

YVONNE M. EADON

MLIS PORTFOLIO

UCLA
SPRING 2020
ADVISOR: DR.
SARAH T. ROBERTS

Table of Contents

Issue Paper: “New neutrality and contextual locality: the need for flexible guidelines for providing reference service to suspicious researchers”.....	1
Professional development statement.....	10
MLIS Coursework.....	13
Major Paper.....	15
<i>A Moment of Creepiness: The Imagined Infrastructure of Behavioral Targeted Advertising on Social Media</i>	
Core Paper.....	40
<i>“Useful Information Turned into Something Useless”: Archival Silences, Imagined Records, and Suspicion of Mediated Information in the JFK Assassination Collection</i>	
Elective Paper 1.....	68
<i>The Truth is Out There: Examining Conspiracist Information Seeking in Archives</i>	
Elective Paper 2.....	102
<i>Misinformation & Disinformation: A Review of the Literature</i>	
Elective Paper 3.....	117
<i>Analysis of Pilot Data</i>	
Record of Advising History.....	149
Curriculum Vitae.....	151

Issue Paper
MLIS Portfolio
Yvonne M. Eadon
May 8, 2020

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 Conspiracists³ *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

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).

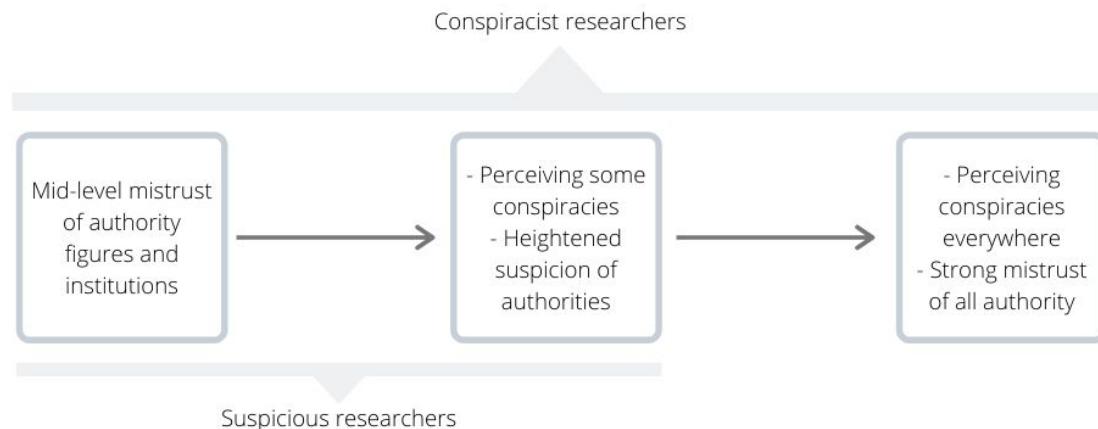


Figure 1: the continuum of conspiracism

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

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 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.

References

- Aaronovitch, David. *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010.
- Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Random House: Vintage Books, 2008.
- Jane, Emma A., and Chris Fleming. *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Milan Konda, Thomas. *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Nguyen, C. Thi. "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles." *Episteme*, 2018, 1–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>.
- Schwartz, J.M, and Terry Cook,. "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory." *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 1–19.
- Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermeule. "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x>.

Professional Development Statement

My research area--conspiracy theorists and their research practices--has a multitude of possible policy implications, including (but not limited to): platform politics, misinformation and disinformation, epistemic communities and information seeking, and critical information literacy. I initially became interested in conspiracy theorizing as a research topic when I realized that very little had been written about the topic within Information Studies. This was surprising to me, as IS literature--specifically, work on information literacy, epistemic communities, institutional power, and information seeking--has so much to say to scholarship on conspiracy theories. Coming from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, media studies, and philosophy, the study of conspiracy theory often asks similar questions about power, epistemology, trust, and truth. My work is some of the first to address conspiracy theorizing from the vantage point of Information Studies, and I would ideally like to continue furthering this research as my career develops.

Once I successfully defend my dissertation in the Spring of 2021, I plan to complete a two-year research post-doctoral position at one of the many research centers in the U.S., such as Data & Society or the MIT Media Lab. A research-based postdoc will allow me to learn and become experienced in different research methods, introduce me to doing research on a team, and make it possible to conduct research that has policy applications. After completing this postdoc, I will choose between one of two paths: a non-academic policy-related researcher position, or tenure-track professorship in an Information Studies program.

The former choice, a nonacademic policy-related researcher position, entails a less concrete plan than the latter. The advantage of going with this career trajectory would be that I could take part in making tangible policy changes in a hands-on way. This could mean working as a government researcher, for a think tank of some kind, or in the technology industry.

If I decide on the latter, I will continue developing my research agenda and goals, which will likely include an expansion of my dissertation work. This will turn into my first book, which I aim to publish within my first three years of assistant professorship.

Although I hope to find a research-focused position, I am also anticipating teaching students who will be earning their Master of Library and Information Science. In my time at UCLA, I have taken many classes with fellow MLIS students, as I have worked toward obtaining

the degree myself. I have been consistently challenged by my peers' thoughtful curiosity and criticism, and would consider myself lucky to be able to guide more cohorts through the intellectual and practical disciplinary training necessary for the MLIS. With the thoughtful help and support of multiple IS faculty and administrators, I was the first student—under the new system—to successfully petition UCLA's Graduate Division to obtain the MLIS and PhD concurrently. I consider myself extremely fortunate to be able to work towards obtaining both degrees, and taking MLIS classes alongside my PhD coursework has significantly expanded my view of the profession, the challenges my peers will have to face in their professions, and the changes they will be making to the field. I have had the chance to work with several cohorts of MLIS students at UCLA, and they are invariably critical of the status quo, technically skilled, and intellectually adept. Beyond the fact that attaining an MLIS will give me the knowledge I need to teach in an information studies program, working closely with a wide variety of fellow MLIS students has educated me as to what their needs are, and what kind of instruction they find most useful.

In my time as an MLIS student, I have had the opportunity to take classes in both archival and library studies, giving me excellent grounding in both aspects of information studies work. I found it particularly enlightening to take IS 260, Description and Access, with Jonathan Furner, and IS 438B, Archival Description and Access Systems, with Kathy Carbone, the following quarter. Although 260 was a core course, and 438B an elective, the former seemed more in line with librarianship, and the latter, of course, with archives. Both classes focused on higher-level theoretical questions (what is information? Why do we need knowledge organization?; what is an archives/ fonds/ finding aid?), as well as more practical skills practitioners need to know in order to conduct their day-to-day work (learning how to use metadata schema like DublinCore and collections management systems like CONTENTdm; working with software like ArchivesSpace to build a finding aid and describing a collection using DACS elements). Taking these classes so close together illustrated two fundamental things to me about LIS education: first, the difficulty inherent in teaching both theoretical and practical aspects of a topic as broad as description and access in the course of a ten-week quarter; second, the deep parallels between archival and library work, and the ways in which knowledge of one expands and deepens knowledge of the other. I will take this understanding with me into future academic work teaching these subjects.

I have also been fortunate enough to gather experience in the field, both prior to my starting at UCLA and during my time here. Before coming to UCLA, I worked at an oral history nonprofit archive, the 1947 Partition Archive, as a digital archivist. During my time at UCLA, I also learned a significant amount during the year (2017-2018) that I worked with Shira Peltzman in the Digital Forensics Lab at UCLA Special Collections. At this job, I got a glimpse into the state of the art of born digital archives, having the opportunity to design [3D-printed housing for a 5.25" floppy disk drive](#), contribute to the award-winning, multi-institution collaborative [Archivists' Guide to Kryoflux](#), and develop guidelines for digital archiving using Forensics Toolkit (FTK). This job gave me extremely valuable hands-on experience in archives.

As a professor, I will also have the opportunity to mentor and advise PhD and MLIS students. The possibility of being able to guide PhD students through their intellectual development, honing my mentorship style, is very exciting for me. The small amount of mentorship I have already engaged in--with PhD students in cohorts below mine--has already been fulfilling for me. Likewise, devoting time to guiding MLIS students through their professional education, and learning from them, would be fulfilling as well.

MLIS Coursework*

Quarter	Class	Units	Grade	Professor
Fall 2016	IS 211: Artifacts & Cultures	4	A	Johanna Drucker
Winter 2017	IS 439: Special Collections	4	A	Johanna Drucker
Spring 2017	IS 462: Subject Cataloging	4	A	Luiz Mendez
Fall 2017	IS 260: Description & Access	4	A	Jonathan Furner
Winter 2018	IS 270: Systems & Infrastructures	4	A	Miriam Posner
Spring 2018	IS 212: Values & Communities	4	A	Ramesh Srinivasan
Fall 2018	IS 289: Readers Advisory	4	A	Melissa Elliott
Fall 2018	IS 431: Archives, Records & Memory	4	A	Anne Gilliland
Winter 2019	IS 438B: Archival Description & Access	4	A	Kathy Carbone
Winter 2019	IS 250: Reference Librarianship	4	A	Marisa Diehl
Fall 2019	IS 434: Archival Use & Users	4	A	Michelle Caswell
Fall 2019	Public Policy 291A: Survey Analysis	4	A	Martin Gilens
Fall 2019	IS 596: Directed Individual	4	S	Sarah Roberts

	Study			
Fall 2019	IS 596: Directed Individual Study	4	S	Gregory Leazer
Winter 2020	IS 213: Current Issues in Librarianship	4	A	Gregory Leazer
Winter 2020	IS 272: Human Computer Interaction	4	A	Leah Lievrouw
Winter 2020	IS 281: Historical Methodology	4	A	Shawn Vancour
Winter 2020	IS 400: Portfolio Design	4	S	Safiya Noble

* Concurrent PhD coursework not included

Yvonne M. Eadon
Information Studies 272
Prof. Leah Lievrouw
March 23, 2020
Coursework: Major Paper

A Moment of Creepiness: The Imagined Infrastructure of Behavioral Targeted Advertising on Social Media

I. Abstract

A few months prior to the Cambridge Analytica Facebook data scandal—and the #DeleteFacebook movement that followed—some Facebook users discussed a more subtle, but related, phenomenon. Users reported in-person, oral conversation with a friend or family member in which a product would come up. In the next few days, that user would see the same product advertised to them on Facebook. Feeling discomfort, users will often conclude that Facebook must be listening to them through the microphone on their smartphones. As a result, many users change their attitude and behavior towards their smartphones, the Facebook service as a whole, and the Facebook app. This qualitative content analysis of a single Reddit thread of 11,000 comments suggests that “creepiness” is a significant factor in some users’ attitude toward Facebook. To theorize this phenomenon, I introduce the terms *moment of creepiness* and *imagined infrastructure*. The former refers to any moment in which an individual is “creeped out” by technology. The latter is a phenomenological perspective on infrastructure: it refers to an infrastructure whose exact structures are ambiguous or hidden, and so must be imagined by those who encounter it at moments of near-breakdown. Facebook advertising can be considered a kind of infrastructure, and the *moment of creepiness* a moment of breakdown. Because human users are an integral aspect of the infrastructure of Facebook advertising, they must behave predictably in order for the system to function as it was designed to. The *moment of creepiness* is a pebble thrown into the cog of the system; the presence of an *imagined infrastructure* in the collective imaginary is an indicator that the infrastructure of behavioral targeted advertising is close to breaking down. When a *moment of creepiness* occurs, the infrastructure reveals its *presence* to the user, but the details of how it functions remain obfuscated. This obfuscation creates space for the details of the infrastructure, e.g., how data is gathered, to be imagined. The new notions of a

moment of creepiness triggering the *imagined infrastructure* function as explanatory frameworks with which to conceptualize and understand an infrastructure that is meant to go largely unnoticed.

II. Introduction

On July 26, 2016, YouTube user “nevilleblackphoto” posted a video in which he conducts a test of sorts to determine whether Facebook is eavesdropping on his verbal conversations. The test consists of Neville discussing cat food with his wife, close to an iPhone, to see if Facebook advertises cat food to them. He claims that he and his wife have never spoken about cat food, and do not own cats. After they discuss cat food close to the iPhone, a cat food ad appears on the Facebook app on the same phone.¹ (N., 2016) The video went viral on Reddit in late October 2017, over a year and a half after it was posted.

Many Reddit users commented that they had experienced the same phenomenon. One user wrote, “I’ve never searched online for belts, never needed to since I had a belt my grandfather gave me years ago that I’ve worn forever. It broke about a week ago, and my wife and I had a conversation about belts and where I’d like to go to buy them, what kinds, etc. Now I’m still seeing Facebook ads for belts. Never looked it up or anything. Pretty creepy, if you ask me.” Another user, who had mentioned buying a pregnancy test in conversation with a friend, stated that, “five minutes later, I got on Facebook and the very top of my news feed was an ad for first response pregnancy tests. And then, during a video I was watching, an ad for the Clear Blue brand of pregnancy tests played. It’s so obvious.” On November 2, 2017, the podcast *Reply All* released an episode titled “Is Facebook Spying on You?” in which they investigate the phenomenon, and speak with people who have experienced it. The episode’s title was the question the makers of the podcast heard the most in the year 2017. In the words of one of the hosts, “...everybody thinks this is true. Including tech journalists who I respect a lot. It’s not just a fringe belief. Everybody thinks this is true.” (Goldman & Vogt, 2017). Even before the 2016 video, however, Facebook put out an official statement titled “Facebook Does Not Use Your Phone’s Microphone for Ads or News Feed Stories,” claiming, “We only access your microphone if you have given our app permission and if you are actively using a specific feature

¹ The findings of the test could easily be faked, but many of the comments on this video and on a viral Reddit thread tell similar stories.

that requires audio.” (“Facebook Does Not...”, 2016). This phenomenon on other social media platforms that employ behavioral targeted advertising as well (that is, nearly all of them), but this paper will focus on Facebook as a case study.

Online behavioral targeted advertising--advertising that uses data recorded about users to tailor specific advertisements to their needs²--is embodied as well as embedded; it is both spatial and algorithmic, at once ambiguous and concrete. Upon seeing an advertisement for a product that has only previously come up in oral conversation, users experience what I call a *moment of creepiness*. This is a moment of recoil, of suspicion, and of imagination. Moments of creepy technology crop up constantly (Rubin 2018), but often users do not change their behavior as a result (Barnard 2014, McAndrew and Kohnke 2016). Behavioral targeted advertising on Facebook functions as an infrastructure that is almost wholly invisible to users, even as users are integral to its existence and functionality. To recognize behavioral targeted advertising as infrastructure is to concretize it; infrastructures behave in predictable ways. In such a way, the *moment of creepiness* itself constitutes a near-breakdown of this infrastructure, because the system no longer functions as it was designed to (many users are not about to go out and buy the product if they are creeped out by the ad for it). I am calling this *near* rather than *full* breakdown, because the nuts-and-bolts of the system continue to work as they should (that is, advertisements are still being pushed to users), but the human element of the infrastructure is disrupted.

For many users, this moment of near-breakdown reveals what I call an *imagined infrastructure*. That is, the infrastructure is visualized, instinctively, to be spatial and physical, reaching into users’ households to record their conversations. As a result of this instinct to imagine the infrastructure, users’ orientations towards specific objects—the smartphone, the Facebook app—change. Social media systems like Facebook are inextricably caught up with the notion of being able to define oneself (Miller, Costa, Hayes, McDonald, Nicolescu, Sinanan, Spuer, Venkatraman and Wang, 2016), and many users consider them a comfortable, familiar online space. For users who have experienced this phenomenon, once-familiar objects, Facebook and the smartphone, may become suspicious. (The relationship between the familiar and the spatial is an important one, which will be addressed in more depth in Section VI. B. “The Phenomenological Perspective.”) These changes in behavior cause the infrastructure to work less

² In this paper, behavioral targeted advertising will always refer to social media advertising.

efficiently, but perhaps not to break down entirely. What Sarah Roberts has called the “logic of opacity,” present in nearly all technology companies (particularly corporate social media entities like Facebook) is unsustainable for infrastructures long-term (Roberts 2018). The *imagined infrastructure* takes on such significance that it ultimately has a tangible effect on the “actual” infrastructure of behavioral targeted advertising.

This paper is organized to move from the tangible aspects of this phenomenon (the *moment of creepiness* and the changes in behavior that result from it) to the less tangible (*imagined infrastructure*). Section III is a literature review of work on “creepiness,” especially as it relates to technology, data, surveillance and privacy. Section IV presents research questions, describes the method of content analysis, and reviews the research design of a qualitative case study. Section V presents the data.. Section VI introduces the notion of *imagined infrastructure* by first mapping behavioral targeted advertising on Facebook onto Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder’s characteristics of infrastructure, and then analyzing users’ behavior through the lens of phenomenology. This allows for a more nuanced analysis of how *imagined infrastructure* bridges the gap between the *moment of creepiness* and changes in perception, attitude, and behavior. Section VII concludes the paper with a policy-focused discussion of how corporate social media’s obscurity came to be so pervasive.

III. Literature Review: Creepy contexts

Joseph Turow has argued that when people, in particular lawmakers, use words like “creepy,” “icky,” and “spooky” to describe behavioral advertising, this demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of how the systems behind behavioral advertising function. When people in power call the practice “creepy,” Turow argues, this demonstrates that they have decided that the problem is not a serious social issue—rather, it has to do with individuals’ psychological and emotional states, which can be written off (2011, 172). Similarly, Frank Pasquale states that “Runaway data isn’t *only* creepy, it can have real costs” (Pasquale 2015, 26; my emphasis). Pasquale and Turow want us to get “beyond” creepiness. I argue that creepiness is, instead, an important factor in and of itself for thinking through issues of datafication and user agency. It can indicate a *seam* of sorts within an infrastructure designed to be fully seamless and opaque (Ratto 2007); and can be a key point at which to study the phenomenology of *embodied interactions* (Dourish 2003). Kennedy, Poell, and Van Dijck (2015) suggest that Big Data and

the ubiquity of social media logics in contemporary society are often discussed as though users are simply *victims* of dataveillance, rather than agents operating within and shaping ever-complexifying systems of datafication. Contemplating agency, they say, is “...fundamental to thinking about the distribution of data power” (2).

Adam Kotsko, in his book *Creepiness*, looks at the concept in the context of popular culture. He suggests that “creepiness” might be the most apt English translation for the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich*. The *unheimlich* can be considered a blanket term that refers to all manner of unsettled feelings, but Kotsko emphasizes Freud’s idea that the term has some innate “ambivalence” to it. The *unheimlich* invokes discomfort and unfamiliarity, but “experientially most often involves something that is *all too* familiar, something that fits *too well*” (Kotsko, 2014, 4). Thinking through the phenomenon examined in this paper, we might designate the “familiar” as the subject of a personal conversation that one has had with a friend or a spouse. When this subject comes up again in an *unfamiliar or unexpected context*, violating contextual integrity, it becomes creepy.

Francis T. McAndrew and Sara S. Kohnke bring a more quantitative psychological perspective to the project of operationalizing creepiness. Their article “On the nature of creepiness” (2016) surveys a population of faculty, students, and staff at an American Midwestern University about what traits in a person they consider to be creepy (11). Their findings indicate that “getting the creeps,” so to speak, is a response to “the ambiguity of threat” (*ibid.*, 14)--that is, when it is unclear whether or not a person or a thing poses a threat. Furthermore, a person may be classified as creepy if they display “non-normative nonverbal behavior,” among other traits that could also be considered non-normative, and thus create an impression of unpredictability. On the other hand, Shkloviski et. al (2014) found that, after they had informed app users of the way the apps were sharing their data, participants overwhelmingly “expressed dismay, even outrage,” but did not change their behaviors or patterns of smartphone use. The authors call for a change in how engineers and designers think about creepiness and privacy as they design apps, suggesting that, “For this, we need a practical theory of creepiness, its varieties, and its temporalities (e.g. does creepiness fade over time with familiarity, and if so, what replaces it?)” (*ibid.*, 2355). The answer to the parenthetical question here—suggested by the authors with the statement: “we are fumbling with the now norms rather than looking to the

[future] where these norms might move as a result of technologies we are developing”—is that our informational norms are not developing in pace with the technology of big data and behavioral advertising, resulting in a disconnect between what users expect from technology and what it is actually doing.

Lisa Barnard's 2014 dissertation, *The Cost of Creepiness: How Online Behavioral Advertising Affects Consumer Purchase Intention* focuses in part on the online marketing practice of behavioral targeting. She defines the practice as “marketers track[ing] consumers’ Internet use and tailor[ing] ads for them based on that behavior.” Barnard theorizes that people find the practice of “retargeting” (in which advertisers show users ads for products they have shopped for previously, on different websites from the original shopping website) creepy (Barnard, 1). She goes on to argue that “perceived creepiness” can increase the perception of a “threat or lack of control.” However, instead of insinuating that creepiness is a result of the perceived ambiguity of a threat, as Kotsko and McAndrew and Kohnke did, Barnard suggests the inverse: that the creepier something seems, the more likely we are to perceive it definitively as a threat. Barnard goes on to suggest that creepiness may factor into “reactance theory,” in which a “persuasive appeal” appears to “threaten a person’s individual freedom,” resulting in a negative reaction to the appeal. This reaction may manifest in behavior changes, including withdrawal from the service. She suggests this may be happening in the cases of behavioral targeting and, especially, retargeting (*ibid.*, 7). Barnard argues that marketers do not take into account that some of their targeting practices are *so* mysteriously relevant to the user that they may stop using services in the same way, or at all (*ibid.*, 40). She states that a threshold exists for people, including “digital natives,” where an advertisement becomes *too* relevant, and users experience negative psychological effects. Ultimately, she calls on marketers to recognize this threshold and attempt to distinguish between relevance and over-relevance (*ibid.*, 91).

