Issue Paper
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New neutrality and contextual locality: the need for flexible guidelines for providing reference service to suspicious researchers

Abstract

This issue paper looks at reference service provided to a subset of the conspiracist researcher archival user group, *suspicious researchers*. The data for this study come from interviews with six reference personnel at three institutions. Although too limited to be generalizable, the data indicate a need for flexible guidelines for practitioners who encounter this user group on a regular basis.

I. Introduction: why conspiracist researchers?

Significant works of conspiracy theory scholarship gesture at the idea that conspiracists seek information in distinctive ways. Richard Hofstadter suggests that, rather than expanding their worldview, "paranoid" individuals seek information in ways that further isolate them into echo chambers.[1] Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule similarly assert that the online environment has enabled conspiracists to form "epistemologically isolated groups or networks."[2] Conspiracists[3] *themselves* have demonstrated that research is a significant part of their work. Kony Rowe responded to claims that his 9/11 Truth film *Loose Change* presented information inaccurately with the following statement: "We know there are errors in the documentary, and we've actually left them in there so that people discredit us and do the research for themselves."[4] In fact, it is a relatively common trope for well-known conspiracists like Rowe to call on their followers to *do their own research*; an exaggeration of Enlightenment-era epistemology, which lauds first-hand inquiry.[5] These researchers, especially those who conduct their research within information

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[1] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Random House: Vintage Books, 2008), 38.
[2] Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 202–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x.
[3] Rather than discussing conspiracy theorists as such, I will refer to them as "conspiracists." Conspiracism, in the words of Thomas Milan Konda, is "a mental framework, a belief system, a worldview that leads people to look for conspiracies, to anticipate them, to link them together into a grander overarching conspiracy." Referring to the population of interest as "conspiracists" rather than "conspiracy theorists" emphasizes their epistemic distinctiveness, and avoids some of the pejorative cultural association with the latter term.
[4] David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010), 14.
[5] Jane and Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*, 54.

institutions, can be considered *conspiracist researchers*. A subset of conspiracist researchers, *suspicious researchers*, is the focus of this issue paper (see figure 1).

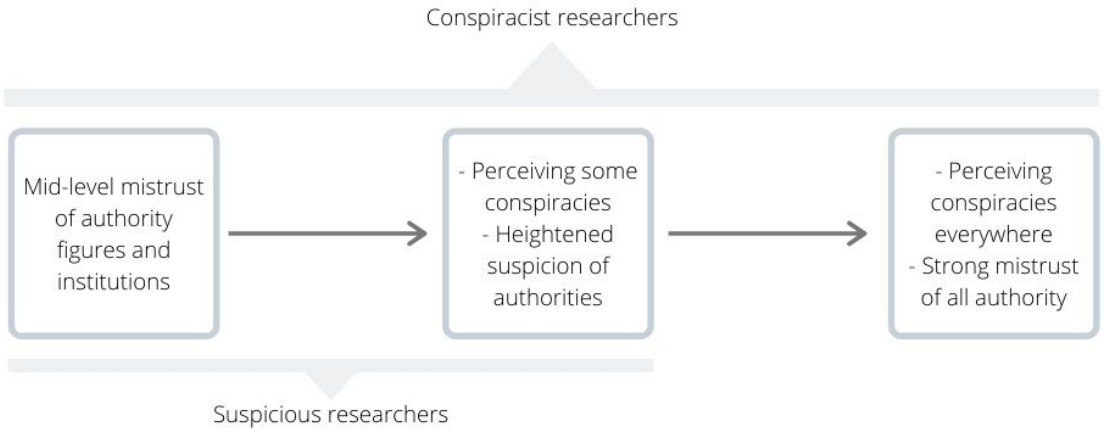

Figure 1: the continuum of conspiracism

The act of researching is a pivotal moment for conspiracist researchers: it is an opportunity for them to discover new information that may not be in line with their established worldview. However, simply *encountering* this information does not--alone--guarantee a change in worldview. C. Thi Nguyen defines echo chambers as "social epistemic structures" sustained by active discreditation of relevant viewpoints through controlled concepts of trustworthiness.[6] In order to escape an echo chamber, one must go through a *social epistemic reboot*. Nguyen gives the example of Derek Black. Raised as a Neo-Nazi, Black reformed his belief system in college, in part as a result of being invited to a classmate's Shabbat dinner--the *only* classmate who did not actively shun him because of his beliefs. Drawing from this, Nguyen suggests that "In order to motivate the social epistemic reboot, an echo chamber member needs to become aware of how much they are in the echo chamber's grip, and forming a trust relationship with an outsider might mediate that awareness."[7] It is developing a trusting connection with other human beings, rather than unmediated access to "neutral" informational resources, that may actually draw individuals out from echo chambers. This makes reference employees--in particular reference personnel in archives, where users must interface with personnel in order to gain access to collections--*vital* to the project of social epistemic reboot for conspiracist researchers.

