

The Truth is Out There: Examining Conspiracist Information Seeking in Archives

Abstract

As conspiracy theories move from the fringes of society to the mainstream,¹ the empirical study of conspiracy theories, their formation, propagation, and rhetorical staying power, has accelerated.² Such research has examined how conspiracy theories spread online;³ addressed the question of what conspiracists believe and why;⁴ asked epistemological questions of whether or not conspiracy theorizing is justifiable or reasonable as a form of sense-making;⁵ and characterized the socio-cultural effects of conspiracy theories.⁶ The project proposed in this research design paper examines the *how* of conspiracist information seeking within archives and/

¹ Michael Barkun, "President Trump and the 'Fringe,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 437–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1313649>.

² Jennifer M. Connolly et al., "Communicating to the Public in the Era of Conspiracy Theory," *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 469–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2019.1603045>; Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online" (Data & Society Research Institute, May 15, 2017), <https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>.

³ Marwick and Lewis "Media Manipulation," 17–20; Kim Mortimer, "Understanding Conspiracy Online: Social Media and the Spread of Suspicious Thinking," *Dalhousie Journal of Interdisciplinary Management* 13, no. 1 (April 6, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5931/djim.v13i1.6928>; Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

⁴ Viren Swami et al., "Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a Monological Belief System and Associations between Individual Psychological Differences and Real-World and Fictitious Conspiracy Theories," *British Journal of Psychology* 102, no. 3 (2011): 443–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2010.02004.x>; Marina Abalakina-Paap et al., "Beliefs in Conspiracies," *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3 (1999): 637–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160>.

⁵ David Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 111–137; Matthew R.X. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 14–18.

⁶ Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, "The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 148, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 210–22, <https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.148.2.210-222>.

or using archival materials. This paper first outlines the theoretical significance of the project (why does it matter how conspiracists do research?), grounding the project in archival theory, conspiracy theory scholarship, and information seeking. It will then outline the research design: using grounded theory-informed intensive interviewing, I will recruit and interview twenty-four to thirty *conspiracist researchers* who are looking into one of three conspiratorial subjects: the CIA program MK-ULTRA, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Roswell Incident. Speaking directly to conspiracist researchers will allow for a more in-depth look at the particulars of conspiracist information seeking.

I. Introduction

“Conspiracy theorist,” is itself a notably sticky designation, particularly as polls show that a significant proportion of Americans believe at least one conspiracy theory.⁷ Defining “conspiracy,” “conspiracy theory,” and “conspiracy theorist,” is notoriously difficult, having been tackled by political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers alike. At its broadest and most basic, a conspiracy involves a group of people planning something in secret. Matthew R. X. Dentith defines a conspiracy as having three conditions: “1. The Conspirators Condition—There exists (or existed) some set of agents with a plan. 2. The Secrecy Condition—Steps have been taken by the agents to minimise public awareness of what they are up to, and 3. The Goal Condition—Some end is or was desired by the agents.”⁸ According to these conditions, anything from a surprise party, to the assassination of a politician, to the plotting of several governments

⁷ Dan Cassino and Krista Jenkins, “Conspiracy Theories Prosper: 25% of Americans Are ‘Truthers’” (Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Public Mind Poll, January 17, 2013), <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2013/outthere/final.pdf>; J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084>; Joseph E. Uscinski and Casey Klofstad, “Florida Believes in Conspiracy Theories Too,” News, Orlando Sentinel, September 6, 2018, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-op-florida-conspiracy-theories-20180906-story.html>.

⁸ Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, 23.

towards a new world order could be considered a conspiracy. Dentith⁹ goes on to define a conspiracy *theory* as any speculation about an event that alleges conspiratorial causes for that event. 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.”¹⁰ 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.

Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of “folk sociology.”¹¹ Indeed, prominent conspiracists will often employ the phrase “do your own research,” as a kind of call to action, implying that “the truth is out there,” and all it takes to uncover it is thorough research and an open mind. Kony Rowe, creator of the popular 9/11 Truth film *Loose Change*, responded to accusations that his film contained several inaccuracies with: “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.”¹² Similarly, Rob Brotherton references the notorious David Icke, propagator of the theory that all powerful figures are secretly humanoid lizards: “The conspirators leave subtle symbols of their plot lying around, Icke says, and ‘when you know what you’re looking for, it starts jumping out at you.’”¹³ Conspiracists often emulate academic rhetoric, while at the same time subverting and challenging the epistemic

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰ Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2.

¹¹ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 54.

¹² David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010), 14.

¹³ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), 227.

authority of science and academia.¹⁴ On the whole, academics, journalists, politicians, and non-conspiracists in general often dismiss conspiracy theorists uncritically and out of hand, by virtue of the perceived danger or ignorance of their ideas.¹⁵

Despite the fact that the act of *doing research* figures so prominently in the conspiracy canon, the information seeking practices of conspiracists remain under-examined and undertheorized. The proposed project constitutes a first step into the arena of theorizing conspiracists' epistemically unique information seeking behaviors *within archives*, solidifying them as a distinct archival user group. I am calling this archival user group *conspiracist researchers*. These are individuals whose epistemic outlook exists somewhere on the continuum of conspiracism (figure 1), and who use archival documents, either physical or digitized, in the course of conducting their research. It is important and relevant to look at how conspiracists interact with and operationalize archival holdings, as conspiracists often have a unique approach to *evidence*, and archival records are commonly operationalized as evidence by other user groups within archives.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," *Public Understanding of Science* 24, no. 4 (May 1, 2015): 466–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662514559891>.

¹⁵ Jack Braitch, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2008); Didier Fassin, "The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: On AIDS in South Africa and a Few Other Global Plots The Politics of HIV/AIDS," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, no. 2 (2011 2010): 39–50; Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority."