IV. Method

In this exploratory study, I performed a qualitative content analysis case study of a Reddit post from November 2, 2017 in which users discuss the video described in the introduction. The virality of the video—as determined by its critical mass of views (see figure 1 in appendix) indicates significance for a large number of people (Varis and Blommaert, 2015; Nahon and Hemsley 2016, 61). The comments in this thread constitute a rich repository of

theorizing (many Reddit commenters propose different ideas about what is happening), strategizing (at several points in the thread, users give each other advice on how to change their settings or delete their Facebook apps), witnessing (many users share their own stories of having experienced the Facebook-listening phenomenon), and debating (commenters hold their theories about what is happening quite strongly—and argue with one another about them).

A. Research Questions

1. Do people feel that the phenomenon in question to be uncomfortable, creepy, or scary?
2. Does an individual need to have a direct, personal experience with the phenomenon to “believe” in it, so to speak?
3. What kinds of debates are going on between commenters?
4. What kinds of behavioral changes (chilling effects) take place as a result of belief in the theory? (i.e. Do users delete or uninstall apps? Do they delete accounts entirely?)
5. What is it that makes this phenomenon *so* creepy/chilling/upsetting that users are changing their behavior as a result of experiencing it?

B. Content Analysis

Researchers have employed content analysis widely as a method for analyzing mass media products, in particular newspapers and television, since the 1980s (Krippendorf 2013, xiii). In the last two decades, scholars have attempted to bring the method of content analysis into the digital realm, facing many challenges in doing so. Hurwitz, Alvarez, Lauricella, Rousse, Montague, and Wartella (2016) have outlined seven challenges that come with online content analysis.

First, there is the problem of the vastness of the content available online. Studying just one platform can prove to be an insurmountable task. I have addressed this in my study by limiting my analysis to a single viral Reddit thread. I do not claim that it is possible to generalize about the opinion of all who have experienced the phenomenon, or even about the significance of the phenomenon, but I do think that it gives a good indication of both. The second challenge, that of finding a suitable sampling frame, is difficult in the digital environment because “published lists of new media products” become outdated nearly immediately. I used a search engine to identify all comment threads or other discussions relevant to my topic, and then sampled one thread, which contained the largest number of comments. This sampling technique is discussed

briefly by McMillan: “us[ing] search engine(s) to identify sites that met criteria related to the purpose of study” (2000, 83). The third challenge stems from the ephemerality of the Internet: how can a researcher sample from something reliably if it is constantly shifting and changing? Hurwitz et al. suggest that this problem can be mitigated by either collecting data in a finite timeline, or by using software to automatically collect data. I chose the former: the data for this project was collected on November 8, 2017, by saving each sub-thread in the larger thread from the browser in PDF form. All 11,000 comments were captured in this way. The fourth challenge, the inability of software to capture some of the nuances of the online environment, is not applicable to this project.

At this point in my research, I am the only person manually coding the thread—another reason that I chose just one thread to work with at this stage. I have addressed the fifth challenge, “deciding how much data to collect from a sampled media product,” by opting to collect all of the data from the sample, as described above. For challenge six, consisting of a decision between breadth (coding using software) and depth (using human coders), I have opted for depth. Challenge seven, verifying that specific populations are consuming the media products that the scholar wants to analyze, is not relevant to the topic at hand: all of the content to be analyzed is a text-based discussion of a certain kind of engagement with targeted advertising, the media product in question.

V. Data

Facebook’s official statement denying that they listen to users does not provide an alternative explanation for the phenomenon of highly specific advertising. Nor does their privacy policy shed much light on what might be going on. The company states that they collect the following user information: full name, email address, demographic information (age, gender), work information, all content created and shared, photo and post metadata, “information that other people provide about you when using the services, including when they send a message to you or upload information about you; all communications with other users of the services;” and feedback provided directly to Facebook (Facebook, *Data Policy*, 2017). They sell this information to third-party providers, and track users using cookies, as well.

We can see the commenters on Reddit wrestling with the lack of information from Facebook—the ambiguity of what has caused the *moment of creepiness*—and formulating opinions about what is going on using their own anecdotal anomalous experiences. One user discusses a medical issue: “I had a urinary tract infection. Didn’t search for remedies or otherwise do anything online in regards to it, but somehow Facebook had ads for all manner of things for UTIs including a walk-in clinic suggestion. I promptly deleted Facebook. Zuckerberg is a creepy stalker.” Another commenter stated:

I’ve never allowed any Facebook app microphone access and I still get ads targeted around my conversations. I do have WhatsApp so that is likely the culprit. I have disabled its microphone access. These are 100% ads targeted about things I have only spoken about and not Googled or searched in any way. One time we kept mentioning pregnancy tests all day just to see if they would appear and lo and behold the next day they did. These are not like Google’s ads, I know Google listens in as well but at least they do only seem to target ads in other apps (such as games) about things I have searched and clicked on. Facebook is creepy specific. (“YouTube User Demonstrates...” Reddit, 2017).

These users are two among many who mentioned they found Facebook creepy and changed their behavior as a result. Both users mention not having searched for anything regarding the topic they were advertised, which indicates that they were aware of the ability that Google and Facebook have to track users in the online environment. These commenters *expected* to be tracked online, but were “creeped out” when this tracking appeared to extend into the offline world. Although an offline/online dichotomy may seem simplistic, the two contexts do have different informational norms. Particularly with contemporary mobile phone capabilities, the online and the offline worlds are blurred (Miller et. al, 101). Yet it is also true that individuals treat online and offline social networks differently, and build them out differently as a result (Williams, 2006). Indeed, one user stated that she clearly thinks of the online and the offline differently: “I’m 100% okay with assuming that my life on the Internet isn’t private, but it is WAY too far when I can’t even have privacy IRL.”

Other users pushed back against the idea that Facebook is eavesdropping on its users oral conversations. One user suggested the following explanation in the midst of one debate: “Machine learning and AI can easily pull together seemingly disparate data and pull together patterns that computer engineers aren’t creative enough to imagine. Long story short, Google and Facebook don’t need overt rudimentary tools to crudely record and store audio. Pattern

recognition and torrents of reams of data of all users across all its platforms is all it needs.” Another user pointed out that, “Big Data and the associated deep learning mechanisms are an amazing thing that is not understood pretty much on almost any level by the average person yet, but they are involved intimately with them every single day.” In reference to a user whose anecdotal evidence of the Facebook-listening phenomenon concerned a discussion about Nest smart thermostats, another user responded:

This story and a lot of similar ones can be explained by location tracking. The advertising networks knew your friend was searching for thermostats. Maybe it was through Amazon or Google or some other site, but advertisers knew about it. Maybe they even know he bought it. Now if they’re tracking their location and your location and happen to see the locations match up, they know this dude has been searching for thermostats and there’s a chance you’ve been talking to him. Maybe he was telling you about the thermostat. In that case, they can decide to target thermostat ads at you (“YouTube User Demonstrates...” Reddit, 2017).

These explanations concern Facebook aggregating and analyzing large amounts of data about a user and his network. Many of the comments in the thread concern a debate between commenters who have had personal experience with the phenomenon and *believe* that Facebook is listening, and those who argue that they can figure out what is happening despite total infrastructural opacity and ambiguity.

Some pro-algorithm users condemn the stories of “believing” users by calling them “anecdotal evidence;” Other users state “this is anecdotal, but here is my story anyway.” One such user presented the following story:

My partner the other day mentioned a certain brand of mattress that’s supposed to be good and that we could look into buying one. I have no problem with our mattress so I didn’t search for it online. I’d also never heard of this brand before. I don’t recall having a mattress advert come up on Facebook before. After she mentioned this brand though, for the next few days I got several adverts on Facebook for this particular brand of mattress. They’re definitely listening. (“YouTube User Demonstrates...” Reddit, 2017).

This user was responding to another user who had condemned yet *another* user for presenting anecdotal evidence, but he doubled down on the fact that he believes this is happening despite qualifying his story as being “anecdotal.” The fact that multiple people are experiencing similar *moments of creepiness*, is itself evidence that the phenomenon should be examined more closely.

Another debate that surfaced in the comments had to do with which explanation was creepier: the notion that Facebook was listening in to conversations, or the idea that the

algorithmic analysis of an enormous database of information about a user and her friend network allows Facebook to draw the same conclusions—in other words, that they don’t “need” to be listening to face-to-face conversations. One commenter suggested that the algorithmic explanation is “both easier and less obviously immoral to implement.” Another commenter responded, “and yet still disturbing.” To these users, the algorithmic explanation is the more “moral” of the two, because users have given their (perhaps uninformed) consent to it. Still other users agreed: “listening to your conversations when idle is far weirder than basing your recommendations on your friends’ activity;” the algorithmic explanation is “not quite as overtly creepy, but either way is pretty bonkers.” (“YouTube User Demonstrates...” Reddit, 2017).

However, other commenters found it to be the opposite, stating that the aggregation explanation is no less creepy than the listening-in explanation: “Aggregating data without my consent is exactly what companies like Equifax do we all know how that turned out;” the algorithmic explanation “is arguably creepier, but not as overt as straight up using the mic;” “is kind of creepier than using your mic;” “even creepier;” “far more creepy and insidious.” Other users are ambivalent about the method of collection: “At this point, who cares HOW it’s happening. It’s happening and it’s creepy. Get out of my living room Facebook.” “Does it really matter if they’re listening or using constant geolocations and IP addresses to track where you’ve been and what you’re doing for ads? It’s all a huge invasion of privacy.” There seems to be a wide range of opinions about where the creepiness stems from, in addition to what exactly the explanation for the phenomenon may be.

Often, changes in behavior result from what an individual thinks Facebook is “doing,” so to speak—that is, how they picture the infrastructure. As mentioned earlier, some commenters, including ones quoted earlier, mention deleting Facebook (either the app or their account), and disabling WhatsApp’s and Facebook’s microphone access, respectively. Other users mention deleting the Facebook and messenger apps on their smartphones, reducing social media use in general “so I can minimize the details they know about me,” deactivating their accounts, turning off all permissions and keeping restrictive privacy settings on the Facebook app, using a separate app called Microphone Blocker to block the microphone access on all apps until they need to use the mic (a camera blocker also exists), and deleting the Facebook app from a Samsung phone (on which it comes pre-installed and is difficult to delete—there is an entire individual comment

thread in the Reddit in which different users guide one another through the process of doing this). (“YouTube User Demonstrates...” Reddit, 2017). Turning off microphone access or disabling *just* the microphone on one’s phone will only have an effect if Facebook is indeed listening. However, even those who believe that Facebook is listening will often take other precautions just in case, such as deleting the app from their phones.

VI. Discussion

A. *Imagining Infrastructures*

Susan Leigh Star (2016) rejects the more technical definition of infrastructure as “a system of substrates,” arguing that a system may be an infrastructure for one person, but not for another (477). With Karen Ruhleder, Star (2016) defines infrastructure according to nine properties: “embeddedness,” “transparency,” “reach or scope,” “learned as part of membership,” “links with conventions of practice,” “embodiment of standards,” “built on an installed base,” “becomes visible upon breakdown,” and “is fixed in modular increments.”

Embeddedness describes the characteristic of infrastructure as it is “sunk into other structures” (Star 2016, 477). Corporate social media in general is built on advertising as its revenue model; in this way advertising is embedded in the system of corporate social media. *Transparency* refers to the notion that infrastructure “invisibly supports” a variety of activities (477). Social media advertising supports the activity of scrolling through a social media feed—often tolerated as the price for being on social media. *Reach or scope* indicates that infrastructure goes beyond “a single event or one-site practice” (477). Certainly, social media advertising is distributed throughout the reach of the social media network itself; not only in terms of the users reached, but also in terms of the different devices on which users access the platform. *Learned as part of membership* refers to the fact that “New participants acquire a naturalized familiarity with its objects, as they become members” (477) Those who have been on social media for a long time are *used* to seeing advertisements and interacting, or not interacting, with them. For a first time user, new to social media, it could be distracting and confusing to see something unfamiliar pop up that, in format, looks quite like the rest of their feed. Of course, this person would also have to be unfamiliar with advertising as a practice in general, suggesting that perhaps there are

layers to membership in corporate social media advertising. *Links with conventions of practice* indicates that, “infrastructure both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of a community of practice” (477). Again, there are layers to this in the case of social media advertising. In the largest sense, conventions of practice of corporate social media exist within and are shaped by capitalism, especially with the drive to continually grow the company. Conventions of practice may also be to blame for the constant attempts to obscure any and all activities carried out by social media giants (again, Roberts’ [2018] “logic of opacity”).

In *embodying standards*, infrastructure plugs in “to other infrastructures and tools in a standardized fashion” (Star 2016, 477-478). Advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, for example, are formatted so that they look like any other post. If the advertisement is a video, the sound will play or not depending on whether or not you have set sound to be on for other videos on the platform. This functions to make advertisements less distinguishable from other posts on the platform. Infrastructure is also *built on an installed base* meaning that it “wrestles with the inertia of the installed base and inherits strengths and limitations from that base” (478). This property is more difficult to apply to advertising on corporate social media. This is in part because it is not clear exactly what the structure of social media advertising *is*, as will be elucidated later on in this paper. As has already been addressed, when infrastructure *becomes visible upon breakdown*, its transparency fails—that is, its presence *as* an infrastructure becomes apparent. Breakdown can reveal more than simply the presence of an infrastructure—often, it also reveals its reach and scope. Finally, infrastructures are *fixed in modular increments, not all at once or globally*. That is, “Because infrastructure is big, layered, and complex, and because it means different things locally, it is never changed from above” (478). Thus, to make changes to the infrastructure of corporate social media advertising, individuals must re-orient themselves to it, making changes modularly on the local level. *Imagining* the way that infrastructure may extend into space is one aspect of doing this.

Where the points of connection between an individual user and the infrastructure of Facebook advertising are, is equally as important as her awareness of these points. One point of contact is her smartphone: its geolocation data, the data shared between the Facebook app and other apps, the Facebook app itself (as well as Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp—all owned by Facebook). Another point of contact is her computer, and the third-party websites for which she has made an account by connecting her Facebook account. Furthermore, her friends and her

interactions with them on these platforms constitute points of contact. And there are many more, of course. However, she may not be aware that these *are* points of contact with the infrastructure of Facebook advertising. And so she imagines a new point of contact.

Importantly, too, those who do not own a smartphone, perhaps because they cannot afford one, do not have as many points of contact with the infrastructure, so they do not experience the phenomenon in question in any sense. They have not learned the *conventions of practice* as part of *membership*. According to Star (1990), those who are not members of a network often view it as a “source of chaos and trouble” because its standards do not conform to their own needs as users. She further argues that any analysis of a network must choose a “point of departure:...does [a given network] represent a stable network, a source of chaos, or a third thing altogether?” (42) Star is here discussing networks rather than infrastructures, but her point that networks can be viewed from different perspectives and function differently stands for infrastructures as well. And as we have seen evidence of already, many Facebook users, upon experiencing a *moment of creepiness*, feel their perception shift: Facebook swings from “a stable network” to “a source of chaos.”

Matt Ratto (2007) problematizes the socio-technical design value of *seamlessness* that is implicit within many systems of ubiquitous computing. Seamlessness is the value upon which certain infrastructural features, especially invisibility, are predicated. In Ratto’s words, infrastructural function is predicated on “a conflation of social, technical, and legal regimes, that, in addition to the technical objects themselves, work to create and maintain a coherent and seamless experience for users” (3). Ratto discusses Chalmers and Galani’s notion of *seamful design*, which argues that seams and boundaries are important for users to understand where they come in and what their particular kind of agency could be. Seams between systems in the infrastructure of behavioral targeted advertising can reveal a lot about the functioning of an infrastructure, its users, and its contexts. Ratto concludes his paper by saying, “...it appears that the seams between systems provide the most opportunity for extending, troubling, and repurposing infrastructures...without knowledge of the boundaries, users may be left with little ability to negotiate the moments of switching between active and passive roles.” The phenomenon at hand in this project is a solid example of a “seam” appearing within a technology that was designed with seamlessness in mind. The positive aspect of users experiencing *moments of creepiness* is that it spurs them into realizing that their agency is determined almost wholly by

the advertising infrastructure in which their data shadow self lives. They may, as illustrated in the “data” section of this paper, come to a realization that they need to take more control over their informational environment. Perceiving this one seam, between the gathering of user data, processing of that data, and reflection back to the user, makes all of the existence of the data processing black box more visible, even as it emphasizes the invisibility of how the infrastructure itself functions. . .

B. The Phenomenological Perspective

Infrastructures direct and guide us through related systems and substrates. Recognizing behavioral targeted advertising as an infrastructure concretizes it in spite of its persistent opacity. Phenomenology allows for an examination of the way this infrastructure is perceived, and how it is spun out into space through the imagination of an individual who experiences a *moment of creepiness*. Thus, the phenomenological perspective will help us to comprehend what exactly about the *moment of creepiness* causes users to see Facebook as chaotic rather than stable. Within the field of Human-Computer Interaction, phenomenology has proven useful for thinking through how technologies are embodied within individualized subjective experiences. Phenomenology, “...points to our action-oriented way of being-in-the-world as determining how we experience the things around us, and it emphasizes the important role that embodiment plays in perception and cognition” (Gallagher 2014). To think through the problem of too-specific behavioral targeted advertising on social media phenomenologically is to understand the effects of design infrastructures that purport to be value-neutral.

Phenomenology, founded as a kind of “radical philosophy” by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, is a descriptive practice. Husserl reacted against both the overly-positivist practices of psychological diagnoses, and the immaterial, intellectualized floatings-about of philosophy. The goal of phenomenology is not to *explain*, but rather to *describe*, in the fullest sense, a phenomenon both as object(s) and as individuals experience it cognitively. This is termed a “reduction” of phenomena to their *modes of givenness*, made again material and spatial, set free from philosophical or other kinds of judgments or assumptions about their nature.

In this case study, the anecdotal nature of some commenters’ experience with too-specific Facebook advertisements, condemned as empirically useless by many of the Reddit commenters, in fact proves to be phenomenologically significant. In the words of Dermot Moran, “...the way

problems, things, and events are approached must involve *taking their manner of appearance to consciousness into consideration*" (2000, 6). Husserl's objective was to understand and describe the "basic structures of consciousness," that influence the ways in which humans perceive objects (Gallagher 2014). For Husserl, intuition was an important aspect of consciousness; it was the embodied experience at the root of all judgment and thought. His Principle of All Principles is as follows: "every *originary presentive intuition* is a legitimizing source of cognition...everything originally (so to speak, in its 'personal' actuality) offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there" (Husserl 1982, sec. 24). That is, intuition is the first step in drawing conclusions about a phenomenon. For this case study specifically, the embodied intuition—the *moment of creepiness*—must necessarily occur before the work of imagining the infrastructure behind the phenomenon can take place.

Imagination, *l'imaginaire*, is significant at certain points and for Husserl and other purveyors of phenomenology. Husserl argues that imagination (or, in his words, "phantasy,") is an embodied experience of an object when it is not present. He calls this a kind of "quasi-perception" (Husserl, 2005). For Jean-Paul Sartre, who drew on empirical psychology for his work in phenomenology (Gallagher 2012, 74), imagination is decidedly *not* a kind of perception. Sartre argues that imagining something is like *intending* it, that is, bringing it into being. Imagining an infrastructure, then, manifests it in some way. However, Sartre claims, the imaginer is always aware that his imagination does not reflect reality except in some circumstances. One of these circumstances, it seems, has to do with imagining that is derived from filling in the blanks, so to speak. Here Sartre cites several "schematic drawings" (Sartre 1948, 41). In reference to a sketch of a man (figure 2 in Appendix), Sartre states,

In these black lines we do not only envision a silhouette, but a complete man, we concentrate in them all his qualities without differentiation: the drawing is filled to the breaking point. But, these qualities are not really *represented*: in fact the black lines *represent* nothing more than some structural relationships and an attitude. But a mere hint of representation is enough for all the knowledge to descend upon it, thereby giving a sort of depth to that flat figure. Draw a man in a kneeling position with arms uplifted and his face assumes the expression of indignant surprise. But you do not *see* it there: it is there in a latent state, like an electric charge (Sartre 1948, 42).