[6] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme*, 2018, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32, 2.
[7] Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles" 18.

This project examines how reference personnel at two state archives and one presidential library in the American West have addressed and dealt with the user group *suspicious researchers* (a subset of conspiracist researchers--see figure 1). These archivists are in a uniquely challenging position: as government representatives, they recounted experiences of navigating being suspected, by certain users, of having a political agenda and/ or concealing things from the public.

My research questions are as follows: a) What accepted archival principles and practices do archivists draw on--or subvert--when working with suspicious researchers? And b) How might it be possible to develop generalized guidelines for working with this user population?[8] What challenges exist for doing so? Archivists in this study drew on a multitude of archival principles and ethics to assist suspicious researchers, most universally, *neutrality*. Neutrality, as a concept, is lauded in its accepted definition by some reference personnel, and subverted to refer to the agency of individual archivists by others. This terminological confusion, as well as the myriad approaches for assisting suspicious researchers (with varying degrees of success), solidifies the need for flexible guiding principles. One challenge for developing such guidelines has to do with categorizing these users in the first place: a fine line exists between productive conversation about assisting users who share epistemological sensibilities, and treating them pejoratively or prescriptively. Many of the nuances of suspicious researcher subgroups are likewise highly contextual and dependent on locality. Guidelines for assisting suspicious researchers must be flexible enough to map onto different contexts, yet specific enough to remain useful for reference personnel.

Conspiracists doing in-person research in archives is an important potential trigger for *social epistemic reboot*, particularly when compared to other research environments, such as online or in most libraries, where they are free to browse without needing to interact with an information professional. Successful archival reference interactions are key for bridging the gap between the epistemological orientation of archives and their staff, and a more conspiratorial epistemic outlook:[9] The reference archivist is a critical link between the larger social world and the conspiracist researcher. It is imperative that archivists do not dismiss suspicious or conspiracist researchers on the basis of their belief systems. To begin to understand these researchers and their reasoning, archivists must first recognize their own contextualized authority and agency, as well as the potential power of epistemic flexibility.

II. Method

[8] The ongoing nature of this study, alongside the limitations of the length of this paper, allow me to only gesture at this research question.

[9] Yvonne Eadon, "(Not) Part of the System: Resolving epistemic disconnect through archival reference," in "Politics, Culture and the Organization of Knowledge," special issue, *Knowledge Organization,* in press.

The data for this paper come from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with six current and former reference employees at two anonymous state archives and one Presidential library in the American West. Pseudonyms are used to protect interviewee privacy. All participants were informed of their rights, and gave verbal consent in accordance with UCLA Internal Review Board procedure. Rather than forming and testing hypotheses, I used grounded theory to let theoretical categories emerge in the course of processing my data. I transcribed, coded, and re-coded the data for this project myself.

This is exploratory research, and thus has a few limitations. The pool of interviewees is quite small, and the voice of the archivist is centered. This project is separate from my dissertation work, the data for which will consist partly of interviews with conspiracist researchers themselves. Finally, the interview format was somewhat irregular for this pool of interviewees, with some interviews lasting for one hour-long session and others taking place in two separate sessions. At State Archives A, I interviewed Andrea (a library assistant II), Linda (the collections archivist), Patrick (a government archivist), and Brian (a government archivist). At State Archives B, I spoke with Timothy (a reference archivist). At the Presidential library, I spoke with Christopher (former reference archivist; current supervisory archivist).

III. Data & discussion

I recruited interviewees for this study by asking reference personnel, via email, if they had ever encountered a researcher they would deem *conspiratorially minded*. Many interviewees conveyed that they feel that this designation contains a measure of nuance. Linda, Andrea, and Patrick all suggested that there is a *range* of conspiracist researchers--this insight was the origin for the continuum of conspiracism (figure 1). Further, both Linda and Andrea touched on feeling discomfort with classifying the spectrum of individuals as one single user group. It is partly for this reason that I have decided to focus on *suspicious researchers* in this iteration of this project, rather than *conspiracist researchers* as a whole--to develop and incorporate subtle variations in the former designation, before being able to adequately discuss the latter.