¹⁶ Stacy Wood, "Making Secret(s): The Infrastructure of Classified Information" (University of California, Los Angeles, 2017).

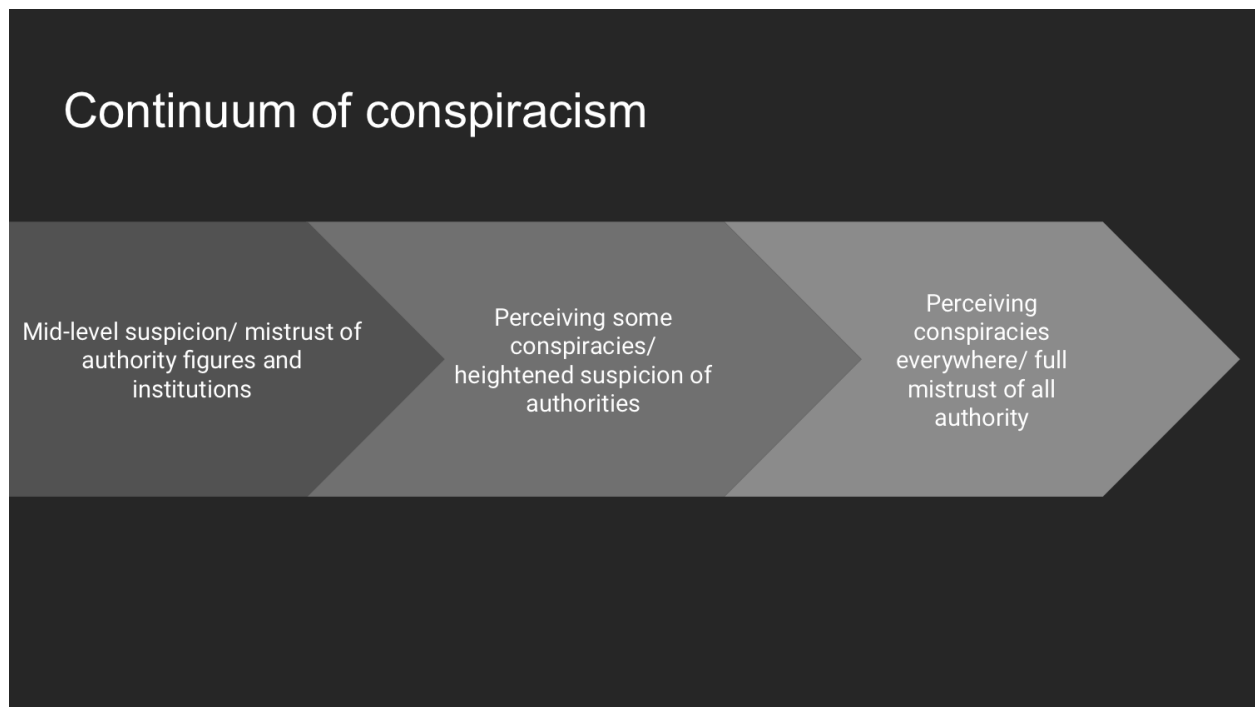


Figure 1: The continuum of conspiracism. Original figure.

In seeking information outside of their communities, archives may constitute a potential site for conspiracist researchers to incorporate new information into existing belief systems. This research project proposes interviewing conspiracist researchers looking into three specific cases of historical conspiracy/ theory: the CIA program MK-ULTRA, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the 1947 Roswell Incident. Interviews will be about these researchers' information seeking practices within archives. My research question is: How do conspiracist researchers conduct their research within archives? Or: what are conspiracist researchers' information seeking practices within archives? The results of this study will allow for a more concrete characterization of this user group in terms of size and information seeking behavior, as well as informing information professionals about how to thoughtfully and critically build trust with and provide reference services to this user group.

II. Literature review

A divide exists in scholarship on conspiracy theories, which Matthew R. X. Dentith denotes as “generalist,” and “particularist.”¹⁷ Scholars in the generalist camp tend to discuss conspiracy theories as one set of phenomena, characterized by irrefutability and irrationality. Particularists, on the other hand, argue that conspiracy theories are varied, diverse, and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. For particularists, a given conspiracy theory cannot be dismissed out of hand just because it is a conspiracy theory. Klein et al.¹⁸ differentiate between these two scholarly camps using different terminology: the “monological,” and what they call the “iceberg model.” The monological viewpoint considers conspiracists as a group that can be evaluated according to shared socio-psychological characteristics. The iceberg model, on the other hand, suggests that conspiracists that fit monological characteristics are just the tip of the iceberg--below the surface lie conspiracists who are much more epistemically and psychologically heterogeneous. This supports my notion of a continuum of conspiracism. Likewise, when I refer to “conspiracists,” and “conspiracist researchers,” I am referring to a heterogeneous group whose members may display some of the same or similar epistemic characteristics, but who need not display them all at once, or to the same degree. For this project, I will take a particularist stance and will be looking at conspiracists who are researching *specific* conspiracy theories. In the course of this literature review, I will first summarize the conspiratorial topics at hand--MK-ULTRA, the JFK assassination, and the 1947 Roswell Incident--and then move on to work that has been done at the intersection of archival studies and the study of conspiracy theory.

¹⁷ Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*.

¹⁸ Colin Klein, Peter Clutton, and Vince Polito, “Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00189>.