It is in this same way that imagined infrastructure manifests itself in a near-tangible sense. The ambiguity of the actual *shape* of the infrastructure is such that the user can see parts of it—specifically, the output in the form of a too-specific advertisement. Thus, the user imagines what the rest of the infrastructure must be. In particular they give “depth to that flat figure,” by imagining that part of the infrastructure consists of recording in-person conversation—that the infrastructure reaches out, in a sense, from their smartphone into their physical space.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his seminal *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) made the observation that imagining an object or person brings them into being in a partial sense, because the imaginer’s behavior changes as though the object or person is in their presence. In giving an example of imagining a friend, Peter, Merleau-Ponty muses:

When I imagine Peter absent, I am not aware of contemplating an image of Peter numerically distinct from Peter himself. However far away he is, I visualize him in the world, and my power of imagining is nothing but the persistence of my world around me. To say that I imagine Peter is to say that I bring about the pseudo-presence of Peter but putting into operation the ‘Peter-behaviour-pattern’ (Merleau-Ponty, 181).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, changes in behavior themselves constitute manifestation of the presence of the imagined. Those who experience the *imagined infrastructure* (that is, those who imagine the infrastructure) act differently toward actualized objects that are part of the Facebook advertising infrastructure—the smartphone, the app, the service itself. Thus, the imagined infrastructure is functionally brought into being.

Importantly, too, phenomenology has always resisted, at various levels and times, the positivist tenet that objectivity exists. Instead, phenomenology “attempts to provide a rigorous defence of the fundamental and inextricable role of subjectivity and consciousness in all knowledge and in descriptions of the world.” (Moran, 15). Sara Ahmed has brought this notion into conversation with queer theory in her 2006 monograph *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed gives us some useful ways to think about what it means for a body to be *orientated* in space, towards objects, and how that relates to familiarity with a space or an object. Ahmed draws mostly on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty for her discussion of phenomenology, arguing that there are many “queer moments” of disorientation within the discipline already. Thinking through orientation and disorientation, Ahmed writes, “In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation. When we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated: we might not even think ‘to think’ at this point. When we experience

disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have.” (5-6) In the case of the phenomenon in question, disorientation occurs at the *moment of creepiness*. Immediately, users are disorientated towards their mobile devices. They will re-orient once *imagined infrastructure* manifests in their consciousness, but it will be in a very different way.

For Ahmed, orientation, familiarity with space, and “feeling at home” are inextricable. Spatial orientation is particularly important: “Familiarity is shaped by the ‘feel’ of space or by how spaces ‘impress’ upon bodies. This familiarity is not, then, ‘in’ the world as that which is already given. The familiar is an effect of inhabitance, we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach” (7). Smartphones, part of both the imagined infrastructure and the “true” infrastructure of Facebook advertising, exist for many as exceedingly familiar objects--particularly as they are designed often with the implicit value of *seamlessly* fading into the background of daily life (Ratto 2007). We pick up our smartphones to check email, text, etc., almost unthinkingly. In that sense, we are always orientated towards our phones—many individuals constantly know where their smartphones are located, and become anxious when they are temporarily lost.

Indeed, smartphones are considered to be objects of informational agency. Shkloviski, Mainwaring, Skúladóttir, and Borgthorsson (2014) suggest that smartphones are, among other things, functionally “about projecting and constructing the self” (2348). Certainly, smartphones present an opportunity for self-determination through social media, etc., but they also may limit our agency. We constantly produce large amounts of data from our smartphones, and in that way we create a secondary layer of personhood that exists within and around the smartphone-object, our “data shadow” so to speak. The uncanny *moment of creepiness* is one of recognition, when we see our data-shadow-self reflected back at us through an advertisement. The familiar smartphone-object, in which we feel “at home” in some sense, has its everyday comfort revoked by the ultra-familiarity of the advertisement, the unexpectedness of the reflection. The *moment of creepiness* therefore has as much to do with an unexpected encounter with dis/embodied identity as it does with feelings of violated privacy.

Spatiality is fundamental to the phenomenon in question, particularly with respect to the *imagined infrastructure*. It is relevant in a concrete sense as well: many of the conclusions drawn by the system (that your friend bought a product, and so you would be interested in that product)

are most likely related to geolocation data. That is, the system is “aware” when an individual is having lunch with a friend, because the two smartphones are physically close together.

Michel de Certeau’s (1984) ideas about spatiality are also relevant for this project. He introduced the notion that any designed system cannot be fully controlled by those who designed the system. Inevitably, it will be encountered and activated by users in unanticipated ways. Those who walk around the city write the “urban text.” They operate within the established, designed framework of streets and alleys, but cannot be directed in any specific way beyond that framework. As a collective, the walkers define the city itself. The streets of the city are an infrastructure, but that infrastructure is not activated into a *space*, a *city*, until the walkers walk through it in unpredictable ways. This notion can be applied to advertising, as well. Stephanie O’Donohoe states that, “Advertising texts are inherently polysemic; while text and context place some constraints on readings, they are open to multiple and not necessarily consistent or compliant interpretations” (2001, 95). Even within a structured text *and* a structured context, a multiplicity of consumer behaviors follows from a multiplicity of interpretations. Yet, the entire purpose of advertising infrastructure is to guide consumers to buy products. This is one reason that the *moment of creepiness* can be considered a semi-breakdown of the advertising infrastructure—because it is no longer guiding users in the way it was designed to. In de Certeau’s words, “To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*.” Practicing space, therefore—activating an infrastructure—can be ambivalent: joyful as well as dissonant. Imagining an infrastructure functions as a kind of amplified activation.

It is important to note here the significance of the notion of text versus context. In a 2003 article, Paul Dourish questions whether or not designers’ positivist conceptions of context are doing productive work. He particularly draws attention to the given positivist notion that context exists as a separate entity from activity/content: in this view, context, which “describes features of the environment” provides the static setting for the activity or content. Presenting an alternative view of context, not positivist but also not fully phenomenological, Dourish suggests that context and activity should be taken together, as one entity: “*context arises from the activity*. Context isn’t just ‘there,’ but is actively produced, maintained and enacted in the course of the activity at hand” (2003, 22). Considering “activity/content” to be analogous to “text,” we might conclude that Dourish’s notion of *embodied interaction* is similar to de Certeau’s “walking the

city:” the planned *text* (the city) is activated by the activities and contexts of users. In conceptualizing *activity* and *context* separately, designers of behavioral targeted advertising infrastructure did not predict the effects of too-specific advertisements. In practice, geolocation data--viewed by designers as purely *contextual*--turns out to be indistinguishable from the *activity* of a verbal conversation with a friend. Designers of the Facebook advertising infrastructure treating them as separate entities may be one root of the phenomenological issues outlined in this section. However, it bears recognizing that embodied interaction is, in some sense, unpredictable. Is it even possible to design *seamfully*, with embodied interaction in mind?

Ahmed argues that space not only shapes bodies, but that bodies also shape space. The spatial nature of the imagined infrastructure is significant. It is the way that a body’s orientation is able to affect space: by bringing an imagined infrastructure, functionally, into existence through quasi-perception and behavioral changes. It is not only the immediate space of the individual in relation to her phone that is affected by the imagined infrastructure—the extant infrastructure is affected as well. So many imagining the infrastructure in the same way, and changing their behavior in relation to points of contact with the infrastructure in similar ways, inevitably has an effect on the infrastructure as a whole. Thus, not only are individual users affected by the infrastructure of targeted behavioral advertising on Facebook, but the infrastructure is also itself affected by the imagination of it extending into physical space. Users have become suspicious of the system, their orientation and behavior towards it has shifted to the point that it no longer behaves as it was designed to.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the tendency of technology companies to keep their systems in total obscurity contributes to infrastructural failings. The *moment of creepiness* in which a user sees an advertisement for a product that had recently come up in an in-person conversation is the catalyst for that same individual to *imagine an infrastructure* in which their smartphone is actively listening to them. This imagined infrastructure is spatial, due in part to the fact that infrastructures are generally spatial entities. The behavioral changes that result from this imagining of infrastructure, or any other kind of theorizing, necessarily affect the system as a whole as each module (in the form of an individual user) changes the way that they interact with

both their smartphone and with Facebook as a service. Facebook took a risk by building such a powerful and obscure infrastructure, in the name of growing the company, and it has seen some consequences from this, such as Mark Zuckerberg's having to testify before congress in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Wichter 2018).

Several paths for further research into this topic exist. First, a more robust study would analyze continuing conversations about smartphone eavesdropping that have taken place since 2017. Further, some larger questions could be answered in a deeper inquiry: is it possible to design an infrastructure that remains opaque to users *seamfully*, as Ratto (2007) suggests? Alternatively, can an infrastructure that must function within logics of opacity (Roberts 2018) ever be built using critical technical practice (Boehner et. al 2005)? Can it ever be built upon a design value like social justice? On a separate note, what do other imagined infrastructures look like? Can imagined infrastructures exist where no original infrastructure exists at all? Is obscurity-opacity always needed for an imagined infrastructure to come about? Are imagined infrastructures only manifest in relation to technology? Many other questions could and should be asked regarding this subject. In the end, it is imperative that we recognize that because of this phenomenon, the infrastructure of Facebook advertising has faltered—a sign of hope in the face of the enormous power wielded by such companies.

Appendix

Number of views per date for "Facebook Listening iPhone..." YouTube video

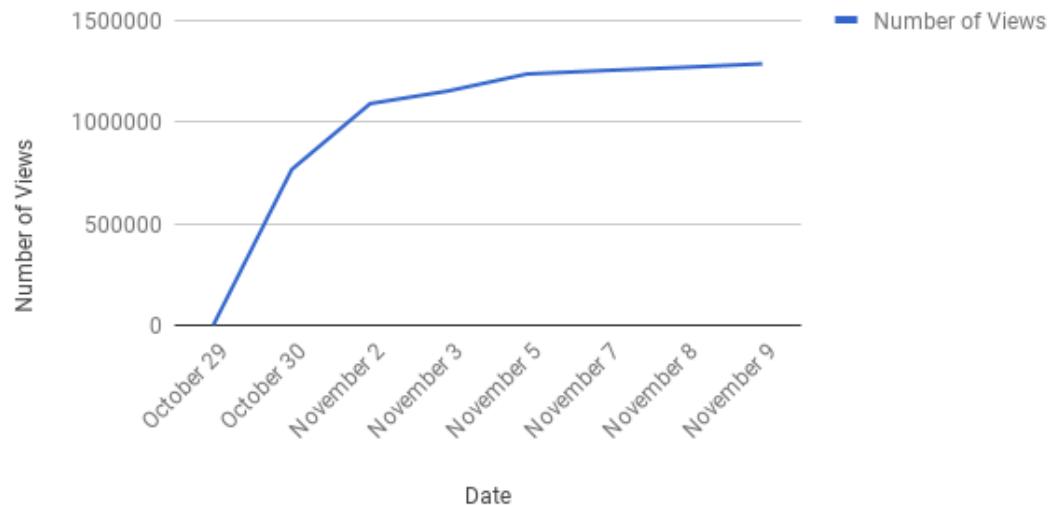


Figure 1: Cumulative views per day of “Facebook Listening iPhone...” video. Starting value on Oct 29 is 2,514 views.



Figure 2: Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 1940.

References

- Barnard, L. (2014). *The cost of creepiness: How online behavioral advertising affects consumer purchase intention* (Ph.D.). The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States -- North Carolina. Retrieved from
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1545897557/abstract/43AF97CB30BB4553PQ/1>
- Boehner, Kirsten, David Shay, Joseph Kaye, and Phoebe Sengers. "Critical Technical Practice as a Methodology for Values in Design." In *CHI 2005 Workshop on Quality, Values, and Choices*. Portland, Oregon, 2005.
- De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Dourish, Paul. "What We Talk about When We Talk about Context." *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 8, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00779-003-0253-8>.
- "Facebook." Data Policy, www.facebook.com/policy.php.
- Facebook Does Not Use Your Phone's Microphone for Ads or News Feed Stories. (2016, June 2). Retrieved from <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/h/facebook-does-not-use-your-phones-microphone-for-ads-or-news-feed-stories/>
- Gallagher, S. (2012). On the Possibility of Naturalizing Phenomenology. *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199594900.013.0005. 74.
- Gallagher, Shaun. "28. Phenomenology." In *The Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction*, 2nd ed. Denmark: Aarhaus, 2014. <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/phenomenology>.
- Goldman, A. and Vogt, P. J. (Hosts) and Pinnamaneni, S., Bennin, P. and Marchetti, D. (Producers). (2017, November 2). *Is Facebook Spying on You?* [Audio podcast]. Retreived from <https://gimletmedia.com/episode/109-facebook-spying/>.
- Hurwitz, Lisa B., Aubry L. Alvarez, Alexis R. Lauricella, Thomas H. Rousse, Heather Montague, and Ellen Wartella. 2018. "Content Analysis across New Media Platforms: Methodological Considerations for Capturing Media-Rich Data." *New Media & Society* 20 (2): 532–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816663927>.
- Husserl, E. (1982). *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. F. Kersten. The Hague: Nijhoff.

- Husserl, E. (2005). *Phantasy, image consciousness, and memory*. Trans J. Brough. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kennedy, Helen, Thomas Poell, and Jose van Dijck. "Data and Agency:" Big Data & Society, December 14, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951715621569>.
- Kotsko, A. (2014). *Creepiness*. Washington, D.C: Zero Books.
- Krippendorf, Klaus. n.d. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Lambert, A. (2016). Intimacy and social capital on Facebook: Beyond the psychological perspective. *New Media & Society*, 18(11), 2559-2575. DOI: 10.1177/1461444815588902
- Latzer, M., Just, N., & Saurwein, F. (2012). Self-and Co-Regulation: Evidence, legitimacy and governance choice. In M. E. Price, S. G. Verhulst, & L. Morgan (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Media Law*. (pp. 373–397). Routledge.
- McMillan, S. J. 2000. "The Microscope and the Moving Target: The Challenge of Applying Content Analysis to the World Wide Web." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77 (1): 80–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900007700107>.
- Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., ... Wang. (2016). Online and offline relationships. In *How the World Changed Social Media*. London, UK: UCL Press.
- Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nahon, K., & Hemsley, J. (2014). *Going viral*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- N. (2016, July 29). Facebook iPhone Listening into our Conversations for Advertising TEST. Retrieved November 2, 2016, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0SOxb_Lfps&t=36s
- O'Donohue, S. (2001). Living with ambivalence: attitudes towards advertising in postmodern times. *Marketing Theory*, 1(1), 91–108.
- Pasquale, F. (2015). *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms that Control Money and Information*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ratto, Matt. "Ethics of Seamless Infrastructures: Resources and Future Directions." International Review of Information Ethics 8, no. 12 (2007).
- Roberts, S. T. (2018). Digital detritus: 'Error' and the logic of opacity in social media content moderation. *First Monday*, 23 (3).
- Rubin, P. (2018). Eye tracking is coming to VR sooner than you think. What now? In *Wired*, March 2017 issue. <https://www.wired.com/story/eye-tracking-vr/>.

- Sartre, J.P. (1948). *The Psychology of imagination*. New York: Philosophical Library, Inc. 41.
- Shlovski, I., Mainwaring, S. D., Skúladóttir, H. H., & Borgthorsson, H. (2014). Leakiness and Creepiness in App Space: Perceptions of Privacy and Mobile App Use. In *Privacy*. Toronto, ON.
- Star, S. L., & Ruhleder, K. (2016). Steps toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces. In *Boundary Objects and Beyond* (pp. 377–415). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Star, S.L. (1990). Power, technology, and the phenomenology of conventions: on being allergic to onions. *The Sociological Review*, 38 (S1). 26-56. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.1990.tb03347.x.
- Star, S. L. (2016). The Ethnography of Infrastructure. In *Boundary Objects and Beyond*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. Retrieved from
<http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/articleDetails.jsp?arnumber=7580150>.
- Turow, J. (2011). *The Daily You*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Turow, J. (2012). Self-regulation and the construction of media harms: Notes on the battle over digital “privacy.” In M. E. Price, S. G. Verhulst, & L. Morgan (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Media Law* (pp. 485–500). Routledge.
- Varis, P. and Blommaert, J. (2015). Conviviality and collectives on social media: Virality, memes, and new social structures. *Multilingual Margins* 2(1). 31-45.
<http://www.epubs.ac.za/index.php/multiling/article/view/50/48>.
- Wichter, Zack. “2 Days, 10 Hours, 600 Questions: What Happened When Mark Zuckerberg Went to Washington.” The New York Times, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/technology/mark-zuckerberg-testimony.html>.
- Williams, D. (2006). On and Off the ’Net: Scales for Social Capital in an Online Era. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2). 593–628. DOI: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00029.x
- “YouTube User Demonstrating How Facebook Listens to Conversations to Serve Ads” /r/Videos. Reddit, 25 Oct. 2017,
www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/79i4cj/youtube_user_demonstrating_how_facebook_listens/

Note: The following paper was originally written for the core course Information Studies 260: Description and Access, taken with Prof. Jonathan Furner in Fall 2017. In January 2018, it was presented at the Kenneth Karmiole Symposium in Archival Studies, “[dis]memory, [mis]representation & [re]figuring the archival lens: A Symposium on Visual Archives & Forms of Representation.” The paper was then published in 2019, in the special issue of *InterActions: Journal of Education and Information Studies* that came out of this symposium.

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

“Useful Information Turned into Something Useless”: Archival Silences, Imagined Records, and Suspicion of Mediated Information in the JFK Assassination Collection

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7pv1s9p7>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 15(2)

ISSN

1548-3320

Author

Eadon, Yvonne

Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed

The Kennedy assassination is nearly synonymous with the notion of conspiracy theory. For those who make it their business to theorize about the events of and subsequent to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the details matter most: Was his brain stolen, or his body swapped, before the autopsy? Was Lee Harvey Oswald a CIA operative? Was the man who killed him a mafia hit man? What about the smoke that appeared on the grassy knoll—could it have been from a rifle, or was it simply from a passing vehicle? The official narrative states that Oswald was the lone assassin of President Kennedy, coming at the behest of the famously fraught investigation propagated by the Warren Commission. Many people do not believe it could be so simple, however—conspiracy theorists latch on to details that seem like evidence of a cover-up (the trajectory of the bullet, Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination while in the hands of police, etc.), and proceed to suggest that Oswald was a Russian agent (or alternatively, a CIA agent) who had to be taken out, for example (Aaronovitch, 2010, p. 129). Countless conflicting unofficial and official narrative explanations of the event exist. These narratives can sway one another. For example, Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* (which promoted the idea that the CIA, FBI, and the military were involved in covering up the assassination) influenced public opinion to such an extent that legislative action ensued. *The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Act of 1992* mandated that all records relating to the assassination be consolidated at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and made available to the public. The records that could not be declassified immediately—for security and privacy reasons—were to be held in a protected collection at NARA for 25 years, maximum (S.3006 - 102nd Congress, 1992). Almost all of this protected collection was released by or soon after October 26, 2017, leaving roughly one percent of the collection classified.

Some user groups of online government archival databases are more conspiratorially minded¹ than others. Such user groups think about and interact with government documents in a unique way—with what I call *suspicion of mediated information*—which should be thought about by archivists, particularly those working

¹ By “conspiratorially minded,” I mean they are inclined to suspect conspiracies, not that they are inclined to perpetrate them.

with collections of high conspiratorial value. The concept of archival silences (established by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and taken up by Michelle Caswell, Simon Fowler, David Thomas, Valerie Johnson, and others), coupled with Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell's notions of *imagined records* and *impossible archival imaginaries*, provides a conceptual framework for this project by making it possible to talk about the productivity of silences in archives. My case study of the JFKFiles subreddit (/r/JFKFiles) illustrates how users can react to these silences with *suspicion of mediated information*, often filling them with imagined records. In the 2017 document release of the JFK Assassination Collection, poor scan quality and lack of adequate searchability function as silences, alongside and within one another, contributing to users' *suspicion of mediated information*. Users direct this suspicion towards the originating institutions (FBI, CIA, etc.), NARA, its archivists, or the government in general—anyone who could have possibly interfered with or manipulated the information. The community also attempts to band together to problem solve. /r/JFKFiles is grappling with the same kinds of problems that archival scholars and practicing archivists are facing in regards to digitization—archivists can learn from this group of users just as the user group could learn from archivists.

II. Literature Review: Scholarship on Conspiracy Theories

Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming (2014), who have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of “folk sociology,” argue that conspiracy theorizing is, in some sense of the word, *reasonable*. But there is a disconnect between this mode of sense-making and the heavily mediated socio-political-technological contemporary world. This disconnect fosters anxiety and makes conspiracy theorizing seem to be an even more viable way to explain the mysteries of modern life and its layered mediations. In their words, Jane and Fleming argue that:

. . . we live in an age in which the vast bulk of knowledge can only be accessed in mediated forms which rely on the testimony of various specialists. Contemporary approaches to epistemology, however, remain anchored in the intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment. These demand first-hand inquiry, independent thinking, and a skepticism about information

passed down by authorities and experts. As such, we may find ourselves attempting to use epistemological schema radically unsuited to a world whose staggering material complexity involves an unprecedented degree of specialization and knowledge mediation. (p. 54)

Although not cited, this notion strongly evokes Michael Buckland's notion of contemporary society as a *document society* (in contrast to the oft-invoked "information society"), in which humans rely on increasingly mediated forms information, often in the form of documents (Buckland, 2017, p. 11). If conspiracy theorizing could be considered a result of the disconnect between Enlightenment attitudes and increasingly mediated information resources, then examining a community of conspiracy theorists in terms of how they relate to information institutions and the resources they provide access could shed some light on how this epistemological disconnect manifests in practice.

