Possible Research Question for Project 2: How does ironic and memetic content on the r/aliens subreddit contribute to government distrust?

De Wildt, Lars, and Stef Aupers. "Conspiracy Culture on Reddit: Belief, Doubt, and Play in r/conspiracy." *New Media & Society*, 2023.
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13548565231178914

This academic article talks about the participatory culture of the r/conspiracy subreddit, saying that it is a heterogeneous space characterized by belief, doubt, and play (ludic conspiracies). The authors support this claim through an ethnography and qualitative analysis of user discussions. This research is recent because it was published in 2023, and I think it's relevant because it directly addresses the mechanism of non-serious participation in conspiracy communities on Reddit.

I think I can use this article as a framework for analyzing r/aliens. The "play" concept relates to memetic content to the normalization of distrust. I think I can compare the "ludic conspiracies" to the discussions on r/aliens. If users on r/aliens start by joking about government cover ups (play), this article suggests that form of engagement still normalizes the underlying conspiratorial topic among the community.

Gaudette, Tiana, and Ryan Scrivens. "Collective identity formation in r/The_Donald: The role of Reddit's voting algorithm in 'othering' discourse." *New Media & Society*, vol. 22, no. 12, 2020, pp. 2050-2069.
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444820958123

This paper examines the banned r/The_Donald subreddit, and it analyzes how Reddit's upvoting and downvoting algorithm causes the formation of a collective identity. The authors use thematic analysis on a upvoted sample versus a random sample of comments to show that the upvoting process created an echo chamber that promoted extremist views. I think this article is recent (2020) and relevant because it demonstrates exactly how Reddit's algorithm can amplify content and reinforce identity, which can increase hostility and distrust toward external groups.

I think I will use this article as a counterpoint for my research on r/aliens. I think the mechanism in r/aliens is similar but softer because of the memetic content. This piece helps establish the precedent that Reddit's structure can engineer a shared group identity defined by a common enemy (in my case, the government). I think I can use their framework of how upvoting reinforces group narratives to explain how upvoting alien memes reinforces the shared narrative that the government is inherently lying to them.

Proferes, Nicholas, et al. "A systematic review of Reddit research: Disciplines, methods, and ethics." *Social Media + Society*, **vol. 7, no. 2, 2021.**
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20563051211019004

This article is a review of 727 academic manuscripts between 2010 and 2020 that used Reddit as a data source. They support their argument using statistics on publication growth and data collection techniques like Pushshift API. This is recent (2021) and relevant because it validates Reddit as a platform for serious research, especially regarding political and sensitive topics. I think it has a useful overview of the existing scholarly landscape.

This article is useful for my introduction and methodology. I think it helps justify why I chose Reddit as my primary research space, as it shows Reddit is a major platform for studying political communication and online communities. I can say that a unique, niche community like **r/aliens,** which blends politics, speculation, and irony, is underrepresented in systematic studies, which is why this research is important.

De Francisci Morales, Gianmarco, et al. "No echo in the chambers of political interactions on Reddit." *Scientific Reports*, **vol. 11, no. 1, 2021.**
https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-81531-x

This study uses logistic regression to investigate political interactions between Clinton and Trump supporters on the r/politics subreddit during the 2016 election. The argument is that the network showed heterophily (cross group interaction) instead of echo chambers. However, the authors noted that these cross cutting interactions were often hostile and might lead to a "backfire effect," where exposure to opposing views increases polarization. This article is credible (Nature, 2021) and relevant because it complicates the "echo chamber" narrative on Reddit.

I think I will use this piece to analyze the type of interaction I see on r/aliens. If I observe memes criticizing government disclosure, I can ask if these are just for internal group affirmation, or are they designed to provoke and interact with external groups? I think this research gives a technical and psychological basis to argue that charged, memetic content intensifies political segregation, which might be contributing to government distrust among users.

Smith, Peter. "NO LAUGHING MATTER: UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING IRONY POISONING." *Canadian Anti-Hate Network*, **5 Jan. 2023.**
https://www.antihate.ca/understanding_defining_irony_poisoning

This article, which isn't academic, talks about the concept of "irony poisoning." It says that this is a phenomenon where individuals become so entangled in layers of irony regarding hateful or extreme content that the distinction between the joke and sincere belief disappears. The author uses interviews with experts in misinformation and examples from extremist figures like Nick Fuentes. I think it's relevant and recent (2023) because it provides the theoretical vocabulary for the core mechanism of my research question.