Three conspiracy theories: MK-ULTRA, the JFK Assassination, and the Roswell Incident

In 1977, the Senate held a congressional hearing to hold the CIA accountable for its experiments with mind control in the early years of the Cold War. The CIA's top-secret project, named MK-ULTRA for most of its existence, had over 130 subprojects underneath it, with approximately eighty-six institutions involved. Many of these projects involved unethical human subject research, including covert dosing of unwitting subjects with LSD. MK-ULTRA ran from 1953 to 1973. In the same year that the project was terminated, the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, and the director of MK-ULTRA, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, conspired to destroy all of the records of MK-ULTRA and its activities. In 1977, an employee at the CIA's Retired Records Center uncovered an overlooked cache of financial documents related to MK-ULTRA,¹⁹ which revealed the names of the individuals and institutions involved in MK-ULTRA research. After these financial documents came to light, the aforementioned Senate hearing was held, in which the documents were discussed and various CIA employees testified. Since then, a multitude of conspiracy theories about the project have surfaced.²⁰ The overarching theory posits that the project was never terminated, and continues to this day in deep secrecy. Many conspiracists who believe in this theory point to videos of celebrities flubbing lines or staring into space unexpectedly as "glitches" in their MK-ULTRA programming; others suggest that the Sandy Hook and Columbine shootings were false flag operations carried out by "MK-ULTRA puppets."²¹ The financial documents mentioned above are available in full online, with some redactions.

¹⁹ These documents were not supposed to be at this location—it was an oversight that they were stored there and did not get destroyed along with the other documents in 1973.

²⁰ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003).

²¹ Hobbs Thomas, "The Conspiracy Theorists Convinced Celebrities Are under Mind Control," *WIRED UK*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/mkultra-conspiracy-theory-meme>.

Gray areas around the assassination of John F. Kennedy have been prominent sites for conspiratorial speculation almost since the incident itself occurred in November 1963. It did not help that the Presidential Warren Commission, and the numerous subsequent Congressional committees that followed, came to their conclusions using and creating records that were not available to the American public: “The American public lost faith when it could not see the very documents whose contents led to these conclusions.”²² Partly as a reaction to the conspiracy theories that exploded out of the incident (including that the CIA and FBI were complicit in the assassination, or that it was a Cold War hit carried out by Cuban and/ or Soviet operatives, or that the murder was backed and executed by the Mafia²³), and especially as triggered by Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK*, Congress explicitly established a policy to apply to all of the records having to do with the assassination. The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Collection was established by *President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992* (“the JFK Records Act”). The JFK Records Act mandated that all records relating to the assassination be consolidated at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and made available to the public, with the exception of some records whose release would be postponed. According to the JFK Records Act, these protected records were to be made publicly available by exactly 25 years after the Act was passed on October 26, 1992: October 26, 2017. Approximately 1% of the collection remains classified to this day. The documents to be released were digitized and released in a database hosted on NARA’s website. Many conspiracists attempted to collaboratively comb through the documents for new information, using websites

²² Assassination Records Review Board, “The Problem of Secrecy and the Solution of the JFK Act,” in *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009), 247.

²³ Lori Moore, “The J.F.K. Files: Decades of Doubts and Conspiracy Theories - The New York Times,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/us/jfk-assassination-files-questions.html>.

like reddit to create communities around the researching and talking about the newly released documents.²⁴

In June 1947, W.W. “Mac” Brazel and his son, when driving outside of Roswell, New Mexico, stumbled across wreckage that appeared to be composed of lightweight metallic sheets, rubber, and other mysterious materials. The news made it back to intelligence officers working at the nearby Roswell Army Air Field, and a public statement was made--resulting in news coverage that, among other things, reported: “The intelligence office of the 509th Bombardment Group at Roswell Army Air Field announced at noon today, that the field has come into the possession of a Flying Saucer.”²⁵ The following month, the War Department in Washington, DC, put out an official statement that the Roswell debris was in fact the remains of a weather balloon. The conspiracist community interested in the Roswell Incident claims that this was, inevitably, a coverup. Roswell is now home to the International UFO Museum and Research Center, which focuses on the Incident and presents the story of the government cover-up, using photographs, affidavits, and the controversial MJ-12 or Magic 12 documents, which the FBI has claimed are falsified.

Archives, information seeking, and conspiracy theory

The literature at the intersection of archival studies and conspiracy theory, as well as at the intersection of information seeking and conspiracy theory, is thin. Models of archival information seeking are also rare, as the work around information seeking and behavior has

²⁴ Yvonne Eadon, “‘Useful Information Turned into Something Useless’: Archival Silences, Imagined Records, and Suspicion of Mediated Information in the JFK Assassination Collection,” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 15, no. 2 (2019), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7pv1s9p7>.

²⁵ Donovan Webster, “In 1947, A High-Altitude Balloon Crash Landed in Roswell. The Aliens Never Left,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, accessed December 7, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/in-1947-high-altitude-balloon-crash-landed-roswell-aliens-never-left-180963917/>.

mainly been derived from library science. I will present the work that has been done in these three areas in order.

Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, in their 2016 article “Records and their imaginaries: imagining the impossible, making possible the imagined,” introduce two new terms: “imagined records,” and “impossible archival imaginaries.” Imagined records “can function societally in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or their aspirational nature;”²⁶ impossible archival imaginaries, are “archivally impossible in the sense that they will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense unless they are drawn into some kind of co-constitutive relationship with actualized records”²⁷ Imagined archives and impossible archival imaginaries are alternative affective understandings of records and their collectives, and they can easily clash with existing records. Often the existing record represents the institutional or official viewpoint, whereas the imagined record represents subversion or resistance to that viewpoint.²⁸ In introducing these new terms, Gilliland and Caswell acknowledge the situatedness of records and the power of archives to function differently for different individuals, according to a variety of factors. They directly reference the JFK Assassination Collection as indicative of the power of imagined records and impossible archival imaginaries: “...in part because of public suspicion that the government remains intent on withholding key evidence, and in part because of the compelling nature of film as a medium (both as record and as fiction) as well as the director’s vision as reflected in *JFK* as a work, imagined accounts of what actually happened will likely continue to wield influence even after

²⁶ Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 53–75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9259-z>, 53.