In this literature review, I address the history of conspiracy theory scholarship, the difficulty of defining "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory," and the gap between scholarship on conspiracy theory and information studies/ archival studies, concluding with a brief discussion of how this paper will attempt to bridge that gap.

Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, is a seminal text in the study of conspiracy theory. In Hofstadter's (2008) view, conspiracy theorists see conspiracies as motivating most significant historical events, and the "paranoid style" as a particular mode of perception and expression (p. 8). Hofstadter discusses his theory in relation to secret societies (the Masons and Illuminati), conservative politics contemporary to his time, religion, and nativism. To him, "What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts . . . but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events" (p. 37). Karl Popper (1974) took a somewhat similar, if rather more extreme, view of conspiracy theories in his work. Totalitarianism, Popper argues, grew out of conspiracy theories rooted in racist, nativist, and/or generally bigoted ideologies. His "conspiracy theory of society," suggests that conspiracy

theorizing was a manifestation of exactly the *opposite* of the aim of the social sciences—to discover truth (pp. 94–96).

Jovan Byford (2015) takes a similar viewpoint of conspiracy theories, arguing that the term itself is “evaluative,” and necessarily pejorative because of the ideological and political severity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, he claims that the characteristics of conspiracy theorizing tend to remain stable over time, showing that the rhetoric and perspective of contemporary conspiracy theorists is not meaningfully different from those writing in the previous two centuries (p. 5). He goes on to characterize conspiracy theorize as consisting “. . . of a warped explanatory logic that is not amenable to rational debate. This is why conspiracy theories cannot be eradicated either through the creation of a more transparent government, or through any conventional means of persuasion . . .” (p. 155). Byford here presents quite a narrow definition of what conspiracy theories are and how they function in society. Rob Brotherton (2017) similarly defines a “prototypical conspiracy theory” as “an unanswered question; it assumes nothing is as it seems; it portrays the conspirators as preternaturally competent; and as unusually evil; it is founded on anomaly hunting; and it is ultimately irrefutable” (p. 11). If we define conspiracy theories as Byford and Brotherton do—in terms of their irrefutability, among other cultural characteristics—how can we discuss those phenomena that may not be so prototypical, or do *not* contain Byford’s particular kind of “warped explanatory logic”? How do we spot a *real* conspiracy theory, rather than something that might be related to the phenomenon, displaying the same or similar characteristics? Besides, is it indeed true that improving government transparency makes absolutely *no* impact on conspiracy theorists?

Hofstadter, Popper, and Byford all treat the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing as a *prima facie* problem. Scholars such as Lance deHaven-Smith question this stance, asking whether or not this treatment of conspiracy theorizing as all-bad could be damaging in and of itself. Certainly, politicians and others holding seats of power have often used the pejorative nature of the label “conspiracy theorist” to their advantage, by branding critics as such (deHaven-Smith, 2013, p. 9). DeHaven-Smith argues that using the label as a general put-down for individuals and groups of people who are suspicious of government

damages democracy, by solidifying the notion that elected officials never collude (p. 10). DeHaven-Smith devises an important point—that not all conspiracy theories should be labeled as such or considered on equal footing. The term “conspiracy theory” lumps many different kinds of suspicion and paranoia together, quickly becoming unwieldy.

Matthew R. X. Dentith discusses this very problem from a philosophical standpoint, designating the opposing viewpoints outlined above the *generalist* versus the *particularist*. The generalists—Hofstadter, Popper, and Byford—consider conspiracy theorizing in general to be irrational, believing that conspiracy theories can be assessed as a broad category of phenomena. On the other hand, particularists—namely deHaven-Smith)—argue that conspiracy theories are varied, diverse, and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. To conduct such analysis, however, it is necessary to have a more general definition of the phenomenon, so that each case might be considered without the pejorative cultural connotations.

At its broadest and most basic, a conspiracy involves a group of people planning something in secret. Dentith (2014) defines a conspiracy along these lines 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 minimize public awareness of what they are up to, and 3. The Goal Condition—Some end is or was desired by the agents” (p. 23). According to these conditions, anything from a surprise party, to the assassination of a politician, to the plotting of several governments towards a new world order could be considered a conspiracy, as long as all three conditions are satisfied. Dentith goes on to define *conspiracy theory* as “any explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause” (p. 30). This is a perfectly general definition, and is indeed devoid of the functional and cultural characteristics associated with conspiracy theories and theorists, as outlined briefly by Byford and Brotherton. It allows, however, for conspiracy theorists to be discussed in terms of their myriad actions and beliefs, not simply their political, historical or cultural function. It is possible, therefore, to talk about conspiracy theorizing as a phenomenon in and of itself, rather than defining it according to common, if not universal, cultural characteristics.

Quite a few scholars working on conspiracy theories discuss the relevance of information *problems* in the study of conspiracy theories, but they often fail to cite any kind of information studies literature. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009), for example, argue that belief in conspiracy theories is caused by a “crippled epistemology” on the part of the conspiracy theorist, which is a result of “a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational resources” (p. 204). In addition to the disturbingly ableist terminological choice, this generalist perspective lacks epistemological nuance. What determines the relevance of an informational resource? Who has access to which resources? What role does epistemology play in such questions of access and relevance? Information scientists have wrestled with and written about these questions for decades—and yet Sunstein and Vermeule cite none of this literature.

Fran Mason’s (2002) exploration of Fredric Jameson’s notion that conspiracy theorizing is the “poor person’s cognitive mapping” is another perspective that skirts the purview of information studies. Breaking down the phrase, Mason acknowledges the strangeness of the use of the colloquialism “poor person’s,” given that Jameson was a Marxist (p. 45), and defines “cognitive mapping,” as such: “a means by which the individual subject can locate and structure perception of social and class relations in a world where the local no longer drives social, political, and cultural structures or allows the individual subject to make sense of his or her environment” (p. 41). Conspiracy theorizing, therefore, is a particular kind of postmodern cognitive mapping that produces a map of another world—a parallel world perhaps—constructed of misunderstandings of relationships (p. 40); or, indeed, “maps neither conspiracy nor society but provides a map of itself and the subjectivity that created it” (p. 53).

The hegemony implied in the term “poor person’s” references access to knowledge and information, in addition to class and status. Mason (2002) points out that Jameson is necessarily making a distinction between legitimate knowledge and illegitimate knowledge, or knowledge that is “real” and knowledge that is “ideological” (p. 44). Indeed, within conspiracy theorist culture, knowledge functions as a unique kind of object:

"knowledge" of the conspiracy seemingly gives the subject a position of independence and authenticity outside the domain of the conspiracy and its world of ignorance, control, and inauthenticity The conspiracist 'subject-outside-history' sees him- or herself as free of the information systems controlled by the conspiracy, government, or secret society and sees subjects inside history and society as constructs of "alien" information systems in which thoughts, values, and beliefs do not originate with the subject." (p. 50)

Here, "information systems" is not used in the information-science technical sense; rather, Mason's notion of an information system seems to refer to official stories or narratives, which take on many forms: media articles, collections of government documents, books, etc. From the conspiracy theorist's perspective, people who believe the official story become a part of it, and thus are folded into the supposed conspiracy itself, if involuntarily. Indeed, Mason posits that conspiracy theorists don't view their theories ". . . as narratives, but as histories . . ." (p. 44) returning us to the idea that many people who might be quickly labeled as "conspiracy theorists" do not view themselves as such, but rather think of themselves as researchers and investigators. The emphasis on individuality, the valorization of knowledge possession/ production, and the official/unofficial and legitimate/illegitimate dualities again recalls the disconnect between Enlightenment sense-making and the modern world discussed by Jane and Fleming. Mason points out the immensity of the difference in epistemology between those who are inside the system (sheeple, so to speak), and those who exist out of it (conspiracy theorists). The conspiracy theorist has a kind of meta-viewpoint, which informs all of their information seeking habits and patterns.

The final chapter of Stacy Wood's (2016) dissertation, "Making Secret(s), The Infrastructure of Classified Information," addresses one conspiracy theorist community, ufologists, and the possibly forged Majestic-12, or MJ-12 documents that purport to be documentary evidence of the 1947 extraterrestrial incident in Roswell, New Mexico. Addressing conspiracy theorists' relationship to evidence, Wood argues, "The enactment of conspiracy theory culture revolves around an almost fever like excitement around the accumulation and presentation of

evidence, and typically an attempted adherence to the aesthetics and style of argumentation of widely accepted rhetorical standards" (p. 138). In such a way, evidence takes on a particular kind of significance within conspiracy theorist communities. Searching for it, finding it, and presenting it as a method of convincing skeptics all figure prominently in many conspiracy theorists' agendas. Wood also addresses, directly, 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" (p. 144). I similarly argue in this paper that silences, particularly in government archives, affect how archival user groups prone to exhibit *suspicion of mediated information*, and/or other kinds of conspiratorial thinking, receive declassified information.

Wood's dissertation is some of the only work that touches on conspiracy theory scholarship from an evidence-centered archival/information studies perspective. Many scholars who study epistemology as it relates to conspiracy theorizing fail to engage with information studies issues, despite their applicability: Jane and Fleming touch on something akin to Buckland's document society; Sunstein and Vermeule come close to discussing what constitutes access and relevance; and Mason, through Jameson, tackles the notion of the legitimacy of certain kinds of knowledge. Beyond the stated thesis of this article, my goal is to bring conspiracy theory scholarship and information studies scholarship into conversation with one another, so that they might inform archival praxis and theory.

As this literature review has shown, conspiracy theories/ists are complex, both rhetorically and epistemologically. So as to concentrate on the epistemological aspects of conspiracy theorizing, and to attempt to avoid the rhetorical pitfalls pointed out by deHaven-Smith (2013), I will be using "conspiracy theorist" and "conspiracy theory" sparingly²—instead, referring to *suspicion of mediated information*. Here, I use "suspicion" as a step below paranoia; something we are all

2 When I do discuss conspiracy theories directly, I will be using Dentith's definition of a conspiracy theory, which will allow for discussion of conspiracy theories free enough from cultural and political associations so that each theory might be considered individually, on a case-by-case basis.

capable of feeling in the day-to-day. Coupled with “mediated” and “information,” however, the term evolves. “Mediated information” refers to any form of information (particularly information-as-thing, which denotes objects, like data and documents, that have the quality of being informative [Buckland, 1991]) perceived to have been interfered with, duplicated, copied, or at all otherwise changed from its original form. Mediation as referring to *perception* of interference is significant—for, it could be argued that all information is mediated and that original forms do not exist.

I will also be drawing on Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman’s (2008) model of paranoia, which they define as “acts of interpretation gone awry” (p. 109). Freeman and Freeman argue that paranoia exists in a kind of pyramid, with negative feelings about oneself and others being the foundation (Fig. 1). I disagree with Freeman and Freeman that conspiracy theories belong only at the very top of the pyramid—in the implied *most paranoid* section (or indeed, that low self-esteem always results in paranoid thinking). Rather, I believe that conspiracy theories can be thought to exist on a spectrum parallel to and informed by the paranoia hierarchy. This is exploratory work, and thus the spectrum of conspiracy theory is in very early stages; for the purposes of this paper, *suspicion of mediated information* exists towards the bottom of the pyramid; reasonable in its own way, but also a potential building block to other forms of paranoia and conspiracy theorizing. Introducing and deploying the concept of *suspicion of mediated information* will foreground epistemology in my analysis of how archival silences and imagined records function in the JFK assassination collection.

III. Thinking Through the Framework of Silences

All archives contain both available records *and* archival silences. Silences can manifest as gaps within a collection, barriers to access, redactions, classified documents, etc. Particularly within collections of conspiratorial significance, like the JFK assassination collection, such silences can engender *suspicion of mediated information* among user groups and individual users. That is, even the documents that are available become subjects of suspicion. Within collections of conspiratorial significance, therefore, archival silences take on a particular

weight, as they can affect the ways in which users perceive extant, especially recently declassified, documents. This section will first look at silences as they relate to history-making, and subsequently as they relate to archives, in particular, government archives.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1997) introduced a framework for thinking about silences in his seminal *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Silences, he argued, enter history-making at four critical points: ". . . the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)" (p. 26). These four silences could be said to exist on different levels of mediation, the fourth silence being the most highly mediated—original documents having been mediated by the archivist, the archival institution, and further synthesized by the historian. Silences corresponding with levels of mediation in such a way is not inexorable and depends on the collection. Indeed, Trouillot emphasizes that the framework itself is not all-inclusive, and should not be mapped onto all means of historical production uncritically; instead, the four silences ". . . help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner . . . any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly" (p. 26). This recalls the particularist approach to conspiracy theories, that it is often more productive to address a specific conspiracy theory (or, in some instances, a group of conspiracy theories) in terms of its unique characteristics, rather than the as a general group of phenomena.

Recall, too, that Mason (2002) asserts conspiracy theorists do *not* think of their theories as theories, or narratives, but rather as *histories* (p. 44). Chronology, the primary organizing principle of history, has been critiqued continuously in the twentieth century; but Marine Hughes-Warrington (2013) suggests that chronology is only limiting if we see it as singular. Hughes-Warrington contends that histories and revisions to histories must be thought of as simultaneous, rather than sequential. She argues that histories can be stopped, redirected, reversed—

indeed, history can go in several directions at once, and is “many things at the same time” (p. 119). Furthermore, framing history in terms of the reasonableness or rationality of its writers does not always affect how such histories are received or put to use in different contexts: history-making is always an ethical activity. Indeed, she states, “Professional training does not mean that audiences will listen respectfully, and reasonableness does not always silence those of ill will. There is never a definitive word in history making; there is only the tumult, dynamism and troubles of a textual world in which the unrelenting, merciless demands of decision making rest with us” (p. 120). But the “demands of decision making,” rest not only with the historian, but also with the archivist—whose territory is not the fourth of Trouillot’s silences (the making of history), but rather the second (the making of archives), third (the making of narratives) silences, and sometimes even the first (the making of sources), as we will see.

Silences can enter the archive when records are destroyed, never created, kept secret, forged, appraised or de-accessioned out of a collection. In the words of David Thomas, Valerie Johnson, and Simon Fowler (2017): “. . . it has become accepted that archival silences are a proper subject for enquiry and to view the absence of records as positive statements, rather than passive gaps” (xx). Importantly, too, we know that archives are not complete, preserved, static portraits of history. Sue McKemmish (2016) suggests that records are physically stable, but their potential to be pluralized, or, brought into new contexts, shifts over time and is interminable.

Scholars and legislators alike have suggested that the declassification of the Kennedy records may be the only way to “restore the people’s trust” in the American government (President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Act, 1992). Not only does this attitude ignore marginalized groups of Americans who have never trusted their government nor felt protected by it, but it also oversimplifies and fails to recognize the power of conspiratorial (and other) narratives to pluralize official records and their silences. Recall that, according to Byford, declassification almost never has a significant impact on the patterns of conspiratorial thought, even when it might challenge some accepted narratives. In the article “Records and their imaginaries,” Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell (2016)

argue that the declassification of the JFK assassination collection will not quell conspiracy theorizing, citing the power of mistrust in government and the enduring influence of Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Caswell and Gilliland introduce the concepts of 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" (p. 53); 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" (p. 60). Due in part to the long-term silence of their 25-year classification, the JFK records have already been imagined, and these imagined records pluralized, in myriad ways prior to declassification. In such a way, doppelganger counterparts to the declassified records exist and are mapped before they are ever released. Their existence is imbued with a particular significance, and it seems almost natural that users would react to the declassified collection—different from its archival imaginary, often in a disappointing way—with *suspicion of mediated information*.

As Wood argues, classification constitutes a major source of silence in government archives. Government secrecy has the potential to constrain knowledge production, and to create and maintain deep power imbalances (Aftergood, 2009). Simon Fowler argues that unchecked classification "damages the institution of the archive. Archivists and users need to be vigilant to ensure that as many documents as possible are available for public access. The worst Silence of the Archive is secrecy" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 29). Although, arguably, classification is not the absolute worst kind of archival silence, Fowler's point—that secrecy upends the way that archives function—remains salient. The principle of "More Product, Less Process," also known as MPLP (Greene & Meissner, 2005), has a similar thesis and has had an enormous impact on archival praxis as a whole. Greene and Meissner suggest that, to combat the problem of enormous unprocessed collection backlogs, archivists need to sacrifice some degree of quality to process and make collections accessible more quickly.

However, declassifying documents too quickly poses privacy issues, while digitizing documents too quickly can pose problems of legibility and searchability. Furthermore,

declassifying large caches of documents at once has aroused suspicion in some online conspiracy theorist communities. For example, a thread in the subreddit /r/conspiracy discussing a cache of declassified CIA documents about telepathy and clairvoyance, consisted of some users calling into question the size of the cache of documents. One user wrote, “Oh great, a 90,000 page disinformation campaign to keep people focused on magical nonsense instead of what’s real.” Another responded, “But, what if it’s both? Holding a grain of truth, and only now just released to indeed distract the masses from a bigger thing.” Declassification, which may initially seem to be the *opposite* of archival silence, is turned on its head by this particular research community’s *suspicion of mediated information*; the suspicion here being that the government (and the archivist-mediators that did the declassifying) is using declassification of a particularly interesting or weird collection as a tool to distract or detract from a different—more important, and more conspiratorial—event or subject.

Declassification thus itself poses a challenge to conspiracy theorist communities, as they try to make sense of the practice in the context of what they tend to see as threatening and subversive motives on the part of the declassifying institution. Indeed, Kalev Leetaru (2008) suggests that it is much more valuable to consider the number of times poorly scanned documents show up in a collection, rather than putting too much emphasis on “anecdotal discovery” of one example. This does not take into account the way that conspiracy theorist user groups work. A single anecdotal discovery of a poorly scanned document can be a significant occurrence for a community of conspiracy researchers like those on the JFKfiles subreddit. Considering the epistemological differences between user groups matters: one group may react with no surprise at an anecdotal discovery of a poorly scanned document; a more conspiratorially minded group may see it as suspicious. Declassifying institutions and their archivists should familiarize themselves with the audience of a given collection, in order to assess whether or not that audience may be prone to suspicion. Decisions about *how* to declassify can be informed by such familiarity with a user community.

The JFK assassination can be considered what Hughes-Warrington (2013) has called an historical “bright-spot” (p. 119)

—it is, and always will be, highly contested and continually analyzed and re-analyzed. In general, the system of classification and declassification found in U.S. government archives disrupts the taken-for-granted dominance of chronology in history-making—new information contained in declassified documents almost seems to necessitate revision. For my case study, it initially *seems* as though declassification should put into motion a revision of the manifold imagined histories around the assassination. But because of the proliferation of archival silences, and the ease with which imagined records fill such silences, the burden of truth, proof, and trust is put on the materials and the archivists who arrange them and make them available. Although the amateur JFK assassination researchers of /r/JFKFiles can access documents immediately, many levels of mediation still exist in the online environment. Indeed, each of Trouillot’s four silences exists on a different level of mediation—more and more silences do indeed enter history making as primary sources are mediated further and further. The *suspicion of mediated information* that arises from the peculiar mix of entrenched impossible archival imaginaries and inevitable archival silences blooms easily in this collection, even at the first two levels of silence. As we will see, any aspect of the collection that proves challenging or acts as a barrier to access may function as an archival silence.

IV. Method

This project is a case study that explores how members of a specific community of users on a small subreddit (a forum section of the bookmarking site “reddit.com”) interact with, use, and collaborate around NARA’s 2017 record release. Although documents continue to be released in batches, I will be concentrating on NARA’s October-November 2017 release of 31,334 digitized documents that were previously classified in full or in part, and the accompanying discussion on the subreddit. The subreddit—titled “JFK Files”—consists of about six thousand Reddit users. I quote directly from the subreddit, but I do not include usernames, and I have changed key words to keep users as anonymous as possible. The data from the subreddit were collected in October and November 2017.

V. Data and Discussion

I will focus on two digitization problems faced by JFKfiles users: difficulty reading the documents (legibility) and difficulty searching the documents (searchability). These digitization problems constitute archival silences at the moment of fact assembly/ the making of archives. Both creating new digital documents through scanning, and arranging these documents in an online database are a kind of fact assembly, although one could argue for document scanning as a kind of fact creation. With each of Trouillot's four existing on a different level of mediation, it follows that, reacting to the silences in the online collection, the /r/JFKfiles user group exhibits *suspicion of mediated information*.

Poor scanning is a silence that, like Trouillot predicted, does not fit neatly into his framework. It functions both at the moment of fact creation/ source-making and the moment of fact assembly/ archive-making. The digitized document is a new and separate entity from its paper counterpart, which itself may be a copy of a copy of the original document. From that perspective, the illegibility of scanned documents seems to constitute the first kind of silence, at the moment of fact creation/source-making. However, is not the purpose of scanning a document and re-making it in digital form to create a collection of such digitized documents, to be made available online? The silence of poor scanning exists somewhere in between the first and second of Trouillot's silences.

Discussions of illegible documents are frequent in the JFKfiles subreddit. One commenter presented figures 2 and 3 as an example of a heavily redacted document, stating, "nice way of redacting a document without actually redacting it: make it illegible. On the official NARA website, the most important documents (marked 'Formerly Withheld In Full') are mostly totally illegible. All of them are just awful photocopies. Deliberate?" In this instance, the commenter draws a connection between the import of the document and its lack of legibility. The silence of illegibility becomes suspicious when coupled with metadata that indicates that the document in question used to be classified in full, especially when this pairing occurs with multiple documents, as the commenter here implies. Perceived importance, coupled with a perceived pattern, turns into

suspicion of mediated information here: the commenter openly suggests that this silence of illegibility was intentional, rather than a result of the size of the collection or lack of adequate staff (which other commenters do argue could be the reason behind poor scanning).

