point telling you where we're from when you don't even know where you are'". A reply immediately made a funny observation: "Who knew aliens had that level of sass." This humorous label makes the central story, a controversial and extraordinary claim, feel more normal and human. The idea of the "sassiness" becomes a

memorable way to fix the story in the user's mind, separating it from the need for strict evidence.

The humor acts like a secret way in, bringing a real belief hidden inside. While this does not instantly lead from irony to distrust, it shows how using a playful approach makes it easier to accept unusual stories. This makes the community ready to believe claims that official sources deny, which indirectly fosters distrust in the institutions that offer those official denials.

However, it would be wrong to say that r/aliens is simply a path from irony to delusion. We must also look at a strong and widespread force within the community: a culture of internal skepticism. Tiana Gaudette and Ryan Scrivens explore the role of "Reddit's unique voting algorithm in facilitating 'othering' discourse" (2020), demonstrating how users can actively leverage platform features to shape their community. This is most visible in a popular post called "it begins", Table 4, which featured a video of supposed UAPs. Many comments showed excitement, yet one user posted a detailed comment proving the video was fake. The comment had flight path data and exact times, proving the lights were just airplanes near O'Hare airport. This comment, a great example of evidence-based doubt, was highly praised. The reply to this debunking is especially revealing: "17 upvotes, compared to 1.5k for 'Government drones are watching the orbs.' Sad man...". This meta-commentary shows the main struggle of the subreddit. The exciting, conspiracy narrative gets more initial attention, but there is a respected group committed to keeping the conversation based on verifiable facts. This internal system of doubt complicates the government distrust story, suggesting that many users are skeptical not just of the government, but of unproven claims from any source, including people in their own community. In fact, research on political interactions on Reddit observes "a preference for cross-

cutting political interactions between the 2 communities rather than within-group interactions, thus contradicting the echo chamber narrative" (De Francisci Morales et al.).

Ultimately, the ironic talk and the internal skepticism exist in a changing balance, and both help the subreddit look for truth outside of official channels. When a piece of evidence passes the community's unofficial review, the talk quickly shifts from play or doubt to sincere, shared belief. In a thread about a NASA photo that showed something that looked like ruins on Mars in Table 5, the comments were earnest and serious. One user states, "This is I think that the first time I've seen a supposed structure on Mars that actually looks like a ruin as it would be found on earth." The comment connects the unknown to what they already know, making the extraordinary claim seem real. This demonstrates that when the playful "what if" is replaced by a compelling "this looks like," the community shifts its focus to supporting the new narrative. This final step is perhaps the largest reason for government distrust. The community builds its own way to prove evidence is real, moving from playful ideas, through internal checking, to shared belief. Because of this, they effectively decide that official government statements are meaningless. Their trust is not put into institutions; their trust is in their own ability to filter the noise and reach a conclusion. This aligns with broader studies of Reddit, which validate it as a major platform for studying political communication and the formation of collective identities (Proferes et al.).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the r/aliens subreddit shows the complex ways online communities build meaning and belief when they distrust institutions. Ironic talk is not only for fun; it is the crucial first step in building a community identity where being skeptical of authority is the default setting. This shared cynicism creates an environment where irony poisoning can take hold, and playful ideas can slowly change into real beliefs. But a surprisingly strong internal culture of evidence-based doubt checks this process. The result is a self-contained system of truth-seeking, in which government stories are not just accepted but are treated as only one piece of data to be examined, argued over, and often, rejected. The genuine distrust emerges not from a single joke or meme, but from the entire cultural process of the subreddit itself.

Self Reflection:

When I first wrote my research question about how ironic discourse on r/aliens contributes to government distrust, I had a fairly simple theory. I expected to find a simple path, and I thought a user would post a meme joking about a government cover-up. Then the comments would show a slow shift into sincere conspiracy theories. I saw the project as a clear example of irony poisoning. My primary research, however, quickly revealed a much more complicated and interesting reality. The greatest challenge of this project was facing the powerful current of internal skepticism within the community. This was also the most important thing I discovered.

My method of coding comments as "Play," "Belief," or "Doubt" worked well. But the boundaries were often fuzzier than I thought they would be. A comment like "He will release it

"with his healthcare plan" is coded as Play. But it is clearly full of a very real, sincere political cynicism. Is it a joke, or is it a deeply felt belief shown through joking? This uncertainty was a constant challenge. It forced me to realize that these categories are not always separate. The process taught me that discourse analysis is not about finding exact labels. It is about understanding what the language is doing in a specific social setting. I think that the goal of that particular joke was to support a shared belief that the politician is untrustworthy, and it did this through an ironic form of play.

The detailed debunking of the airplane video surprised me the most. I had been gathering examples of humor and people believing things too easily. This post was completely different. It made me totally rethink what I understood about the space. I realized that r/aliens is not just an echo chamber. This is what a simple reading of scholars like Gaudette and Scrivens might suggest. Instead, it is a community that is deeply involved in a struggle over its own standards of evidence. This realization was the turning point in my analysis. It led me to argue that the community's distrust is not from gullibility. I think it comes from the actual process of developing its own methods of proof, directly opposing the act of relying on official sources.

I think that this project also showed that it is important to be willing to be wrong while doing research. My first assumptions were superficial. I think that it was only by reading the data carefully and letting the patterns guide me that I was able to look at the nature of the space. I learned that these are people who are collectively trying to make sense of the unknown. They use every tool they have, from sarcastic jokes and pop culture references to flight-tracking data and real expressions of awe.

References

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