²⁷ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

all the classified records are eventually made publicly available.”²⁹ Imagined records illustrate one important way in which user groups engage with and operationalize records in a way that may be unexpected or surprising to archivists.

Nyhan et al.³⁰ conducted an experimental study in which they hypothesized that, first, individuals presented with redacted government documents would be more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory than those who did not; second, that individuals who were already conspiratorially minded would display a greater tendency to believe a conspiracy theory when presented with a redacted document.³¹ Their first hypothesis was proven, and their second disproven, illustrating that “These findings confirm the expectation from lay epistemic theory that redactions are often seen as evidence that government has something to hide and can therefore contribute to conspiracy beliefs.”³² Wood (2017) directly addresses the relationship that many conspiracy theorists have with classified information-as-evidence: “Classified information is a sanctioned break in the provision of evidence, leaving space for alternative narrative building and the development of new evidential paradigms that stem from new data or no data.”³³ Similarly, Eadon³⁴ found that records from the JFK Assassination Collection that were so poorly scanned as to be illegible functioned in the same way a redaction would--easily filled with theories about what it might contain, creating an “imagined record.”

Wood’s perspective on the MJ-12 documents likewise analyzes them in terms of how they have been operationalized as evidence by the Ufology community, and how they function as

²⁹ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” 62.

³⁰ Nyhan et al., “Classified or Coverup?”

³¹ Nyhan et al., “Classified or Coverup?” 111.

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

³³ Wood, “Making Secret(s): The Infrastructure of Classified Information,” 144.

³⁴ Eadon, ““Useful Information Turned into Something Useless.””

imagined records. Among Ufologists, there is a robust debate about whether or not the MJ-12 documents are indeed authentic evidence of a government cover-up of the Roswell Incident. Wood focuses on the techniques of authentication used by Ufologists, including forensic techniques and linguistic analysis. Wood introduces and employs diplomatics as a technique for analyzing the MJ-12 documents. Diplomatics, she states, "...is a particularly salient methodology with its focus on individual documents outside of documentary context as well as their aesthetic and formal qualities. In its resurgence with respect to electronic records, and attention to the tools of production are also of interest."³⁵ Members of the Ufology community who focus on these documents use some diplomatics techniques, including focusing on the signature of Harry S. Truman on several of the documents, as a method for authenticating them. Analyzing the MJ-12 documents and the debate around them in the Ufology community in terms of *imagined records* and *impossible archival imaginaries*, Wood concludes that "The records and the vibrant debates around their authenticity also provide an opportunity for a subversion of official truth-making and the state's version of events. For any community defined by an adversarial relationship to the state, especially one characterized by paranoia and lack of trust, the control over the mechanisms of authorizing evidence are paramount."³⁶ Indeed, Gilliland and Caswell suggest that actual and imagined records can "confront each other with alternate realities," especially when the former represents hegemonic structures of official power, and the latter represents subversions of or resistance to these structures.³⁷

³⁵ Wood, "Making Secret(s): The Infrastructure of Classified Information," 164.

³⁶ Wood, "Making Secret(s): The Infrastructure of Classified Information," 167.

³⁷ Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," 71.

What does conspiracist information seeking look like? Most work that has been done in this area looks at conspiracist information seeking and knowledge production specifically within online communities (rather than, as is the case in my proposed project, archives).

König³⁸ looks at Wikipedia as a site for contested knowledge production. Focusing on the Wikipedia Talk pages for the article on the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, König asks how knowledge is produced in the open, supposedly democratized context of Wikipedia. Whose voices are prioritized and whose are marginalized? What kind of knowledge eventually predominates?³⁹ Framing her study according to the sociology of knowledge allows König to “...regard both the ‘official version’ and the so-called conspiracy theories neutrally as types of knowledge, regardless of categories such as ‘true,’ or ‘false.’”⁴⁰ In line with this, Raab et. al⁴¹ found that, at least in some cases, no meaningful distinction can be made between so-called “conspiratorial beliefs,” and “official stories.” Using this methodological orientation, König approaches her study according to the ways in which these knowledges have been constructed, without making value judgements about them. König found that, rather than democratizing expertise and/ or knowledge production, Wikipedia in fact reproduced the “knowledge hierarchies” present in other, more traditional sites of knowledge production.⁴²

Similarly, Narayan and Preljevic⁴³ look at belief in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories from an information behavior perspective. Through a grounded theory content analysis of a small sample of publicly available blog data, the authors found that, “...the following play a part in

³⁸ René König, “Wikipedia: Between Lay Participation and Elite Knowledge Representation,” *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 160–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.734319>.

³⁹ König, “Wikipedia: Between Lay Participation and Elite Knowledge Representation,” 162–163.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴¹ Marius H. Raab et al., “Thirty Shades of Truth: Conspiracy Theories as Stories of Individuation, Not of Pathological Delusion,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00406>.

⁴² König, “Wikipedia,” 170.

⁴³ B. Narayan and M. Preljevic, “An Information Behaviour Approach to Conspiracy Theories: Listening in on Voices from Within the Vaccination Debate,” December 5, 2016, <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/90570>.

their information behaviour: Internet and social media, along with selective information seeking, distrust of authority, cognitive dissonance or the tendency to seek consistency among their cognitions (beliefs and opinions), sense making, information avoidance, and the concept of *life in the round* (Chatman 1999).”⁴⁴ The authors call for doctors and nurses to participate more directly in the flow of information on social media, so as to quell the polarization through operationalization of their expertise. Narayan and Preljevic address conspiracist information seeking as a *prima facie* problem in need of concrete solutions. König, on the other hand, tackles conspiracist and official knowledges as though they are on the same level in an attempt to avoid value judgements. These two orientations are epistemically in line with generalism (Narayan and Preljevic) and particularism (König).