Other users, in different threads, make similar arguments. A user posted Figure 4, commenting: “Why scan so many film negatives after they were indecipherably photocopied into uselessness?” Another user responded, “They’re pretending to be transparent, while actually releasing worthless information. Useful information has been turned into something useless.” To the quoted users’ minds, it is quite possible that the archivists and the agencies that created the documents conspired to make them unreadable, but not officially redacted. As predicted by Gilliland and Caswell, declassification by itself—as a generalized action—did nothing to stop suspicion directed towards NARA or the originating agencies. The silence of illegibility as it manifests in a particular document thus plays a part in fostering both *suspicion of mediated information* and the continuation of an imagined JFK assassination archive. As long as silences exist within the JFK assassination collection—as they always must—imagined JFK assassination records will live on, *through* the triggering of suspicion of mediated information in conspiratorially minded users. *Suspicion of mediated information* casts doubt on the originating institutions, NARA, the archivists and/or other personnel involved with the collection, their motivations, and their actions and choices made when scanning and arranging the collection.

These users, as we have seen, rest some of their suspicions on what Leetaru (2008) would call “anecdotal discovery” of something that appears anomalous. Freeman and Freeman (2008) highlight the importance of what they call “anomalous experiences,” which they argue can, for some people, trigger paranoia—anomalous experiences are “odd and unsettling feelings” that result when we “don’t understand what’s happening to us” (p. 90). Experiencing anomaly, even if it is not a direct “anomalous experience,” can be emotional. Rob Brotherton presents the umbrella man, a well-known part of the JFK conspiracy theory canon, as an emblematic anomalous detail. The umbrella man is a figure, visible in a few frames of the Zapruder film, who held a black umbrella open and aloft as

President Kennedy's motorcade passed. Once he was noticed, theories proliferated about what he was doing there: many speculated that he could be the second shooter, and there was a gun hidden in his umbrella. Years later, the umbrella man himself testified before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, and it was found that he was in fact protesting Kennedy's father's support of Neville Chamberlain, who tacitly supported Hitler (Chamberlain was known for carrying a black umbrella). Errol Morris's (2011) short film about the umbrella man puts forth the notion that any detail of an event can appear anomalous—even suspicious—when scrutinized deeply. With so many JFK assassination records having already been imagined, even just one poorly scanned document may take on a similarly anomalous sheen, triggering suspicion.

Users of the JFK Files subreddit also frequently discuss how to search the files. As of October 2018, NARA has not yet provided a searchable database of the 2017 documents, nor have they indicated any plans to do so. Confusingly, they *do* provide a searchable database for other parts of the JFK assassination collection, most of which is not digitized. The newly released digitized documents are presented in an online spreadsheet-style database, made up of item-level descriptive metadata, visible in Figure 5.³ Documents can be sorted according to any metadata category, ascending or descending. When a user clicks on the metadata category they want to sort by, the spreadsheet automatically sorts the entries in ascending order, so that blank or ambiguous entries will come up first. Not only does this arguably make the experience of exploring the collection confusing, it presents users exploring the collection *immediately* with anomalous entries. Indeed, the way that the user who pointed to Figures 2 and 3 discovered the pattern of illegibility in previously classified documents could easily have been by sorting by the metadata category “Formerly Withheld” (whose values are “in full” and “in part”). The way the collection is arranged, therefore, is itself an archival silence, squarely on the second level, that of fact assembly/ archives-making. This silence hinders usability, highlights other silences and anomalous details (in this example, illegibility), and ultimately cultivates

³ I am using Jeffrey Pomerantz's (2015) definition of metadata as a “statement made about a potentially informative object.”.

users' suspicion of mediated information.

In the *JFKfiles* subreddit, the users have turned their *suspicion of mediated information* into something productive—in attempting to gain control over the documents in the collection, some users in fact begin to mediate information themselves. */r/JFKFiles* users often discuss how to make the documents text-searchable. One user created a text-searchable database using Optical Character Recognition (OCR). The user admits it “gets a lot wrong, but should help navigate the archive.”⁴ Admitting to an imperfect system, the user who created the tool effectively removes responsibility from himself as a mediator. Any suspicious documents found on his website (*AssassinationFiles.net*) are a result of either the poor legibility of the documents or the imperfection of OCR as a tool. Rather than recommending it as an alternative to the database accessible on NARA’s website, this user presents *AssassinationFiles.net* as a tool to be used alongside or in conjunction with NARA’s database. Another user similarly combined the tools provided by NARA with his own by downloading the metadata database and then changing some of the values, in order to increase subject-searchability. The users in this subreddit appropriate the tools they find useful from NARA, and discard those that are not useful. Their suspicion towards the institution becomes productive for their own goals.

In a different, earlier, thread, another user proposed that, because of the difficulties in OCR-ing the documents, post-OCR transcription would be preferable for accuracy’s sake: “There’s really no substitute for a good old-fashioned combing through the whole thing, proofreading what the OCR did and fixing it . . . It’s an enormous undertaking but it either has to be done the right way or not at all.” Such a project would harness collective intelligence from *within* the */r/JFKFiles* community, keeping the mediation internal and thus making it more trustworthy than outside, unseen mediation. Illegibility seems to be outside of the control of this community, but they act as though searchability might be something they can understand and potentially control.

In the words of David Aaronovitch (2010), “Conspiracy

⁴“AssassinationFiles.net - OCR/Full-Text Search of 2017 Declassified Files. *r/JFKFiles*.” Reddit. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/JFKFiles/comments/7ipz6y/assassinationfilesnet_ocrf ulltext_search_of_2017/

theory may be one way of reclaiming power and disclaiming responsibility" (p. 169). In part because the silence of poor searchability exists on the second silence level of fact assembly/archive-making, users are able to usurp control over the documents to some extent, appropriating the tools made available by NARA for their own use. The silence of illegibility, however, existing as it does somewhere in between the first and second levels of silence, is more difficult for users to gain control over. In both instances, *suspicion of mediated information* in and of itself constitutes a kind of control, as it is a subversion of the accepted narrative and the powerful institutions from which it originates.

VI. Conclusion

Suspicion of mediated information, as we have seen, is one kind of user reaction to an encounter, especially an anomalous one, with an archival silence(s). It is made significantly more likely by the notoriety, over-analysis, and conspiracy-theory-laden historical narratives of the JFK assassination and its aftermath. Silences, like records themselves, are pluralized and take on different meanings in different contexts. Every archive creates silences, but the silences in the JFK Assassination Collection are of a particular ilk, immersed as they are in a history of secrecy and conspiracy theory. Digitizing documents and making them available online increases access, but also creates more layers of control and mediation. Each layer of mediation—copying documents, scanning documents, and arranging them online—engenders one or more of Trouillot's silences. With the addition of *suspicion of mediated information*, such silences can in turn be pluralized into imagined records imbued with conspiratorial significance. Indeed, when a collection has been classified for so long and so many impossible archival imaginaries inform its existence, every impediment to usability and understanding *functions as a silence*, and may seem to users like a thinly veiled strategy for maintaining secrecy while feigning openness. The unique reasoning and research style of conspiratorially minded researchers, characterized by trust in their own community and skepticism towards and suspicion of institutions, is significant and should be considered critically by archivists and archival scholars alike.

Collections of such conspiratorial significance as the JFK assassination collection are rare, but other collections exist with some measure (those having to do with UFO sightings, for example). As we have seen, conspiratorially significant collections have implacable impossible archival imaginaries associated with them, and these inform how silences are received by users, often stimulating *suspicion of mediated information*. Although I would not necessarily advise that archivists attempt to minimize silences (for how exactly would one do that, when they are inevitable?), I do encourage working towards awareness of how a collection might be received, decontextualized, and recontextualized according to a user's suspicion. I encourage archivists to seek out communities like /r/JFKFiles that are relevant to their collections: the needs such communities discuss and creative solutions they devise could be informative as archivists consider how to improve online collections. This could be a first step towards more frequent communication between users and archivists online, which could also assuage some of the suspicion directed towards archivists as individuals, if not the institutions for which they work. *Suspicion of mediated information* is only the bottom of the nascent pyramid/continuum of conspiracy theories, so understanding how it relates to information-gathering practices can potentially shed light on the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing as a whole.

References

- Aaronovitch, D. (2010). *Voodoo histories: The Role of the conspiracy theory in shaping modern history*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Aftergood, S. (2009). Government secrecy and knowledge production: A survey of some general issues." In *Government secrecy: Classic and contemporary readings*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Brotherton, R. (2017). *Suspicious minds*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma.
- Buckland, M. (2017). *Information and society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Buckland, M. (1991). Information as thing. *Journal of the American Society of Information Science*, 42(5), 351–360.
- Byford, J. (2011). *Conspiracy theories: A critical introduction*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- DeHaven-Smith, L. (2013). *Conspiracy theory in America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Dentith, M.R.X. (2014). *The philosophy of conspiracy theories*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freeman, D. J., & Freeman, J. (2008). *Paranoia: The 21st century fear*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gilliland, A. J., & Caswell, M. (2016). Records and their imaginaries: Imagining the impossible, making possible the imagined. *Archival Science*, 16, 53–75. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9259-z>
- Greene, M. A., & Meissner, D. (2005, Fall/Winter). More product, less process: Revamping traditional archival processing. *The American Archivist*, 68, 208–263.
- Hofstadter, R. (2008). The paranoid style in american politics. In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Random House: Vintage Books.
- Jane, E. A., & Fleming, C. (2014). *Modern conspiracy: The importance of being paranoid*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Leetaru, K. (2008). Mass book digitization: The deeper story of Google Books and the Open Content Alliance." *First Monday*, 13(10). Retrieved from

http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/rt/printerFriendly/2_101/2037f

- Mason, F. (2002). A poor person's cognitive mapping. In P. Knight (Ed.), *Conspiracy nation: The politics of paranoia in postwar America*. New York: NYU Press.
- McKemmish, S. (2016). Recordkeeping in the continuum: An Australian tradition. In A. J. Gilliland, S. McKemmish, & A. J. Lau (Eds.), *Research in the archival multiverse* (pp. 122-160). Clayton, Australia: Monash University Publishing.
- Morris, E. (2011). The umbrella man. www.nytimes.com, November 11. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000001183275/the-umbrella-man.html>
- Pomerantz, J. (2015). *Metadata*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Popper, K. (1974). *The Open Society and its enemies: The high tide of prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (5th ed., vol. 2). London, UK: Routledge.
- S.3006 - 102nd Congress (1991-1992): President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992. n.d. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/senate-bill/3006>
- Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and Ccres*. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2), 202-27. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x>
- Thomas, D., Johnson, V., & Fowler, S. (Eds.). (2017). *The silence of the archive*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1997). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Wood, S. (2017). Making secret(s): The infrastructure of classified information (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles.

Appendix

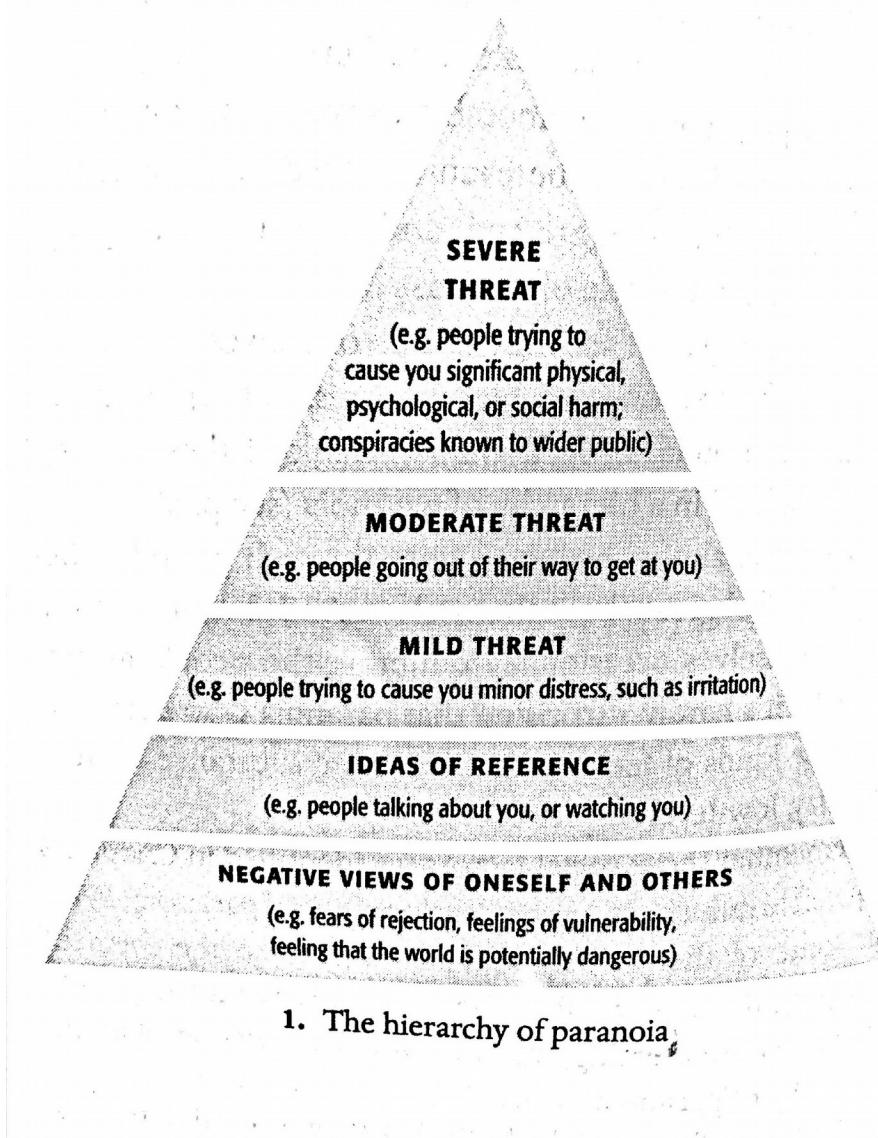


Figure 1. Daniel and Jason Freeman's Hierarchy of Paranoia (Freeman & Freeman, 2008, p. 80).

104-10271-10414

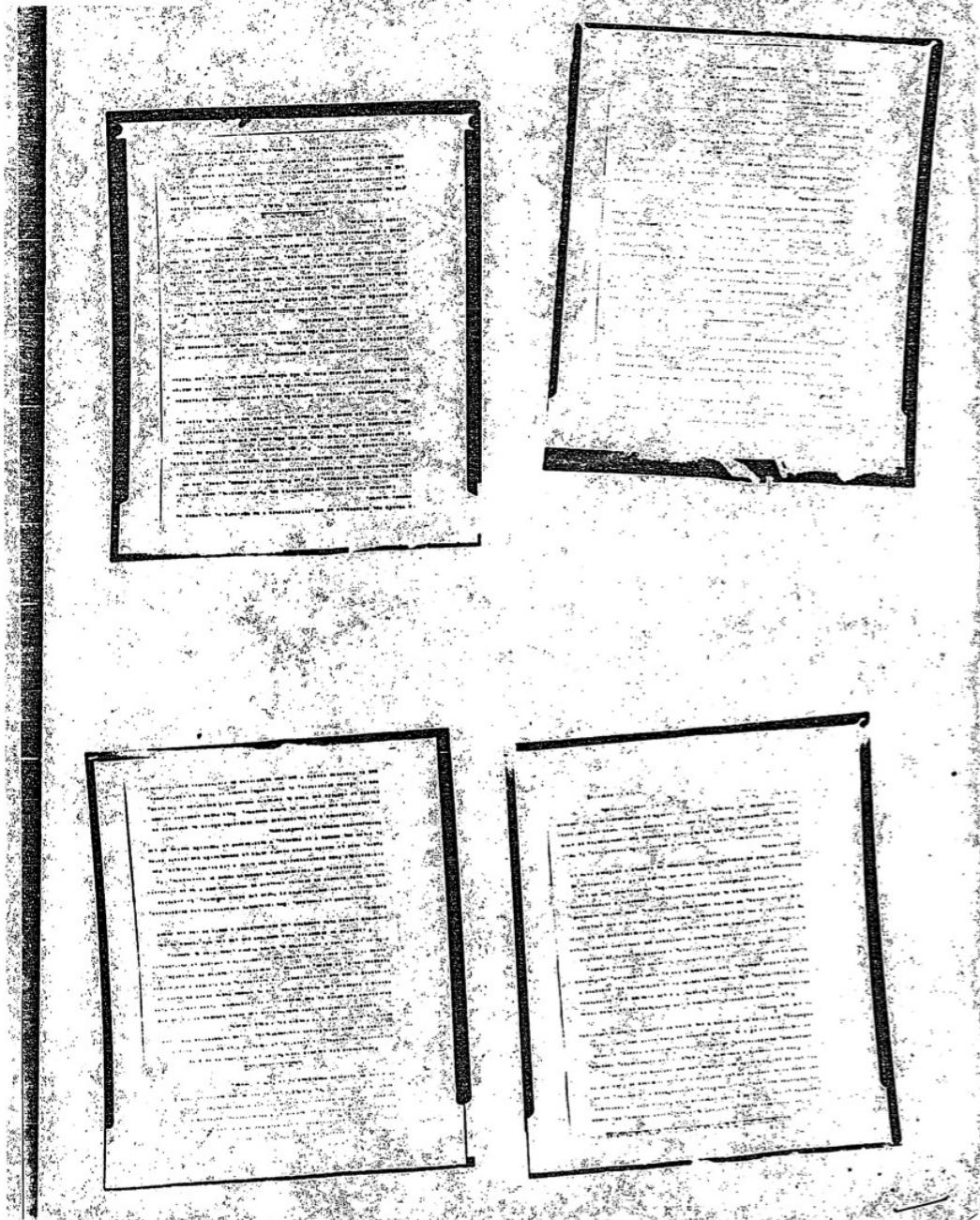


Figure 2. Document 104-10271-10414.

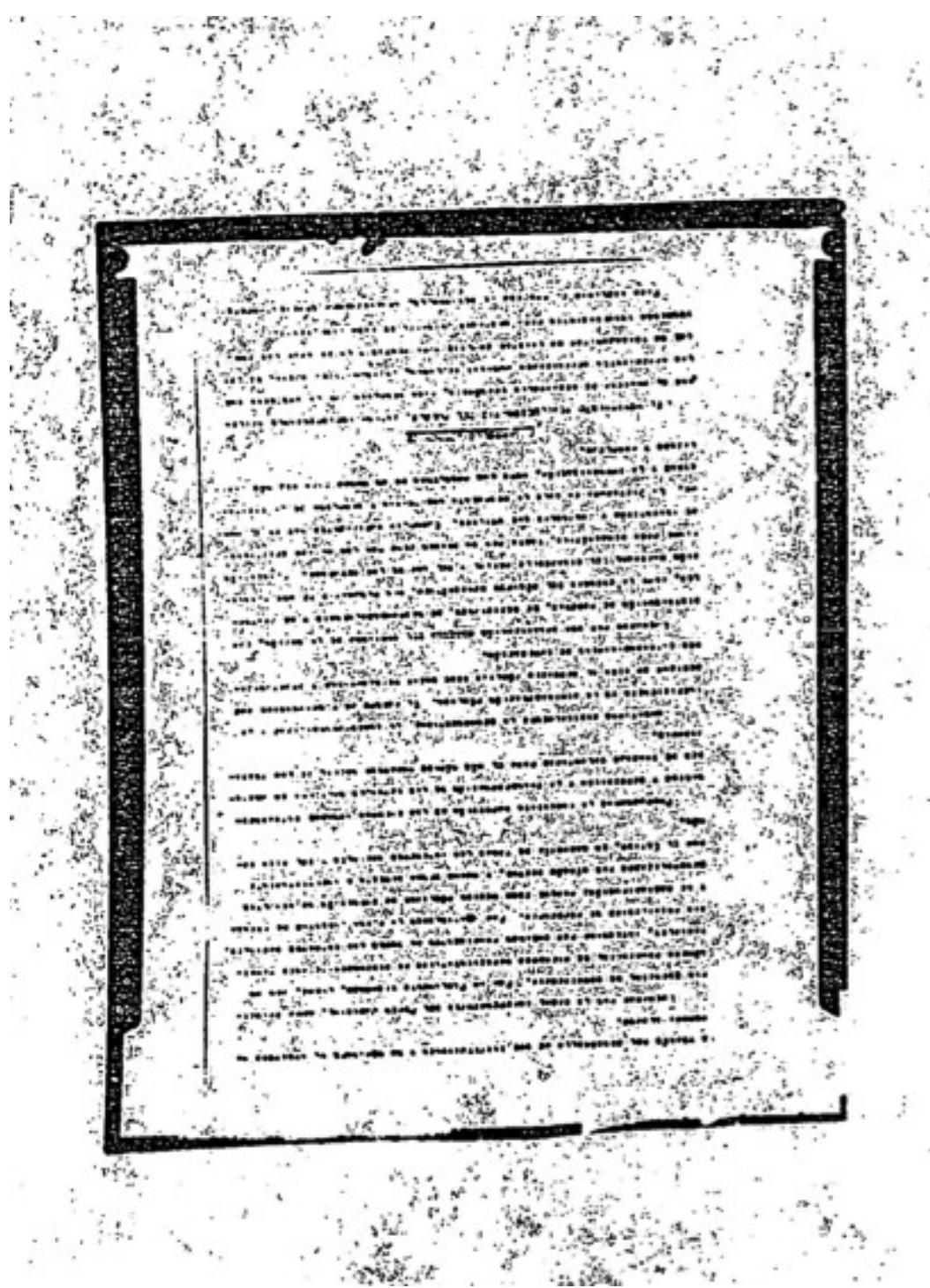


Figure 3. Document 104-10271-10414, detail.