Although Patrick and Andrea both mentioned that they had never encountered a *highly* conspiratorial user at State Archives A (that is, someone towards the right of the spectrum), every single interviewee I spoke with described at least one instance of a researcher openly treating them with suspicion. Linda discussed how one researcher in particular was suspicious of how a collection was arranged, expressing to her that he thought it should be arranged differently than it was, in accordance with his own research agenda. Christopher recalled instances of researchers accusing archives staff of keeping records classified for political purposes. Andrea and Timothy also described researchers who

accused archives staff of hiding entire collections. Linda observed that suspicion towards government is the most common conspiratorial tendency in researchers who come to State Archives A:

> I think it tends to be our government records more than the donated collections that people end up kind of suspicious of things. We've had people coming through because they're looking for a smoking gun--a governor's record group [for instance]...so we have to be really careful when those types of researchers come through to really try and make sure that they don't think that we're trying to hide anything, that we don't have a political agenda. We are just about access and we're not, you know, keeping information intentionally from people...the people that are suspicious of government are probably our biggest group that I would say maybe borders on conspiracy theorists, if that's an appropriate label (laughs).

Here, Linda highlights the challenges of working with this population: because they are government representatives, archivists must navigate the experience of being suspected of having an agenda and/ or concealing things from the public. Yet, in the same breath, she questions whether or not it is appropriate to label these individuals as conspiracists, or even as a group that could be related. Even as she identifies the challenges of being suspected by suspicious researchers, she struggles with the irrefutability of labeling them.

The staff at State Archives A pointed to the culture of their state--in the Western United States--as a significant factor in the pattern of mistrust towards their reference personnel. Linda contended that perception of government overreach in general extends to how government archives and their staff are perceived, and that it has a tangible impact on their work. Patrick and Brian theorized, similarly, that the culture of their state lends itself to mistrust in government, especially among "sovereign citizens," who claim to be sovereign nations in their own right. In Brian's words, "[STATE] does kind of have that draw where, you know, a concentration of constitutionalists, or sovereign [citizens]...in the more rural areas." Brian, Andrea, and Patrick all described specific researchers as *sovereign citizens,* discussing them as a subgroup of suspicious researchers. Sovereign citizen researchers most commonly researched their own land, their county, or their state, often for the purposes of a legal dispute with the state or local government.

According to Thomas Milan Konda, "sovereign citizen" is itself an umbrella term for individuals who hold a variety of similar characteristic beliefs: "Despite their variety, sovereign citizens agree that they are not subject to federal law, as the federal government is illegitimate and has no jurisdiction over them."[10] Brian, recalling again the notion that there is a spectrum of conspiratorial belief, emphasizes that he believes these sorts of sovereign-citizen researchers are not necessarily "out there," but that they are

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[10] Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 264.

indeed "pursuing a narrative," which he considers to be in line with conspiratorial thought. The existence of sovereign citizen researchers in State Archives A highlights a particular aspect of suspicious researchers (and conspiracist researchers, as a larger group): they manifest differently, and must be treated accordingly, within localized contexts. The nuances of locality have the potential to complicate the "suspicious researcher" user group, and by extension, any guidelines that might be developed for reference personnel providing them with assistance.

The reference personnel I spoke with approached assisting suspicious individuals in a variety of ways. Both Timothy and Brian emphasized that, rather than dismissing suspicious researchers out of hand, they make extra effort for them. In Timothy's words, "...if anything my bias would be towards offering a higher level of service, so they could maybe build some trust in us." Patrick, reflecting on Brian's extra efforts to help one researcher in particular, similarly said that "I think that probably helped him in his mind separate us from the state." Andrea remarked that she finds it helpful to "Redirect attention to the materials," and Linda suggested that "developing a good rapport" was helpful for her with particularly difficult researchers. Linda also mentioned that she thought that better intellectual control over collections could help mitigate mistrust, as researchers would be able to find what they are looking for more easily. She also described a researcher who she *expected* to be difficult, because he appeared to be in line with the sovereign citizen subgroup, who turned out to be a very pleasant person to work with. This sentiment was echoed by Patrick and Brian, who also worked with him. Patrick was the only archivist I spoke with who mentioned being transparent about his work: "Tell them what you've looked for, tell them all the different record types you've looked for, and all the people you've contacted...so that they know. Cause you know, Brian and I can disappear in the back for a few hours and they would have no idea what we're doing back there. But we tell them: 'I looked through this record, this record, contacted this clerk, I looked through this, I pulled this map…'" In communicating transparently with users, Patrick recognizes his own privilege and power as an archivist, to move about and exist within spaces and among people not possible for researchers.