Information seeking within archives has been analyzed from a variety of standpoints. First, and perhaps most importantly, within physical archives, the only way users can access archival holdings is through the reference archivist--as we can see in the figure below.

⁴⁴ Narayan and Preljevic, “An Information Behaviour Approach to Conspiracy Theories,” 9.

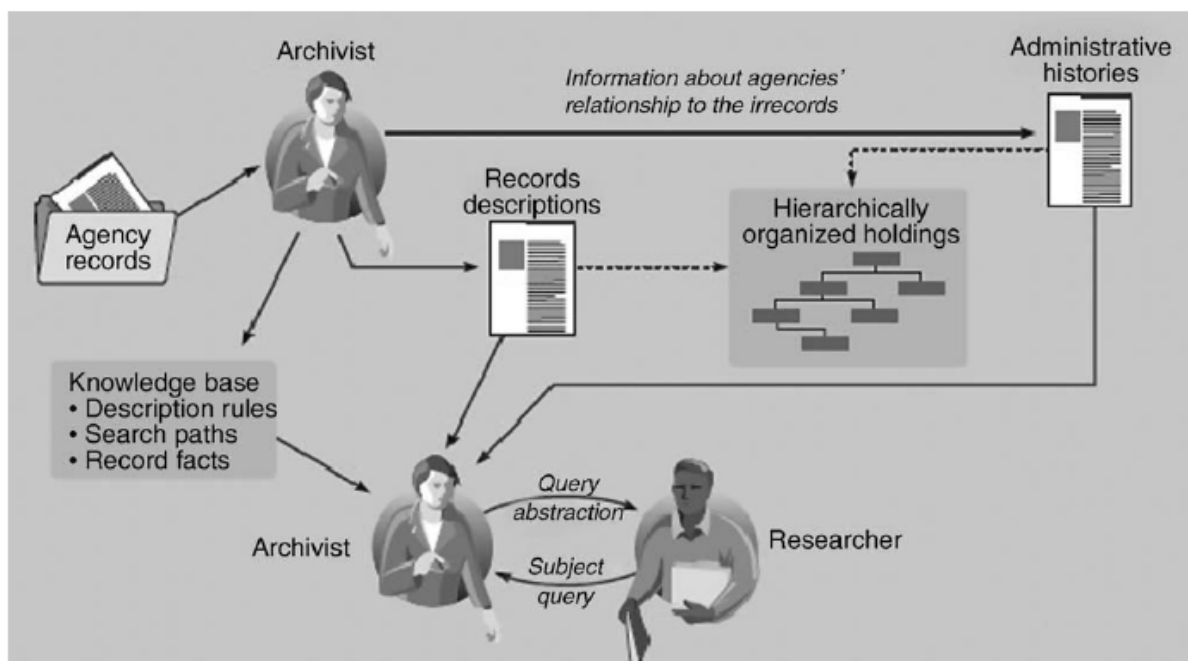


Figure 2: "Inside the black box," from Pugh 2017.

The central archival principle of provenance privileges context and creator over subject. In the words of Geoffrey Yeo, "records [ought to be] managed in ways that secure and preserve knowledge of their origins and contexts."⁴⁵ The nature of records precludes their searchability in subject or content terms.⁴⁶ Many first-time users in archives are used to holdings of libraries, and even online search engines, being organized by subject--and so may be disoriented and/ or confused when encountering the archival system of provenance. This is one reason that a reference archivist is required within physical archives--to help users translate subject-based queries into provenance-based queries.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Yeo, "Continuing Debates about Description," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 164.

⁴⁶ Wendy Duff and Elizabeth Yakel, "Archival Interaction," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 193–223. 27.

⁴⁷ Mary Jo Pugh, "Archival Reference and Access," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, March 15, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1081/E-ELIS4-120043645>, 155.

Many users thus come to the archive (online or in person) unprepared for the complexity of information seeking and working with primary sources. Yakel and Torres introduce the concept of “archival intelligence,” which they define as “...a researcher’s knowledge of archival principles, practices, and institutions, such as the reason underlying archival rules and procedures, the means for developing search strategies to explore research questions, and an understanding of the relationship between primary sources and their surrogates.”⁴⁸ A user develops archival intelligence often simply through doing research in an archives, as well as participating in some form of archival user education; it is rare that novice users will come in to the archive without experiencing at least some confusion.

Yakel argues that archival representation (arrangement and description), although its intent is to provide access, can also complicate the research process to some degree:

“Researchers must know the schemas and codes and understand the underlying systems of privileging, classifying, and selecting that comprise both arrangement and description.”⁴⁹

Finding aids function at multiple levels, as a generalized organizing document, a guide to a collection for researchers, and an archival administrative document. As Daines and Nimer point out, the finding aid’s multiple functionalities makes them complex and not very user friendly.

Users “...expect sophisticated search tools that allow them to directly access reliable and accurate information. They also expect to be able to understand the search results that search engines bring back to them.”⁵⁰ The authors go as far as to assert that finding aids, in their

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, “AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise,” *The American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 51–78, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.66.1.q022h85pn51n5800>, 51.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (March 2003): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02438926>, 2.