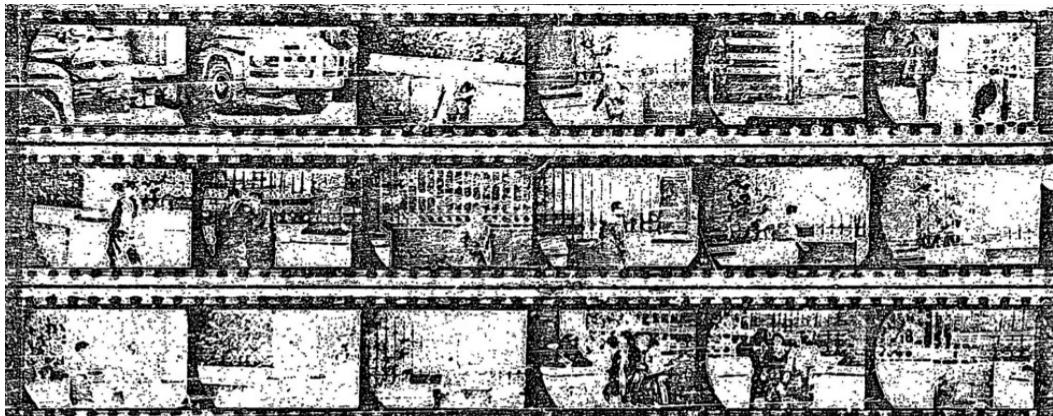


Figure 4. Film negatives; detail from document 104-10292-10007.

Row Num	Record Num	NARA Release Date	Formerly Withheld	Agency	Doc Date	Doc Type	File Num	To Name	From Name	Title	Num Pages	Originator	Record Series	Review Date	C
1	119-10003-10076	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	07/12/1962 [PDF]	PAPER, TEXTUAL DOCUMENT	39-141-046	CHIEF, USSS	DDP	MEMORANDUM	13	CIA	DS	11/30/2017	
2	119-10003-10112	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	06/22/1962 [PDF]	PAPER, TEXTUAL DOCUMENT	39-141-046	CHIEF, USSS	DDP	MEMORANDUM	15	CIA	DS	11/30/2017	
3	119-10003-10181	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	09/02/1966 [PDF]	PAPER, TEXTUAL DOCUMENT	39-141-122	DIRECTOR, INR	DDP	MEMORANDUM	2	CIA	DS	11/30/2017	
4	119-10017-10228	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	09/02/1966 [PDF]	MEMORANDUM		DIR OF INTELLIGENCE & RESEARCH	DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR PLANS	RIMA ZIMTROOK - LEE HARVEY OSWALD'S INTOURIST GUIDE IN MOSCOW	2	CIA	LOT 90D481:SOV FILES	11/30/2017	
5	119-10017-10244	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	05/27/1964 [PDF]	MEMORANDUM	OSWALD, LEE, SOVIET DOCUMENTS	RANKIN, J. LEE	HELMS, RICHARD	DISCUSSION BETWEEN CHAIRMAN KHRUSHCHEV AND MR. DREW PEARSON RE LEE	3	CIA	LOT 90D48:SOV FILES	11/30/2017	
6	119-10021-10413	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	09/30/1963 [PDF]	MEMORANDUM	FBI	MEMBERS OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON CASTRO	CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON CUBAN SUB	REPORT FOR JULY-AUGUST ON ACTIONS TAKEN TO COMBAT CASTRO-COMMUNISTS	23	DOS	INR FILES	11/30/2017	



Figure 5. Screenshot of the NARA 2017 JFK Files website, captured November 2017.

Yvonne M. Eadon
Dr. Michelle Caswell
IS 434: Archival Use and Users
Elective Paper 1

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/outhere/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).

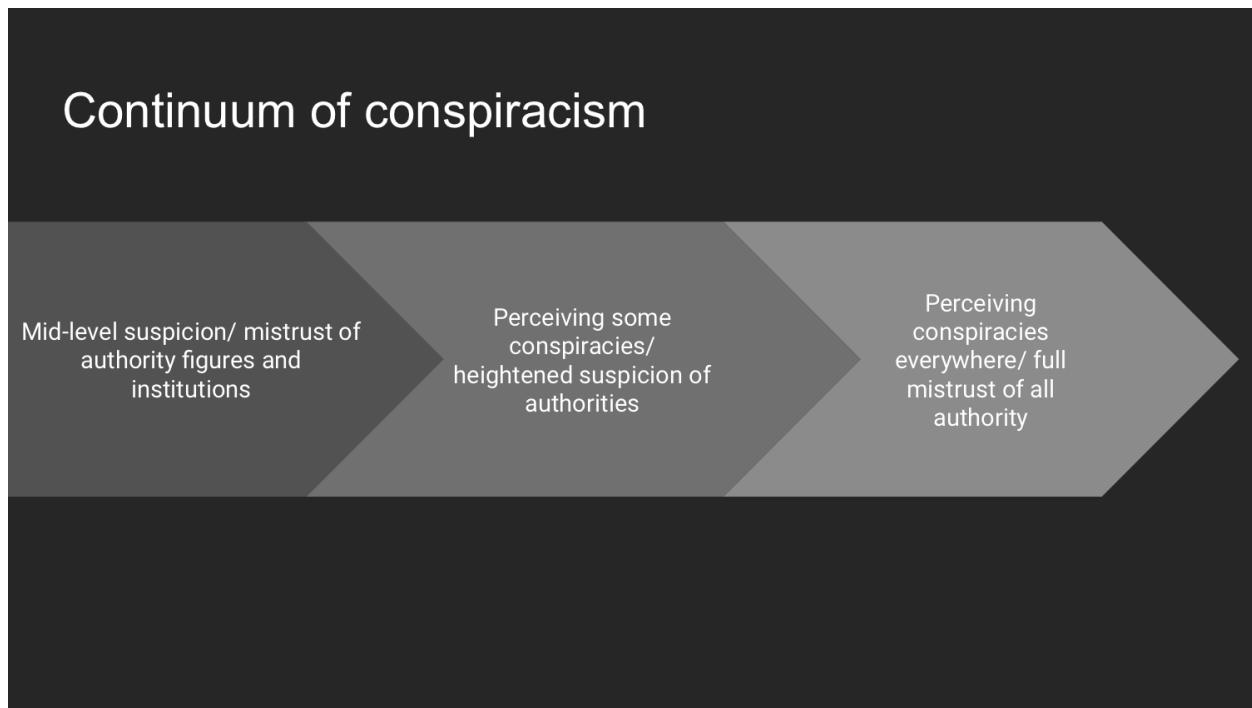


Figure 1: The continuum of conspiracism. Original figure.

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 built 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-alien-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.

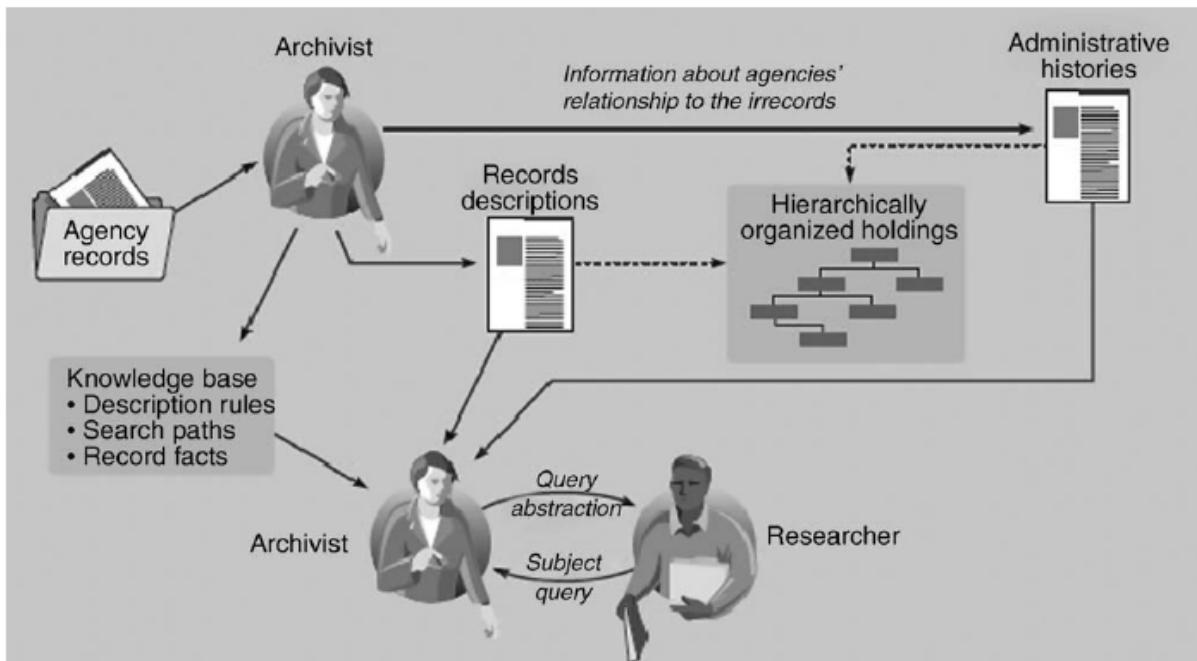


Figure 2: “Inside the black box,” from Pugh 2017.

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 Dealy 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

References

- Aaronovitch, David. *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010.
- Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and W. Larry Gregory. "Beliefs in Conspiracies." *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3 (1999): 637–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160>.
- 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.
- Barkun, Michael. "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>.
- Braitch, Jack. *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2008.
- Brotherton, Rob. *Suspicious Minds*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015.
- Cassino, Dan, 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>.
- Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014.
- Coady, David. *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Connolly, Jennifer M., Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey A. Klofstad, and Jonathan P. West. "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>.
- Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-13099-000>.
- Creswell, John W., and Vicki L. Plano Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011.

- Daines, J. Gordon, 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>.
- Dentith, Matthew R.X. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Douglas, Karen M., 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>.
- Duff, Wendy, 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.
- Duff, Wendy, and Elizabeth Yakel. “Archival Interaction.” In *Currents of Archival Thinking*, edited by Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, 2nd ed., 193–223. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017.
- Duff, Wendy, 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>.
- Eadon, Yvonne. “‘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>.
- Gilliland, Anne J., 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>.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Amsel L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017.
- Harambam, Jaron, 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>.

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

Klein, Colin, 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>.

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

König, René. "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>.

Marwick, Alice, and Rebecca Lewis. "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online." Data & Society Research Institute, May 15, 2017. <https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>.

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

Moore, Lori. "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>.

Mortimer, Kim. "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>.

Narayan, B., 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>.

Nyhan, Brendan, Franklin Dickinson, Sasha Dudding, Enxhi Dylgjeri, Eric Neiley, Christopher Pullerits, Minae Seog, Andy Simpson, Heather Szilagyi, and Colin Walmsley. "Classified or Coverup? The Effect of Redactions on Conspiracy Theory Beliefs." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 3, no. 2 (ed 2016): 109–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2015.21>.

Oliver, J. Eric, 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>.

Pickard, Alison Jane. *Research Methods in Information*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2013.

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

Raab, Marius H., Stefan Ortlieb, Nikolas Auer, Klara Guthmann, and Claus-Christian Carbon. "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>.

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

Swami, Viren, Rebecca Coles, Stefan Stieger, Jakob Pietschnig, Adrian Furnham, Sherry Rehim, and Martin Voracek. "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>.

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

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

Uscinski, Joseph E., 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>.

Vosoughi, Soroush, 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>.

Webster, Donovan. "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-alien-never-left-180963917/>.

Williamson, Kirsty, Lisa M. Given, and Paul Scifleet. "Qualitative Data Analysis." In *Research Methods: Information, Systems and Contexts*, n.d.

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

- Yakel, Elizabeth. "Archival Representation." *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (March 2003): 1–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02438926>.
- . "Thinking Inside and Outside the Boxes: Archival Reference Services at the Turn of the Century." *Archivaria* 49, no. 0 (January 1, 2000): 140–60.
- Yakel, Elizabeth, 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>.
- Yeo, Geoffrey. "Continuing Debates about Description." In *Currents of Archival Thinking*, edited by Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, 2nd ed., 63–99. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2017.

Yvonne.M. Eadon
IS 213: Current Issues in Librarianship
Prof. Greg Leazer
Elective Paper 2

Misinformation & Disinformation: A Review of the Literature

Abstract

Since the end of 2016, the study of misinformation, disinformation, and how it spreads, has exploded in popularity as a subject for scholarly studies as well as journalistic inquiry. This literature review attempts to define key terms in this area, and examines the differences between political and journalistic misinformation, and scientific and health-related misinformation.

I. Introduction

The study of misinformation, disinformation, and the spread of “fake” or “false” news stories is a nascent area of scholarship, having exploded in popularity in the wake of the stunning upset in the 2016 United States Presidential election, in which Donald Trump won the presidency. In the months prior to November 2016, an amalgam of false stories from disreputable outlets spread online. The largest of these was a story, from the website “ETF News,” that circulated in September of that year: “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement.” The article was shared or liked 960,000 times on Facebook between when it was released and Election Day--more times than any one article from a reputable news source.¹ What makes this kind of false story so compelling to so many--and why does it prove to be more tenacious and nefarious than we may have ever expected?

Despite the fact that studying misinformation and disinformation has become increasingly widespread since 2016, it behooves us to recognize a few things: first, that misinformation has existed in some form since the advent of the written word; and second, a rich tradition of academic work on propaganda and its spread exists and enriches the current work being done on misinformation and disinformation. To contextualize the current moment, I will offer two historical examples of misinformation, of the two kinds that I will be focusing on in this literature review: political-journalistic, and scientific-medical.² The first example is commonly thought to be one of the first examples of fake/false news: the so-called “Great Moon Hoax.” In the summer of 1835, the New York City newspaper *The*

¹ Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 3.

² Of course, there is some overlap between these two categories--often, news outlets are the ones who disseminate scientific findings to the wider public.

Sun reported the discovery of life on the moon. This was not a one-time story, however-- the editor drew out descriptions of life found on the moon, ensuring that readers would continue buying his papers for the entirety of the story's six-issue run.³ By all accounts, a significant proportion of New Yorkers believed what they read. O'Connor and Weatherall open their 2019 monograph *The Misinformation Age* with another salient example: the elusive Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, a nonexistent plant-animal hybrid described by several medieval naturalists and scholars. The legend of the Vegetable Lamb persisted for four hundred years-- it was not until 1683, when a Swedish naturalist performed an in-depth hunt for the organism, ultimately concluding that it existed nowhere.⁴

Although it may be tempting to point to technological developments, such as the prevalence of social media, as the instigating factor in the rapid spread of misinformation in the modern day, it remains important to recognize that misinformation in and of itself is not a new development.

II. Some definitions

In this section, I will be defining several contentious key terms: *misinformation*, *disinformation*, *propaganda*, and *fake news*. Freelon and Wells, in their introduction to a special issue of *Political Communication* devoted to the politics of disinformation, suggest that these related terms are “*the defining political communication topic of our time.*”⁵

Habermas, who viewed truth as only possible as a result of consensus, differentiated between misinformation and disinformation by virtue of the creator’s intention.⁶ This distinction between the two terms is generally accepted among scholars; Benkler, Faris and Roberts define misinformation as “communication of false information without intent to deceive, manipulate, or otherwise obtain an outcome,”⁷ and disinformation as “dissemination of explicitly false or misleading information” on purpose.⁸ Despite the popularity of this differentiation, scholars disagree somewhat on the productivity of discerning the creator or disseminator’s intent. Southwell et. al use *misinformation* to indicate both kinds of problematic information, as false information with no malicious intent behind it can still cause harm.⁹

³ Sharon McQueen, “From Yellow Journalism to Tabloids to Clickbait: The Origins of Fake News in the United States,” in *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*, ed. Denise E. Agosto (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” *Political Communication* 0, no. 0 (February 14, 2020): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>.

⁶ Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble, “The Persistence and Peril of Misinformation,” *American Scientist* 105 (2017): 4.

⁷ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble, eds., *Misinformation and Mass Audiences* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), 4.

Don Fallis, on the other hand, argues that disinformation “is likely to be especially dangerous” because this malicious intent on the behalf of the creator motivates manipulation in a particular way.¹⁰

Benkler et. al frame misinformation and disinformation through the lens of propaganda, which, “as a field was an application of the modernist commitment to expertise and scientific management, applied to the problem of managing a mass population in the time of crisis” (25). The authors trace the use of the term from purely political to a term used for referring to manipulation of technologically-driven consumerist masses, through to the mid-late twentieth century advertising boom, ultimately arguing that the term is best utilized in the context of public opinion in the political sphere. The authors suggest that the study of propaganda must necessarily be scaled up in today’s world. They call this “network propaganda.” In their words, the effects of propaganda “...come not from a single story or source but from the fact that a wide range of outlets, some controlled by the propagandist, most not, repeat various versions of the propagandist’s communications, adding credibility and improving recall of the false, misleading, or otherwise manipulative narrative in the target population, and disseminating that narrative more widely in that population.”¹¹ Misinformation is thus one tool at the propagandists’ fingertips, although the wide-ranging effects of manipulation through misinformation are sometimes difficult to track through the network.

Finally, perhaps the most controversial term of the bunch: fake news. This term references falsified or untrue stories from news media outlets or websites masquerading as such. Freelon and Wells eschew the term, arguing that “...its use by Trump and his followers to delegitimize unfavorable news coverage has stripped it of any analytical value it may have once held.”¹² Allcott and Gentzkow examine in-depth the spread of fake news on social media during the 2016 election cycle. They focus on social media because it differs so starkly from other media technologies, like television and newspapers: “Content can be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact checking, or editorial judgement.”¹³ The authors show that fake news spread easily within the U.S. media market because it was cheaper to produce and disseminate than true news from reputable sources; second, that social media led more readers to fake news sites than mainstream news outlets, and third, that fake news was widely and heavily shared in favor of Donald Trump,¹⁴ but that it likely did not contribute significantly to his

¹⁰ Don Fallis, “Epistemic Values and Disinformation,” in *Virtue Epistemology Naturalized: Bridges Between Virtue Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Abrol Fairweather, Synthese Library (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 159–79, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04672-3_10, 159.

¹¹ Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, 33.

¹² Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” 2.

¹³ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (May 2017): 211–36, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>, 211.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

victory.¹⁵ Other studies have examined fake news from a cognitive science standpoint,¹⁶ asking which psychological factors result in a propensity to believe in false stories;¹⁷ and what the motivating factors are for creators and purveyors of fake news.¹⁸

The terms described above are often referred to together, using umbrella terms like “problematic information,”¹⁹ “media manipulation,”²⁰ or simply “misinformation.”²¹ I will refer to them using the final term in this list.

III. Political & journalistic misinformation

Although the study of misinformation is itself nascent, several scholars have pointed to the need to contextualize misinformation within wider media ecosystems and networked media publics. Trust in news media, particularly among conservatives, has been steadily declining since the 1970s,²² hitting an all-time low of 32% in 2016.²³

Marwick and Lewis, in their seminal report on media manipulation and disinformation, look at how far-right groups operationalize aspects of online culture to manipulate and spread falsehoods. In the leadup to the 2016 election, these groups organized and successfully spread pro-Trump messages all over the Internet.²⁴ The structure and functionality of news media in American society was key to their success. Features of the media ecosystem that left it vulnerable to manipulation by the far-right included, in the authors’ words: “low public trust in media, a proclivity for sensationalism; lack of resources for fact-checking and investigative reporting; and corporate consolidation resulting in the replacement of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁶ Elizabeth J. Marsh and Brenda W. Yang, “Believing Things That Are Not True: A Cognitive Science Perspective on Misinformation,” in *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, ed. Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Daniel Halpern et al., “From Belief in Conspiracy Theories to Trust in Others: Which Factors Influence Exposure, Believing and Sharing Fake News,” in *Social Computing and Social Media. Design, Human Behavior and Analytics*, ed. Gabriele Meiselwitz, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 217–32, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21902-4_16.

¹⁸ 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/>, 27.

¹⁹ Fabio Giglietto et al., “‘Fake News’ Is the Invention of a Liar: How False Information Circulates within the Hybrid News System,” *Current Sociology* 67, no. 4 (July 1, 2019): 625–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119837536>.

²⁰ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.”

²¹ Emily K. Vraga and Leticia Bode, “Defining Misinformation and Understanding Its Bounded Nature: Using Expertise and Evidence for Describing Misinformation,” *Political Communication* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 136–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1716500>.