I think I can use this article to define the key terms of my argument. I think that the memetic content I observe on r/aliens can be described as "irony poisoning," where jokes about the "Deep State" covering up UFOs are initially lighthearted but slowly become internalized as sincere distrust toward authority.

Research proposal

Online communities like Reddit are important areas for political communication and formation of collective identities. (Proferes et al., 2021) says that Reddit has a lot of diverse discussions on political and sensitive topics, which could have a mix of speculative and real scenarios. There are political subreddits like r/The_Donald that have been studied for increasing extremism through algorithmic reinforcement (Gaudette & Scrivens, 2020). However, niche communities that are related to conspiracies and speculation haven't been studied as well in the space of ironic content. These spaces sometimes have irony and playful engagement, which might blur the lines between humor and sincere belief. For example, De Wildt and Aupers (2023) talks about the concept of ludic conspiracies, which is when users talk about conspiratorial ideas through satire, doubt, and play, which could be normalizing polarizing narratives. This culture raises concerns about how nonserious content might shape political attitudes, such as distrust toward the government.

My gap in the literature is the prevalence of irony poisoning in the r/aliens subreddit. (Smith, 2023) said that it was how repeated exposure to ironic content might decrease the distinction between jokes and read beliefs. De Francisci Morales et al. (2021) shows that Reddit interactions can lead to polarization via hostile cross-group exchanges. However, the role of irony in niche and nonpolitical subreddits still isn't fully explored. In communities like r/aliens, this mix of ironic content could secretly help decrease government distrust. So, I plan to investigate the question "How does ironic and memetic content on the r/aliens subreddit contribute to government distrust?" My research should explain how playful discourse in online spaces can create real skepticism toward authority and governments.

I'm going to focus on the subreddit r/aliens. The space has a mix of different content types like image memes like satirical edits of government documents or officials, text posts with evidence of coverups, links to news articles and also comment threads that talk about official disclosures like those from the U.S. Department of Defense. Different aspects of Reddit such as the upvote system make popular content to rise to the top, which makes engaging posts more visible to the public. Gaudette and Scrivens (2020) say that this algorithm can amplify othering discourse, which could cause a stronger shared identity against a perceived enemy. In this case, it would be the government which is portrayed as secretive or deceptive. However, constraints like anonymity and moderation rules might encourage ironic participation while limiting overt

extremism, which could potentially mask the gradual shift toward sincere distrust. Reddit's mix of both entertainment and speculation makes it ideal for examining my question.

My secondary research uses few sources to have a framework. De Wildt and Aupers (2023) has the concept of ludic conspiracies. This can help me tell how playful comments in r/aliens normalize distrust without being serious, and Gaudette and Scrivens (2020) talks about Reddit's role in identity formation through upvoting, which I can use to show how memes and ironic content reinforce government distrust. Proferes et al. (2021) shows that Reddit is a valid research platform, so I can use underrepresented niche communities like r/aliens in political studies. De Francisci Morales et al. (2021) complicates echo chamber theories by showing how cross-group interactions can backfire into greater polarization, which helps me interpret if ironic memes create skepticism. Smith's (2023) nonacademic article defines irony poisoning, which is useful for examining how jokes turn into beliefs. Together, these sources help my analysis with established research while addressing the gap in ironic content's impact.

To do this research, I'll use qualitative methods to categorize comments as doubt, belief, and play, and I'll compare the comments to their first subcomments. For data collection, I'll use Reddit's sorting tool. I'll select 20 to 30 of the most popular posts of the past year by browsing top section. I think that it is good for me to filter by content from the past year because it has more recent information about current event. I'll will also record the comments and posts, and I need to make sure the users are anonymous.

To analyze the data, I'll do thematic coding with concepts from my sources. For each post, I'll look at the top comment and sub comments, and I'll check to see if the comment chain transitions from ironic to sincere beliefs. This would be good evidence that irony poisoning is occurring in these spaces. De Wildt and Aupers (2023), has a methodology that I'll use to categorize comments as belief, doubt, or play(Irony). I'll also look for backfire effects (De Francisci Morales et al., 2021), such as hostile responses to skeptical users, which could be evidence against the idea of an echo chamber. This approach should show how ironic content normalizes government distrust.

In conclusion, my research is supposed to describe the extent that ironic and ironic discourse in r/aliens fosters government distrust. I'm using existing methods to categorize reddit comments into 3 categories doubt, belief, and play, and I'm measuring if comments transition from play to doubt or belief within comment threads. I think will show whether playful content can have serious consequences on people's attitudes. One concern is reliably distinguishing satire from sincerity, but irony poisoning provides a guiding heuristic.