⁵⁰ J. Gordon Daines and Cory L. Nimer, “Re-Imagining Archival Display: Creating User-Friendly Finding Aids,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 4–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2011.574019>, 5.

capacity as researcher tools, can in fact create an “access barrier” for users.⁵¹ Indeed, Yeo suggests that the effects of digital technologies may have had effects more adverse than they first seemed: “It is arguable that [online arrangement & description] may have mattered less when finding aids were almost always consulted in reading rooms with archivists on hand to offer assistance, but becomes critical when descriptions are rendered digitally for remote use.”⁵² Many online researchers working with archival holdings have no prior knowledge of the inner workings of archival praxis, and yet many of the tools with which they are expected to work, *alone*, (e.g., finding aids) rely on the user possessing this knowledge.

The reference interaction can itself be a barrier to access; it all depends on the individual reference archivist and their attitudes and practices. Duff and Fox suggest that reference services have historically been underrepresented in the literature of archival studies, particularly when compared to LIS reference literature.⁵³ This expectation, that archives will be as user-friendly as libraries, likely prevents a lot of archival research from even taking place. Indeed, Pugh suggests that one major activity undertaken by reference personnel must be negotiation of user expectations.⁵⁴ Yakel looks at archival reference as a form of knowledge management, advocating for a reconceptualization of archival reference from a document delivery or information transmission model to a knowledge co-creation process between user and archivist.⁵⁵ In such a way, Yakel ultimately calls for adequate translation of the record-keeping context to the user.⁵⁶ That is, archival user education on the individual level of the reference interaction

⁵¹ Daines and Nimer, “Re-Imagining Archival Display,” 4.

⁵² Yeo, “Continuing Debates about Description,” 175.

⁵³ Wendy Duff and Allyson Fox, “‘You’re a Guide Rather than an Expert’: Archival Reference from an Archivist’s Point of View,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 27, no. 2 (February 9, 2007): 129–53. 130.

⁵⁴ Pugh, “Archival Reference and Access,” 2017, 157.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Yakel, “Thinking Inside and Outside the Boxes: Archival Reference Services at the Turn of the Century,” *Archivaria* 49, no. 0 (January 1, 2000): 140–60.

⁵⁶ Yakel, “Thinking Inside and Outside the Boxes,” 155.

may, in essence, look like the archivist imparting the *why* of the rules that are in place in an archives, and what goes on in the “black box” (figure 2).

Archival users must either: a.) Encounter archival holdings online, organized according to provenance, *without* an intermediary, and more likely than not leave the encounter feeling confused/ threatened by the alien organization of the system and its apparent lack of searchability; or b.) Conduct research in an archives with the help of an intermediary, who does the work of boundary spanning between researcher and archival system.⁵⁷ In both of these cases, users who do not already possess archival intelligence may find archival research to be challenging, confusing, and even threatening. Mandatory one-on-one, in-person reference in physical archives is one way to facilitate foundational archival user education, but it puts most, if not all, of the burden of archival user education on individual reference archivists.

III. Method: Grounded theory-informed qualitative interviewing

The proposed project will consist of interviews with individuals researching one or more of the conspiracies and conspiracy theories listed above (MK-ULTRA, the JFK assassination, or the Roswell Incident). My interviews will be informed by Kathy Charmaz’s grounded theory,⁵⁸ as well as Irving Siedman’s model of in-depth interviewing.⁵⁹ In this section, I will first outline how the method of in-depth qualitative interviewing has been used in archival studies, with a particular emphasis on user studies in archives; then, I will outline my particular data collection and analysis procedures.

⁵⁷ Yakel, “Thinking Inside and Outside the Boxes,” 155.

⁵⁸ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014).

⁵⁹ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2005).

Several archival studies papers have used in-depth interviewing as method. Duff and Fox⁶⁰ interviewed thirteen reference archivists at two prominent archival institutions. To recruit interviewees, Duff and Fox contacted the heads of the two archives in question and had them circulate the call to their reference archivists. The authors interviewed reference archivists willing to participate using a semi-structured interview schedule in one forty-five minute long session. Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using the qualitative software NVivo, and intercoder reliability was established by each author coding the transcripts separately, and then coming together to discuss their different or similar findings.

Yakel and Torres⁶¹ interviewed twenty-eight archives users in the course of deriving their model of Archival Intelligence. The authors recruited interviewees by posting flyers in-person and online around the University of Michigan, and conducted hour-long semistructured interviews with respondents.⁶² The authors transcribed the interviews and analyzed them using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti, coding the data according to both the existing literature on archival user expertise and statements from interviewees themselves.⁶³ Drawing from this model, Duff, Yakel, and Tibbo⁶⁴ examine the inverse question--what is the knowledge needed to be an adequate reference archivist? In this mixed methods study, the authors interviewed twenty-eight users of both academic and government archives, and conducted an online survey of reference archivists. For the interviews, the authors recruited participants using flyers and email invitations for users of academic archives, and approached government archives users in person,

⁶⁰ Wendy Duff and Allyson Fox, "You're a Guide Rather than an Expert': Archival Reference from an Archivist's Point of View," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 27, no. 2 (February 9, 2007): 129–53.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," *The American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 51–78, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.66.1.q022h85pn51n5800>.

⁶² *ibid.*, 61–62.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁴ Wendy Duff, Elizabeth Yakel, and Helen Tibbo, "Archival Reference Knowledge," *The American Archivist* 76, no. 1 (April 1, 2013): 68–94, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.76.1.x9792xp27140285g>.

using snowball sampling in both cases to identify more interviewees. The authors recorded, transcribed, and removed all identifying information from the interviews. To analyze the data, the authors conducted a content analysis on the transcriptions, using the Archival Intelligence model as a framework.⁶⁵

Although Duff et. al examined users of government archives as well as academic archives, the sample size for government archives users was much smaller than that of the academic archives users. Overall, users of academic archives have been prioritized in archival user studies over other user groups. More user studies need to be conducted in general, and this project in particular is unique among other studies of archival users in that it attempt to solidify a previously unrecognized and under-examined user group within archives: conspiracist researchers.