²² Jonathan M. Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the News Media and How It Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

²³ Art Swift, “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low,” September 14, 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

²⁴ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” 2.

local publications with hegemonic media brands.”²⁵ Benkler et. al discuss how the right wing media ecosystem in particular influenced and set up the context(s) for misinformation to flourish. They posit that this particular media ecosystem was the most influential factor in declining trust in media as a whole,²⁶ and that it, in their words, “...represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system.”²⁷ Such radicalization is propelled forward by far-right media outlets like Breitbart and Infowars, who do not follow, nor do they claim to follow, any journalistic ethical norms (pursuit of truth, lauding of evidence, etc.). Although far-left websites exist, they tend to keep much more closely to such journalistic imperatives as objectivity and truth-seeking. The asymmetrical nature of this phenomenon makes it particularly difficult to come up with bipartisan policy solutions to the spread of misinformation. In fact, Benkler et. al go as far as to say that “...ignoring the stark partisan asymmetry at the root of our present epistemic crisis will make it impossible to develop solutions that address the actual causes of that crisis.”²⁸

Reputable news organizations have themselves had to adapt to new revenue models in the current digital landscape, some of which have had wide-ranging effects on perception and misperception of truth. Social media as an information environment lends itself to virality and sensationalism. Marwick and Lewis call this an “attention economy,” in which content that causes the largest splash or attracts the most attention is usually the most successful.²⁹ As a result, media outlets can no longer bundle their stories as they were once able to in subscription-based models. Instead, they must try to attract as much attention as possible--a phenomenon that Kevin Munger calls “Clickbait Media.”³⁰ The pressure is growing on news media outlets to garner clicks, shares, and likes, as a way to produce revenue and keep their operations afloat. At the same time, newspapers have been cutting costs and downsizing since the 1990s, resulting in more and more pressure being put on individual reporters.³¹ News outlets are slowly losing their credibility in a number of ways: *native advertising* can be taken as an indication of this. When it works, readers are unaware that it is there, and it can bring in significant revenue. When it does not, and readers are made aware of its existence, they tend to lose faith in the organization.³² Overall, the context of the social media landscape “incentiviz[es] low-quality but high-performing posts over high-quality

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁶ Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” 42.

³⁰ Kevin Munger, “All the News That’s Fit to Click: The Economics of Clickbait Media,” *Political Communication* 0, no. 0 (December 3, 2019): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1687626>.

³¹ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” 42.

³² Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” 3.

journalism...content that is novel, sensational, or emotional is catnip to reporters.”³³ These factors create an environment that is ripe for all sorts of problematic information, political and otherwise. Interestingly, though, Munger claims that the journalistic days of yore when truth-telling ethics were held in the highest regard was itself the idiosyncrasy in the history of journalism--and that Clickbait Media is, in some sense, a return to normalcy.³⁴

Misperceptions and false beliefs may in fact preclude democratic functionality.³⁵ The citizenry may form political opinions, and policy makers may pass legislation, according to false information. Even once false information is found and corrected, it may have already taken on a life of its own.³⁶ This is especially true with respect to ideological mental models: “...in the case of political misinformation, individuals may already have well-developed mental models based on their political party affiliations or ideological beliefs. Information consistent with those existing mental models may be readily accepted and difficult to correct.”³⁷ Benkler et. al ultimately conclude, having conducted and reported a robust and detailed study, that the Internet and social media is not itself--alone--anti-democratic: “There is no echo chamber or filter-bubble effect that will inexorably take a society with a well-functioning public sphere and turn it into a shambles simply because the internet comes to town. The American online public sphere is in shambles because it was grafted onto a television and radio public sphere that was already broken.”³⁸ Like Munger,³⁹ Benkler et. al argue that the spread of misinformation and its wide-ranging effects on democracy is not a *new* thing, it cannot be attributed entirely to the Internet and social media--it exists and is predicated on existing media ecosystems that have been decades in the making.

One of the most popular, and most talked-about, approaches to fixing the problem of misinformation spread is the tried-and-true journalistic tradition of fact-checking. Indeed, Marwick and Lewis cite fewer resources being allocated for fact-checking as one cause of the misinformation crisis.⁴⁰ Fact-checking as a response to misinformation puts the onus of correction on news and information organizations, rather than consumers of information. This makes a certain kind of sense, as expecting

³³ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” 43.

³⁴ Munger, “All the News That’s Fit to Click.”

³⁵ Shannon Poulsen and Dannagal G. Young, “A History of Fact Checking in U. S. Politics and Election Contexts.,” in *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, ed. Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018).

³⁶ Melanie C. Green and John K. Donahue, “The Effects of False Information in News Stories,” in *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, ed. Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018).

³⁷ Green and Donahue, “The Effects of False Information in News Stories,” 115.

³⁸ Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, 386.

³⁹ Munger, “All the News That’s Fit to Click.”

⁴⁰ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” 42.

users to independently evaluate each claim they see on social media is an enormous burden.⁴¹ In response to the crisis, news outlets and social media platforms alike have allocated more resources to fact-checking, with news outlets like the Washington Post creating their own internal system of fact-checking,⁴² while platforms like Facebook have rolled out several programs of internal *and* third-party fact-checking depending on locality.⁴³ The details of how fact-checking can be carried out are very important when it comes to misinformation, however: simply retracting false information can in fact result in readers doubling-down on their belief in it.⁴⁴ This has been termed the *continued influence effect*.⁴⁵ Nyhan and Reifler found that corrective information in news reports had no effect on the misperceptions of ideological subgroups, and in some cases strengthened these misperceptions.⁴⁶ Providing factual alternatives can be one effective approach;⁴⁷ ideally the alternative “...should have the same explanatory relevance as the misinformation it replaces, and it is important that it be plausible...”⁴⁸ However, it is difficult to make this happen effectively in the real world. Furthermore, news sources need to focus on building credibility, which seems to matter more these days than expertise. New outlets that consistently make claims that are based on evidence, and which foreground that evidence clearly and concisely, will build credibility.⁴⁹ Fact-checking organizations are expanding, with the possibility of real-time fact-checking--in which public figures would have to confront their claims head-on--on the horizon.⁵⁰ Importantly, however, Benkler et. al remind us that members of the ideological right often don't give much credence to fact checking organizations: “They are treated by the media outlets and users of the right-wing media ecosystem as systematically biased, and...are generally not visited, shared, linked

⁴¹ Briony Swire and Ullrich Ecker, “Misinformation and Its Correction: Cognitive Mechanisms and Recommendations for Mass Communication,” in *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, ed. Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), 206.

⁴² Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics, 376.

⁴³ “How Is Facebook Addressing False News through Third-Party Fact-Checkers?,” Facebook Help Center, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/help/1952307158131536>.

⁴⁴ Andrea N. Eslick, Lisa K. Fazio, and Elizabeth J. Marsh, “Ironic Effects of Drawing Attention to Story Errors,” *Memory* 19, no. 2 (February 1, 2011): 184–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2010.543908>.

⁴⁵ Stephan Lewandowsky et al., “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 106–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018>.

⁴⁶ Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions,” *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 303–30, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2>.

⁴⁷ Lewandowsky et al., “Misinformation and Its Correction.”

⁴⁸ Swire and Ecker, “Misinformation and Its Correction: Cognitive Mechanisms and Recommendations for Mass Communication,” 198.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁰ Poulsen and Young, “A History of Fact Checking in U. S. Politics and Election Contexts,” 245.

to, or believed by users on the right.”⁵¹ So, fact checking could have its advantages, but it is certainly not the only approach to misinformation.

IV. Scientific and Health-Related Misinformation

Scientific and health-related misinformation circulates somewhat similarly to political misinformation, but there are unique aspects to it as well. Scientific and health-related misinformation can stem from poor practices, mistakes, or fraud (as when data is falsified⁵²). Even once deception is discovered and retractions are printed, media outlets may continue to cite the falsified reports.⁵³ Health-related misinformation is particularly insidious, as it can delay or prevent adequate treatment, and even promote spread of a dangerous disease⁵⁴-- for example, the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 pandemic is not real.⁵⁵ It can be easier to identify health or science misinformation via “expert consensus” (that is, whatever a large portion of experts agree to be factual is the closest approximation of truth) than with political misinformation, although things get more complex when public consensus does not agree with expert consensus, as in the case of climate change.⁵⁶ Indeed, this may be a problem of context--in Laura Sheble’s words, “...science does not operate in a closed system. Though members of a research field may be the primary evaluators of accumulating evidence from studies within a research field, additional research and related efforts are required to translate findings into other contexts.”⁵⁷ Kahan et. al discuss the disconnect between scientific consensus and public consensus in the case of climate change, arguing that *cultural cognition* plays a significant role in how people take in scientific information: “...cultural cognition strongly motivates individuals – of all worldviews – to recognize such information as sound in a selective pattern that reinforces their cultural predispositions. To overcome this effect, communicators must attend to the cultural meaning as well as the scientific content of information.”⁵⁸

⁵¹ Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics, 377.

⁵² Green and Donahue, “The Effects of False Information in News Stories,” 113.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Yuxi Wang et al., “Systematic Literature Review on the Spread of Health-Related Misinformation on Social Media,” *Social Science & Medicine* 240 (November 1, 2019): 112552, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112552>.

⁵⁵ Kiera Butler, “‘A Fake Pandemic’: Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories.,” Mother Jones, sec. Politics, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/03/a-fake-pandemic-antivaxxers-are-spreading-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories/>.

⁵⁶ Emily K. Vraga and Leticia Bode, “Defining Misinformation and Understanding Its Bounded Nature: Using Expertise and Evidence for Describing Misinformation,” *Political Communication* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 136–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1716500>.

⁵⁷ Laura Sheble, “Misinformation and Science: Emergence, Diffusion, and Persistence,” in *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, ed. Brian G Southwell (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), 162-63.

⁵⁸ Dan M. Kahan, Hank Jenkins-Smith, and Donald Braman, “Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus,” *Journal of Risk Research* 14, no. 2 (February 1, 2011): 147–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2010.511246>.

That is, those who are attempting to disseminate accurate scientific information must take into account the contextual predispositions of those who will take the information in, rather than simply relying on overall accuracy or comprehensibility of evidence. Of course, this poses its own set of challenges.

Another relevant example of the insidiousness of health-related misinformation is the anti-vaccination movement. This movement is particularly dangerous as it poses a threat to the societal safeguard of herd immunity--if even a few children are not vaccinated, the herd immunity of the entire community is compromised. The anti-vaccination movement often cites a now-retracted article, published by *Lancet* in 1998 and written by Andrew Wakefield, which indicated that there was a causal relationship between the MMR vaccine and autism spectrum disorder.⁵⁹ The findings of this retracted paper have been disproven and disputed within the scientific community and in the court of law, but, in Samantha Kaplan's words, "...it is possible that these efforts have had a reverse effect and have been misconstrued as evidence that the government and the scientific community collude."⁶⁰ Kaplan argues that context is a meaningful aspect of the spread of this false information--comparing physical (libraries) and digital (the Internet in general) information environments, Kaplan concludes that, in both cases, *contextual information interventions* during the process of information seeking are the most useful solution. Rather than barring off access to anti-vaccination websites, for instance, she argues that providing a warning label of some kind is more productive.⁶¹ Many suggestions for curbing science and health-related misinformation point to context as a critical factor, but what does this context-aware approach look like in practice?

Wang et. al's review of the literature on the spread of health-related misinformation on social media revealed that "only a handful of papers proposed specific and tested interventions to reduce misinformation spread."⁶² The authors propose that attempts to curb misinformation be approached from both the information-production side and the information-consumption side. Since I have already briefly discussed information production in the previous section, I will be concentrating here on educating individuals to consume information critically. Librarians and other information professionals are indispensable for this project, they "...can play the role of information educators, helping to empower their users, not just to access information but to *understand which information to trust*."⁶³ Critical Information Literacy (CIL) approaches the project of information literacy--which can be defined as an

⁵⁹ Samantha Kaplan, "Encouraging Information Search to Counteract Misinformation," in *Misinformation and Mass Audiences* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), 274–88.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 284-5.

⁶² Wang et al., "Systematic Literature Review on the Spread of Health-Related Misinformation on Social Media," 8.

⁶³ Denise R. Agosto, ed., *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 8.

educational framework whose goal is to teach patrons about information, how it is produced and valued within different contexts, and how information can be operationalized in knowledge production practices⁶⁴-- anew. Somewhat difficult to define, CIL asks librarians to situate information literacy within disciplinary structures, but *especially* to teach patrons that information and knowledge are produced and disseminated within structures of power and authority.⁶⁵ Cooke suggests that cultural or prejudicial misinformation is particularly prone to spread, and highlights critical media literacy and cultural literacy (that is, cultural competence: the “...ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently...”⁶⁶) as ways to combat it. In Cooke’s words, “Becoming multiliterate in a way that is especially effective in the online domain takes practice and diligence, and it begins with learning in the classroom and in libraries. The end goal is to produce critical thinkers and culturally competent users of the Internet.”⁶⁷ Librarians and other information professionals must think about ways to teach patrons how to recognize the contextual situatedness of information they come across, and to think critically about their own informational environments and contexts.

V. Conclusion

This literature review has been a general overview of the topic of misinformation and disinformation, addressing the spread of misinformation online in terms of type: political-journalistic and scientific-health. This distinction is somewhat arbitrary, and it could have been addressed from a variety of other viewpoints. I did not have space in this iteration to deeply address any philosophical and cognitive-psychological analyses of misinformation, but some relevant work has been done in Information Studies by Don Fallis,⁶⁸ who analyzes misinformation epistemologically, and Thomas Froelich,⁶⁹ who approaches the problem from an information ethics standpoint. Future iterations of this

⁶⁴ ACRL Board, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” Text, Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), February 9, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

⁶⁵ Annie Downey, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016).

⁶⁶ Patricia Montiel Overall, “Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals,” *The Library Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 175–204, <https://doi.org/10.1086/597080>.

⁶⁷ Nicole A. Cooke, “Critical Literacy as an Approach to Combating Cultural Misinformation/ Disinformation on the Internet,” in *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*, ed. Denise E. Agosto (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018), 36–51.

⁶⁸ Don Fallis, “Epistemic Values and Disinformation,” in *Virtue Epistemology Naturalized: Bridges Between Virtue Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Abrol Fairweather, Synthese Library (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 159–79, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04672-3_10; Don Fallis, “What Is Disinformation?,” *Library Trends* 63, no. 3 (2015): 401–26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014>.

⁶⁹ Thomas J Froehlich, “A Not-So-Brief Account of Current Information Ethics: The Ethics of Ignorance, Missing Information, Misinformation, Disinformation and Other Forms of Deception or Incompetence,” *BiD*, n.d., 14.

project will include perspectives like these, as well as a deeper look at what truth, trust, expertise, and consensus truly mean in the context of the Internet.

References

- ACRL Board. “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.” Text. Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), February 9, 2015.
<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
- Agosto, Denise R., ed. *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018.
- Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (May 2017): 211–36. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>.
- Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Brisola, Anna Cristina, and Andréa Doyle. “Critical Information Literacy as a Path to Resist ‘Fake News’: Understanding Disinformation as the Root Problem.” *Open Information Science* 3, no. 1 (2019): 274–286. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opis-2019-0019>.
- Butler, Kiera. “‘A Fake Pandemic’: Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories.” *Mother Jones*, sec. Politics. Accessed March 26, 2020.
<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/03/a-fake-pandemic-antivaxxers-are-spreading-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories/>.
- Cooke, Nicole A. “Critical Literacy as an Approach to Combating Cultural Misinformation/Disinformation on the Internet.” In *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*, edited by Denise E. Agosto, 36–51. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018.
- Downey, Annie. *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016.
- Eslick, Andrea N., Lisa K. Fazio, and Elizabeth J. Marsh. “Ironic Effects of Drawing Attention to Story Errors.” *Memory* 19, no. 2 (February 1, 2011): 184–91.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2010.543908>.
- Fallis, Don. “Epistemic Values and Disinformation.” In *Virtue Epistemology Naturalized: Bridges Between Virtue Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Abrol Fairweather, 159–79. Synthese Library. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04672-3_10.
- . “What Is Disinformation?” *Library Trends* 63, no. 3 (2015): 401–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014>.
- Faris, Robert, Hal Roberts, Bruce Etling, Nikki Bourassa, Ethan Zuckerman, and Yochai Benkler. “Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.” SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, August 1, 2017. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3019414>.

- “Final Report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation | Shaping Europe’s Digital Future.” Accessed March 6, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>.
- Fisher, Natascha A. Karlova, Karen E. “A Social Diffusion Model of Misinformation and Disinformation for Understanding Human Information Behaviour.” Text. Professor T.D. Wilson, March 15, 2013. http://informationr.net/ir/18-1/paper573.html#.X1_izJNKhZ0.
- Freelon, Deen, and Chris Wells. “Disinformation as Political Communication.” *Political Communication* 0, no. 0 (February 14, 2020): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>.
- Froehlich, Thomas J. “A Not-So-Brief Account of Current Information Ethics: The Ethics of Ignorance, Missing Information, Misinformation, Disinformation and Other Forms of Deception or Incompetence.” *BiD*, n.d., 14.
- Garrett, R. Kelly, Daniel Sude, and Paolo Riva. “Toeing the Party Lie: Ostracism Promotes Endorsement of Partisan Election Falsehoods.” *Political Communication* 0, no. 0 (October 11, 2019): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1666943>.
- Garrett, R. Kelly, Brian E. Weeks, and Rachel L. Neo. “Driving a Wedge Between Evidence and Beliefs: How Online Ideological News Exposure Promotes Political Misperceptions.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21, no. 5 (September 1, 2016): 331–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12164>.
- Giglietto, Fabio, Laura Iannelli, Augusto Valeriani, and Luca Rossi. “‘Fake News’ Is the Invention of a Liar: How False Information Circulates within the Hybrid News System.” *Current Sociology* 67, no. 4 (July 1, 2019): 625–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119837536>.
- Green, Melanie C., and John K. Donahue. “The Effects of False Information in News Stories.” In *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, edited by Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Halpern, Daniel, Sebastián Valenzuela, James Katz, and Juan Pablo Miranda. “From Belief in Conspiracy Theories to Trust in Others: Which Factors Influence Exposure, Believing and Sharing Fake News.” In *Social Computing and Social Media. Design, Human Behavior and Analytics*, edited by Gabriele Meiselwitz, 217–32. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21902-4_16.
- Facebook Help Center. “How Is Facebook Addressing False News through Third-Party Fact-Checkers?” Accessed March 26, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/help/1952307158131536>.
- Kahan, Dan M., Hank Jenkins-Smith, and Donald Braman. “Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus.” *Journal of Risk Research* 14, no. 2 (February 1, 2011): 147–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2010.511246>.
- Kaplan, Samantha. “Encouraging Information Search to Counteract Misinformation.” In *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, 274–88. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.

- Ladd, Jonathan M. *Why Americans Hate the News Media and How It Matters*. Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Lazer, David M. J., Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, et al. “The Science of Fake News.” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1094–96. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998>.
- Lewandowsky, Stephan, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook. “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing.” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 106–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018>.
- Marsh, Elizabeth J., and Brenda W. Yang. “Believing Things That Are Not True: A Cognitive Science Perspective on Misinformation.” In *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, edited by Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Marwick, Alice, and Rebecca Lewis. “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.” Data & Society Research Institute, May 15, 2017. <https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>.
- McQueen, Sharon. “From Yellow Journalism to Tabloids to Clickbait: The Origins of Fake News in the United States.” In *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News*, edited by Denise E. Agosto. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018.
- Munger, Kevin. “All the News That’s Fit to Click: The Economics of Clickbait Media.” *Political Communication* 0, no. 0 (December 3, 2019): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1687626>.
- Nguyen, C. Thi. “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles.” *Episteme*, 2018, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>.
- Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions.” *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 303–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2>.
- O’Connor, Cailin, and James Owen Weatherall. *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.
- Overall, Patricia Montiel. “Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals.” *The Library Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 175–204. <https://doi.org/10.1086/597080>.
- Poulsen, Shannon, and Dannagal G. Young. “A History of Fact Checking in U. S. Politics and Election Contexts.” In *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, edited by Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Rubin, Victoria L. “Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle: A Conceptual Model for ‘Fake News’ Epidemic, Causal Factors and Interventions.” *Journal of Documentation* 75, no. 5 (January 1, 2019): 1013–34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-12-2018-0209>.

- Sheble, Laura. "Misinformation and Science: Emergence, Diffusion, and Persistence." In *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, edited by Brian G Southwell. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Southwell, Brian G, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble, eds. *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- . "The Persistence and Peril of Misinformation." *American Scientist* 105 (2017): 4.
- Swift, Art. "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," September 14, 2016.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.
- Swire, Briony, and Ullrich Ecker. "Misinformation and Its Correction: Cognitive Mechanisms and Recommendations for Mass Communication." In *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, edited by Brian G Southwell, Emily A Thorson, and Laura Sheble. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Tredinnick, Luke, and Claire Laybats. "Reality Filters: Disinformation and Fake News." *Business Information Review* 36, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 92–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382119874267>.
- Vraga, Emily K., and Leticia Bode. "Defining Misinformation and Understanding Its Bounded Nature: Using Expertise and Evidence for Describing Misinformation." *Political Communication* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 136–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1716500>.
- Wang, Yuxi, Martin McKee, Aleksandra Torbica, and David Stuckler. "Systematic Literature Review on the Spread of Health-Related Misinformation on Social Media." *Social Science & Medicine* 240 (November 1, 2019): 112552. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112552>.