The most widely-cited archival ethical principle cited by reference personnel was *neutrality*. Neutrality and objectivity have traditionally been lauded as values of the profession, but in the past two decades, scholars and practitioners alike have questioned their status as pillars of archival praxis. Many archivists and academics now recognize that archives are designed and built by the powerful to record and maintain power, and that archivists are in a privileged and powerful position to arrange and interpret

collections.[11] The postmodern, post-truth-saturated environment in which we find ourselves in the current moment throws the futility of striving for neutrality into especially sharp relief.[12]

Yet, many of the archivists I interviewed cited neutrality as a central value upon which they draw to assist suspicious researchers. In Christopher's words, "that's our number one rule, to not have any political...persuasion or things like that. Our job is to--there are laws! We follow the laws. There's no deviating from that. If we can open something to the public, we'll open it. If we can't, we won't." In another interview, he declared that, when within the walls of the Presidential library for which he works, he has "no opinion, good or bad," of that particular President. Andrea also mentioned wanting to stay neutral, to be "an observer" and "a state steward." Timothy, similarly, suggests that "we're neutral, we can't make judgements about these things, one citizen's request for what we hold is as valid as the next person's request." Although these three personnel seem to be discussing neutrality in the accepted sense of the word, Brian talks about it slightly differently. Discussing helping a suspicious researcher, Brian recalled "...the guy on the other end of the phone's thinking, 'great, another, you know, brush off.' So, usually I try to tell them: 'well, look, give me a day or two. Let me really really really really go into everything we have. We might not have exactly what you're looking for, but we might have something that is related to it that might give you another avenue to search.' They're pretty cool when they realize you're neutral." Brian's use of *neutral* means something slightly different: it refers to his not being a *part of the system*, subverting the researcher's expectation that he is an unhelpful cog in the bureaucratic machine. That is, when Brian speaks of *neutrality,* he describes a more radical idea of his own *agency as an individual archivist*. A subtle difference exists between archivists who consider themselves neutral because their institution is neutral (e.g. Christopher, whose definition of neutrality originates from his working for NARA), and those who consider themselves in a neutral position between the values of their institution and the values of their users. Neutrality, as an archival value, is itself context-specific: constructed according to and in collaboration with institutions, archivists, and user groups.

An archivist may not share the same values as the institution for which they work, and they may choose to prioritize the needs of users over the policies of their institution. Patrick described one notable example of this: a year prior to the interviews, Linda and Brian had collaboratively opened up the reading room on the day it was normally closed, for a sovereign citizen researcher who had traveled from a few hours away. Thinking critically about their roles as archivists, as contextualized within their institution and informed by their own conceptions of archival codes of conduct (the concept of "neutrality" being the

[11] J.M Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," Archival Science 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 1–19.
[12] *Ibid.,* 9.

operative example in this paper), is vital for archivists to create and maintain the kind of epistemic flexibility necessary to interface with suspicious researchers.

Archivists must recognize their own power, privilege, and agency before they can successfully assist users who are mistrustful of them. The fact that suspicious researchers are even coming to archives to do in-person research indicates that they are at a critical point for *social epistemic reboot*. Developing a trusting relationship with a government reference archivist has significant potential for being a turning point for suspicious researchers; it illustrates that not all government employees are out to get them. Developing guidelines for practitioners will allow for a more consistent response to suspicious research. For instance, *does* it make sense for reference personnel to "go above and beyond" for each suspicious researcher they encounter? Does this not take them away from assisting other researchers or techniques for mitigating suspicion, such as increased intellectual control over collections? Flexibility must be the foundation upon which we build guidelines for working with this population: such guidelines must take into account localized contexts, new and different senses of touchstone terms like "neutrality," archival agency, and the sheer variety of different ways one can be a *suspicious* or *conspiracist researcher.* The interviews summarized in this paper are a productive place to start developing such guidelines, but collaborative conversations with practitioners about what they find to be helpful, and what they would like to see in a set of guidelines, are crucial for developing more concrete principles.

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