Data collection

This project proposes interviewing conspiracist researchers using semi-structured qualitative interviews⁶⁶ informed by grounded theory. First introduced in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss,⁶⁷ grounded theory is a methodological framework in which the researcher approaches their project using techniques that allow for theory to emerge from the collected data. In Kathy Charmaz's words, "...grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves."⁶⁸ The grounded theory researcher initially approaches their research in a typical fashion: forming research questions, developing their instrument (in my case, an interview schedule), sampling participants, and

⁶⁵ Duff, Yakel, and Tibbo, "Archival Reference Knowledge," 72.

⁶⁶ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

⁶⁷ Barney G. Glaser and Amsel L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

⁶⁸ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 1.

collecting data.⁶⁹ Grounded theory work is iterative at its core, and although it is based on the idea of approaching research without hypotheses or concrete theoretical framework(s), it need not be entirely atheoretical.

Intensive interviewing as a grounded theory technique allows the researcher to gather in-depth data on a topic, from the perspective of a finite number of individuals. Interviews are a suitable data collection technique for this project, as they are “..appropriate when the purpose of the researcher is to gain individual views, beliefs and feelings about a subject, when questions are too complex to be asked in a straightforward way and more depth is required from the answers.”⁷⁰ Experiences of research are nuanced enough to warrant descriptions of in-depth experience. In grounded theory interviews, the research participant does most of the talking,⁷¹ and sets the pace of the interview questions.⁷² Interviews, particularly those informed by grounded theory, generate a great deal of dense data that requires intensive researcher experience and time.

Before data are collected, certified UCLA Internal Review Board (IRB) exemption will need to be obtained. I will be recruiting interviewees through online message boards devoted or related to the case studies, including the subreddits r/conspiracy, r/JFKFiles, and r/SpecialAccess. If funding makes it possible, I may also physically travel to the International UFO Museum and Research Center in Roswell, New Mexico, and The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza (which has a reading room and archives) in Dallas, Texas, to take (if these institutions allow) a similar recruitment method to the one used by Duff et. al in government archives--that is, recruit participants in-person. I will also use snowball sampling once I have

⁶⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 18.

⁷⁰ Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*, 205.

⁷¹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 63.

established an initial pool of interviewees for each case study. Non-probability sampling techniques are appropriate for this study, as not much is known about the population in question. I will aim to recruit eight to ten interviewees per subject area.

Whenever possible, I will interview participants in person--but in some cases I will be interviewing remotely using videoconferencing software. The interview structure is a modified version of the three-interview series from Seidman,⁷³ forgoing the first life history interview and shortening the duration of the interviews from an hour and a half to between forty-five minutes and an hour and fifteen minutes. See figure 1 in appendix for the full interview schedule, which details the exact subjects and questions that will be covered in each section. All interviewees will be informed of their rights, give verbal consent, and be informed about the purpose of the study in accordance with UCLA IRB procedure (See fig. 2 in Appendix for the informed consent document that will be given to all interviewees).

Data analysis

Interviews, particularly those informed by grounded theory, generate a great deal of dense data that requires intensive researcher experience and time.⁷⁴ I will transcribe interview data as soon as possible after the interview has taken place, so that I might incorporate or relate observational notes and memos written in the course of the interview with the contents of what has been said during the interview. I plan to organize field notes, memos, and transcriptions chronologically, according to interview session and interviewee. All interviewees who wish their identities to remain confidential will be given a pseudonym at this stage, and original recordings with identifiable information will be destroyed. After transcription of the interview and

⁷³ Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*.

⁷⁴ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 18.

organization of notes and memos, initial coding can begin. If funding makes it possible, I plan to use the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to assist with coding. If no funding is available for the purchase of this software, I will use Google Sheets to code the data (if this is the case, I will transcribe directly into Google Sheets, transcribing one sentence or phrase per cell, to facilitate line-by-line coding).

Creswell suggests that researchers, as they begin to submerge themselves within the data, ask themselves, “What strikes you?”⁷⁵ This overarching question allows for interesting or marked bits of data to come to the surface. Coding as a whole can be considered “...the active process of identifying data as belonging to, or representing, some kind of phenomenon. This phenomenon may be a concept, belief, action, theme, cultural practice, or relationship;”⁷⁶ or, alternatively, “thinking creatively with the data.”⁷⁷ Initial or “open” coding is the first pass through the data, looking for themes or repeated ideas to emerge. These initial codes are often descriptive, rather than analytical, conveying what is happening in the transcribed text in one or two active words.⁷⁸ This is also the phase in which I will create and maintain a codebook, or a list of codes that includes definitions and examples for each.⁷⁹ This codebook will change throughout the iterative stages of grounded theory-informed qualitative analysis. The next stage will be *secondary* coding, in which the initial codes are themselves coded into overarching themes and concepts. These themes and concepts themselves contribute to the ultimate formation of a theory, in my case a model of conspiracist information seeking within archives.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 153.

⁷⁶ Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 174.

⁷⁷ Kirsty Williamson, Lisa M. Given, and Paul Scifleet, “Qualitative Data Analysis,” in *Research Methods: Information, Systems and Contexts*, n.d.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁸⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 47.

Qualitative interviewing informed by grounded theory necessitates constant and consistent researcher reflexivity throughout all stages of the research process, facilitated by memo-writing and journaling.⁸¹ This allows the researcher to also negotiate and be aware of the power dynamics inherent in the activity of interviewing, as well as those that come with gender, professional status, race, and age.⁸² Once I have developed a theory from the data and written up my initial findings, I will perform *member checking*, in which I will run my results and interpretation by research participants so that they can confirm “...whether the findings are an accurate reflection of their experiences.”⁸³ Member checking is one way to establish qualitative validity, confirming that the findings measure and reflect what they are supposed to.

IV. Conclusion: Implications

The goal of this exploratory study is to take the first steps towards theorizing a model of conspiracist information seeking within archives. However, because I will be focusing on only three cases, it may not be generalizable at this stage. The implications for the study remain salient, however. This will be the first project that asks individuals who may have been labeled as “conspiracy theorists” to enumerate and convey their research practices. Rather than dismissing these practices as “wrong,” this study approaches conspiracist information seeking with curiosity, as a *kind* of information seeking. I as a researcher will try to withhold judgement inasmuch as that is possible, by practicing reflexivity. Further, this study will serve as a jumping off point for the development of guidelines for reference archivists to consult when helping someone who may be a conspiracist researcher, or who is merely suspicious of them--how might

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸³ Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 211.

they develop trust with such researchers? Is it possible for conspiracist researchers to change their beliefs as a result of doing research in an archives? Should *changing belief* even be the goal? study will constitute the beginning of a bridge between conspiracist researchers and archives; ultimately making the archive a more welcoming space for conspiracist researchers, and reference personnel more comfortable working with conspiracist researchers. Lending voice to these specific users, and constituting them as a user group, will hopefully allow for reference personnel to more deeply understand conspiracist researchers as researchers *first*.

Appendix

Interview Schedule

PI: Yvonne M. Eadon, UCLA Information Studies PhD Candidate

I will be using grounded theory and conducting semi-structured interviews, so the questions listed in this schedule may not be asked exactly as they appear written here. I would like for research participants to be able to talk about their feelings on the subject of my research without much intervention on my part. This study is exploratory; the data collected in the course of these interviews will inform future research.

The following questions are divided into first and second interview session questions. Each interview will be forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes long. Interviewees will be given the option to collapse the two sessions into one longer session if they choose to. I am modifying the intensive three-interview series from Seidman (2006), forgoing the first life history interview and shortening the duration of the interviews. The first interview session will cover the research participant's background, their research practices with regard to the specific case the interviewee is associated with (MK-ULTRA, JFK assassination, or Roswell incident), broad conceptions of their research practices, and feelings they experience in the course of doing research. The second interview session will cover experiences with information institutions (online and offline), trust in resources, and how they self-identify as a researcher.

Interview Session 1

1. How did you become interested in [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident]?
2. How long have you been researching [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident]?
3. What interests you about [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident] in particular?
4. Have you researched other topics like this one?
5. Are you a part of any groups, online or in person, of researchers looking into this topic? Can you tell me about them?
6. When you want to research a topic, where do you go to get started?
7. When you're starting to research a topic you haven't looked into before, how do you feel?
8. Where do you do your research? Libraries? Archives? Online?
9. When you're in the midst of researching a topic, how do you feel?
10. When, if ever, do you feel like you've finished researching a specific topic?
11. Is there something you would like to add that I didn't ask about?
12. Is there something you would like to ask me?

Interview Session 2

1. What are your feelings about libraries, in general?
2. What are your feelings about archives, in general?
3. Can you describe a specific experience in a library or archive that made you feel that way?
4. What sources of information do you trust?

5. Why do you trust these resources?
6. Can you tell me more about your research habits?
7. What motivates you to keep looking into [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident]?
8. What motivates you to keep looking into other topics?
9. In general, how do you feel about conducting research?
10. What could librarians and archivists do differently when helping you and people with similar research questions?
11. Have you ever been labeled as a “conspiracy theorist”? If so, how does that make you feel?
12. What would you like to be identified as?
13. What advice would you give to someone who is just starting to become interested in researching [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident]?
14. Would you prefer for your name to remain confidential in this study?
15. Is there something you would like to add that I didn’t ask about?
16. Is there something you would like to ask me?

Figure 1: Interview schedule

UCLA Research Study Information Sheet

Yvonne M. Eadon, PhD candidate in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an individual who regularly searches for information and/ or conducts research about [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident]. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

This study will constitute the first few steps in establishing researchers who are interested in conspiracies and/or conspiracy theories (what I call “conspiracist researchers”) as a researcher group within archives, libraries, and online.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in two forty-five minute to an hour-and-fifteen-minute-long interviews over the course of two to three weeks. You also have the option to collapse these two sessions into one 1.5- 2 hour long session, depending on your availability.
- The location of the interview will depend entirely on your preferences, but will be guaranteed to be in a private place where you feel comfortable. The interview may also be conducted remotely.
- Interview questions will be about how you became interested in [MK-ULTRA/ the JFK assassination/ the Roswell incident], how you conduct research or search for information, what your experiences have been like within libraries and archives.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about three hours over the course of one week. Follow-up interviews may be requested via email. Participation in follow-up interviews, like initial interviews, is fully voluntary.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

- There are no potential risks or discomforts.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

This research will help archivists, librarians, other information professionals, and scholars of these disciplines, to understand the specific needs of conspiracist researchers. Ultimately, this research will contribute to the information studies literature around reference and knowledge organization, so that conspiracist researchers may feel more at home or welcome within information institutions.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of the use of pseudonyms for your institution as well as yourself, unless you would like to be named as a research participant. After recordings are transcribed by the researcher, they will be destroyed.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Principal Investigator Yvonne M. Eadon
ymeadon@gmail.com
661-312-7880

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

Please keep this information sheet for your personal records.

Figure 2: Informed consent sheet

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