Yvonne M. Eadon
Public Policy 291A: Survey Methods
Prof. Martin Gilens
Elective Paper 3

Analysis of pilot data

Abstract

This project looks at how conspiracists conduct research, paying particular attention to which resources and institutions they trust, what emotions they feel in the course of conducting research, and where they most frequently go to conduct research. I was also interested in their own self-perception as it related to conducting research. Conspiracism was measured using the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. Although this is a pilot project (60 respondents) and thus cannot demonstrate generalizable results, the pilot data indicate that, in general, people who consider themselves “researchers” tend to trust institutions (libraries, archives) over news organizations, mainstream and fringe alike; felt a variety of feelings over the course of conducting research; and prefer to conduct their research online. Further, they tend to think of themselves most commonly as “critical thinkers.”

Initially, I had some trouble getting responses for my questionnaire, having posted it on smaller subreddits (subject-specific subsections of the forum website “reddit.com”) without much response. I posted the survey on five larger subreddits, ultimately: r/UAP (dedicated to “unidentified aerial phenomena,” and whose rules insist that posts be “low on speculation, high on facts,”), r/SpecialAccess, (“a community dedicated to uncovering Special Access Programs of the last 50 years”), r/Intelligence (dedicated to news about spies, intelligence, etc.), r/ConspiracyFact (“for conspiracy theories that have substantial evidence to back them up,”), and r/UnresolvedMysteries (devoted to unsolved mysteries). These subreddits are mostly conspiracy-leaning, except for r/UnresolvedMysteries and r/Intelligence, which are two of the larger subreddits in this group of five. In this paper, I will first analyze the pilot data according to

insight it could give into my research questions. At the end of this paper, I will go into what I have learned from this process and how I will be revising my survey.

My research questions are as follows:

1. Which resources and institutions do individuals who demonstrate high conspiracism (i.e., those who score highly on the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire [CMQ])¹ trust? How does this compare to the sources trusted by individuals with mid-level and low conspiracism?
2. What emotions do individuals who demonstrate high conspiracism most often experience at the beginning and in the midst of the research process? How strongly do they feel these emotions? How does this compare to those who do demonstrate mid-level and low conspiracism?
3. Where do individuals who demonstrate high conspiracism most often go to conduct research? How does this compare to those who demonstrate mid-level and low conspiracism?

I will refer to each of these questions when discussing the relevant section(s) of the survey, as RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3.

The first question in this questionnaire asks how often an individual does research, with one option being “I don’t do research.” This question acts as a filter question,² so that when a respondent indicates that they did not do research, the survey automatically ends. I received four

¹ Martin Bruder et al., “Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225>.

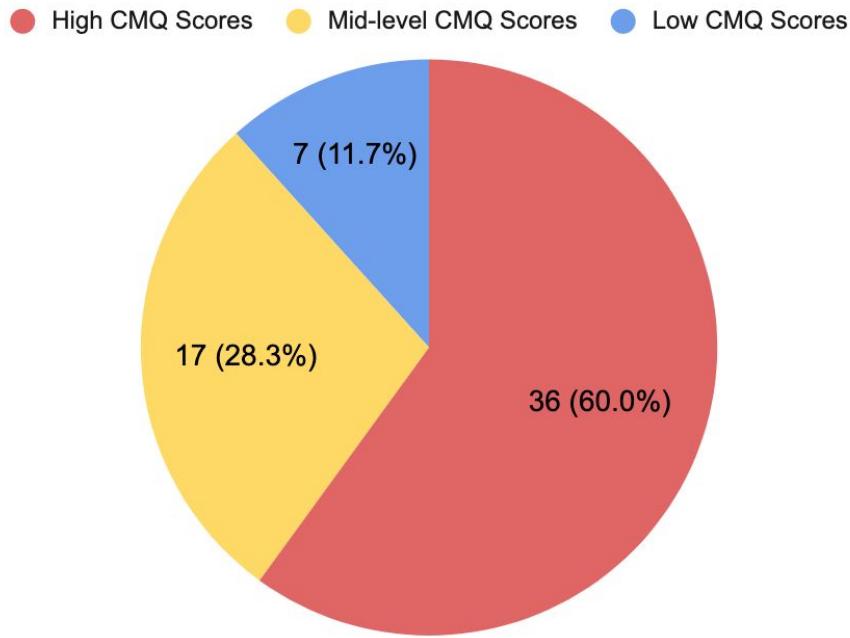
² Sheila B. Robinson and Kimberly Firth Leonard, *Designing Quality Survey Questions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2019), Kindle Edition, p. 219.

of these responses out of 64 total responses, meaning that some null values had to be removed from the dataset before working with it.

To test for conspiracism, I used the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) devised by Bruder et al. to be a cross-cultural diagnostic for conspiracism. The CMQ is composed of five questions, rated on a five-point Likert scale, from agree to disagree. Respondents who indicate agree or strongly agree for 60% or more of the questions can be considered to score highly. Respondents who indicate disagree or strongly disagree for 60% or more of the questions can be considered to have low scores. Other combinations or distributions can be considered mid-level scores. 36 of the 60 survey respondents (60%) displayed high conspiracism, 17 survey respondents (28.33%) displayed mid-level conspiracism, and seven survey respondents (11.67%) displayed low conspiracism. High CMQ scorers may occasionally be referred to as HCMQ, mid-level as MCMQ, and low as LCMQ. Having distributed the survey on two large non-conspiratorial forum websites ([r/Intelligence](#) and [r/UnresolvedMysteries](#)), I expected there to be a higher number of mid- and low-level CMQ scores. However, both [r/Intelligence](#) and [r/UnresolvedMysteries](#) could be said to be tangentially related to conspiratorial thinking, so in a future iteration I may try to post the survey on very non-related research areas. Ideally, and in the final iteration, I would have a more balanced distribution of CMQ scores across respondents. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will be treating the scores as though they are--mostly--evenly distributed across high, medium, and low.

Total number of respondents w/ high CMQ scores	Total number of respondents w/ mid-level CMQ scores	Total number of respondents w/ low CMQ scores
36 (60%)	17 (28.33%)	7 (11.67%)

CMQ Scores

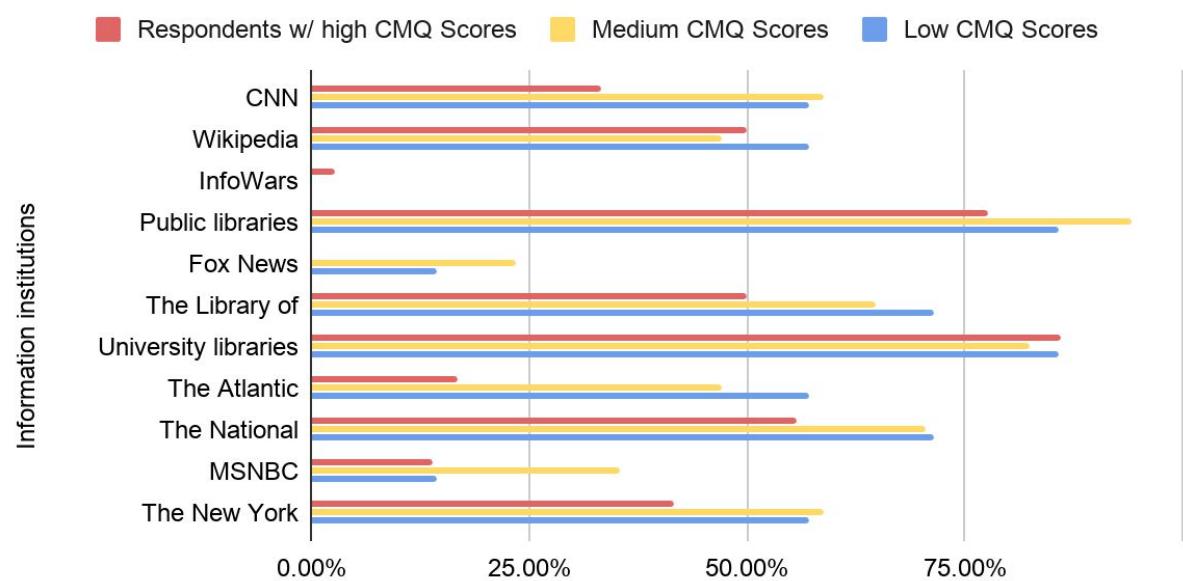


The following analysis will address RQ1. The survey asks respondents to rate eleven information sources/ institutions on a five-point Likert scale, from untrustworthy (1) to trustworthy (5). High trust in a given institution is indicated by a 4 or a 5, and low trust is indicated by a 1 or a 2. A “3” can be considered neutral, and indicates mid-level trust. For this analysis, I am most interested in high scores, which indicate trust.

% of respondents indicating trust in the following resources:	Respondents w/ high CMQ Scores	Medium CMQ Scores	Low CMQ Scores
CNN	33.3%	58.8%	57.1%
Wikipedia	50%	47.1%	57.1%
InfoWars	2.8%	0%	0%

Public libraries	77.8%	94.1%	85.7%
Fox News	0%	23.5%	14.3%
The Library of Congress	50%	64.7%	71.4%
University libraries	86.1%	82.4%	85.7%
The Atlantic	16.7%	47.1%	57.1%
The National Archives	55.6%	70.6%	71.4%
MSNBC	13.9%	35.3%	14.3%
The New York Times	41.7%	58.8%	57.1%

% of respondents with high - low CMQ scores who trust specific information institutions



I have divided the information institutions up into “mainstream (media),” “non-mainstream (media),” and “mainstream (non-media).”

Mainstream (media)

CNN
The Atlantic
MSNBC
The New York Times

Non-mainstream (media)

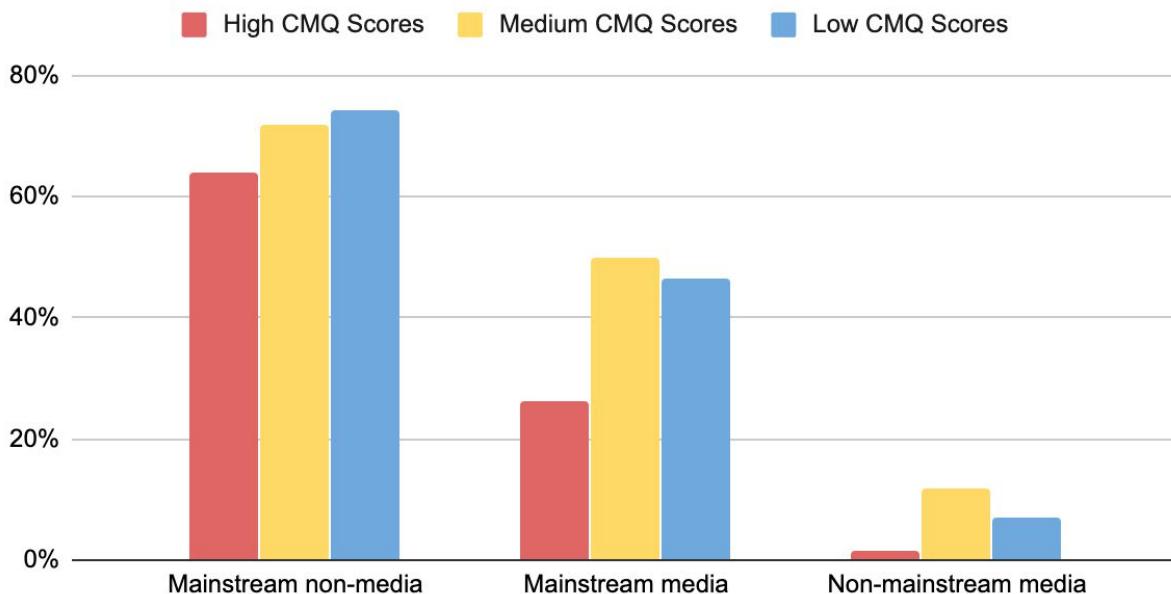
InfoWars
Fox News

Mainstream (non-media)

Wikipedia
Public Libraries
The Library of Congress
University Libraries
The National Archives

	Respondents w/ high CMQ Scores	Medium CMQ Scores	Low CMQ Scores
Mainstream (media)	64%	71.78%	74.26%
Non-mainstream (media)	26.40%	50%	46.40%
Mainstream (non-media)	1.40%	26.45%	7%

% of respondents with high - low CMQ scores who trust mainstream & non-mainstream information institutions



What is most apparent in these data is that *all* respondents, regardless of CMQ scores, trusted mainstream non-media institutions the most, mainstream media less, and non-mainstream media the least. In a revision of this survey, I will include more than just two non-mainstream media sources so as to ensure that the category is balanced with the other two. These data also illustrate that CMQ scores may be related to degree of trust in resources, but the sample size is so small that it cannot be said definitively. If the trend were replicated in a larger dataset, it would be possible to claim that high CMQ scores are negatively correlated with degree of trust in information institutions overall (media and non-media alike), as compared to mid-level and low CMQ scores. Interesting as well in this data is that mid-level CMQ scorers appear to demonstrate higher trust than low CMQ scorers in mainstream media and non-mainstream media. Again, there is not enough data to say whether or not this may be a statistically significant trend.

RQ2 asks what emotions individuals who demonstrate high conspiracism feel in the course of doing research. In my questionnaire, I asked respondents to rate how strongly they felt specific emotions that the literature³ has suggested are commonplace in the course of information seeking. In accordance with Kuhlthau's model of information seeking, which suggests that different emotions are felt at the beginning, in the midst, and towards the end of the research process, I asked respondents to rate the emotions they felt at the beginning and in the middle of the search process. I decided not to ask about the end of the search process to curtail the length of the survey. In processing the pilot data, I divided the Likert scale upon which they rated their feelings into the following subcategories:

Scores of 4 - 5: strong feeling

Score of 3: mid-level feeling

Score of 2: weak feeling

Score of 1: does not feel at all

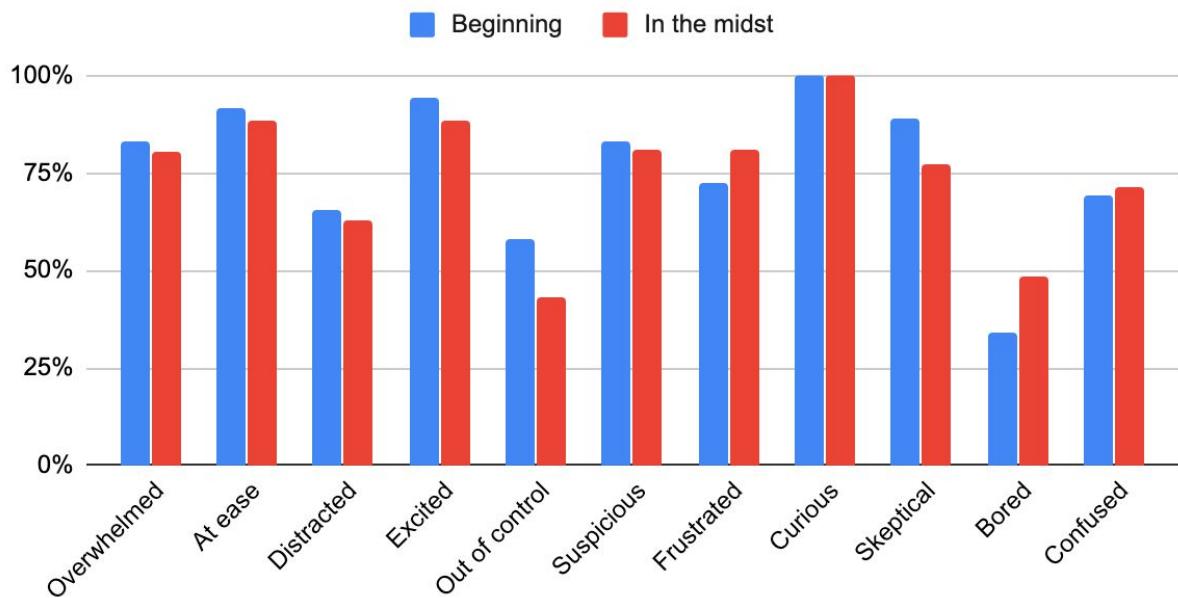
For High CMQ scores:

Emotion felt	Point in process	Degree: no feeling	Degree: weak feeling	Degree: mid-level feeling	Degree: strong feeling
Overwhelmed	Beginning	17.10%	23%	31.40%	28.60%
	Midst	19.40%	11.10%	47.20%	22.20%
At ease	Beginning	8.60%	22.90%	22.90%	45.70%
	Midst	11.40%	8.60%	40.00%	40.00%
Distracted	Beginning	34.30%	20.00%	23%	22.90%

³ Carol C. Kuhlthau, "Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User's Perspective," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42, no. 5 (1991): 361–71; Elfreda A. Chatman, "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 47, no. 3 (1996): 193–206, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4571\(199603\)47:3<193::AID-ASI3>3.0.CO;2-T](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4571(199603)47:3<193::AID-ASI3>3.0.CO;2-T).

	Midst	37.10%	25.70%	20.00%	17.10%
Excited	Beginning	5.70%	8.60%	8.60%	77%
	Midst	11.40%	8.60%	17.10%	62.90%
Out of control	Beginning	41.70%	27.80%	13.90%	16.70%
	Midst	57.10%	20%	14.30%	8.60%
Suspicious	Beginning	16.70%	33.30%	19.40%	30.60%
	Midst	19.20%	19.20%	50%	11.50%
Frustrated	Beginning	27.80%	27.80%	27.80%	16.70%
	Midst	19.20%	23.10%	46.20%	11.50%
Curious	Beginning	0%	0%	0%	100%
	Midst	0.00%	7.40%	7.40%	85.20%
Skeptical	Beginning	11.10%	19.40%	36.10%	33.30%
	Midst	22.90%	20.00%	34.30%	22.90%
Bored	Beginning	65.70%	14.30%	11.40%	8.60%
	Midst	51.60%	25.80%	19.40%	3.20%
Confused	Beginning	30.60%	11.10%	33.30%	25%
	Midst	28.60%	22.90%	40.00%	8.60%

Emotions felt by high CMQ scorers in the course of doing research



In order to simplify data for visualization purposes, I combined all positive scores into a *positive feeling* of the emotion, rather than the degree of that feeling. So, the visualization here illustrates the percent of HCMQ scorers who felt the feeling *at all*. Although we again run into the issue of not having enough data to draw meaningful conclusions, it is true that all feelings seem to lessen slightly--or are felt less frequently--in the midst of during research, apart from feelings of frustration, boredom and confusion.

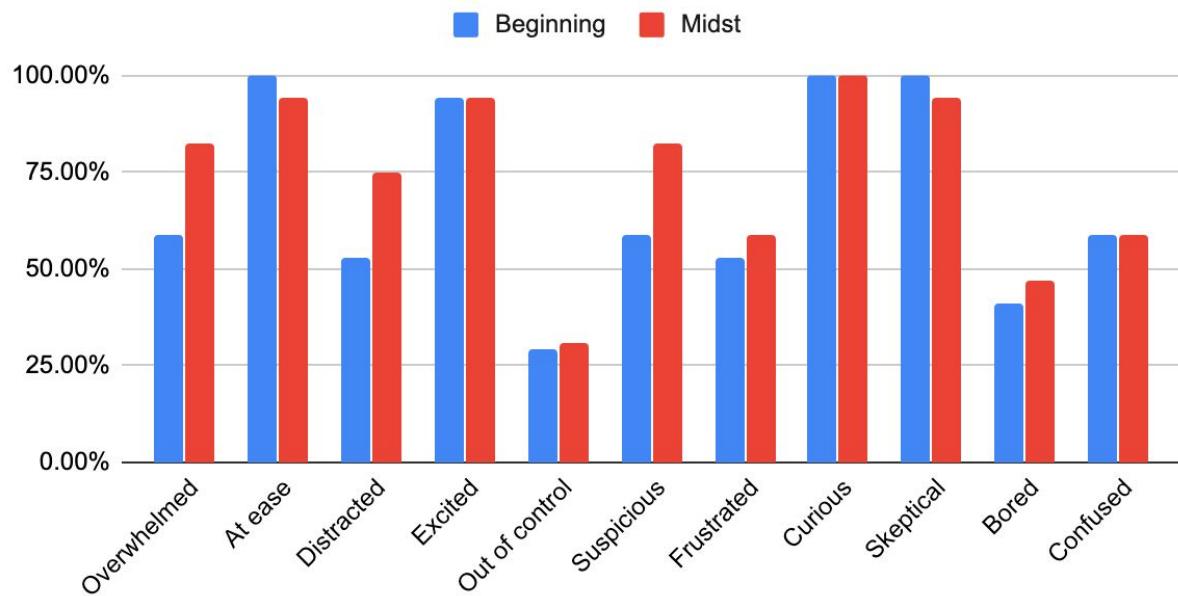
I did the same thing for mid-level and low CMQ scores, included in the tables and figures below:

For mid-level CMQ scorers:

Emotion felt	Point in process	Degree: no feeling	Degree: weak feeling	Degree: mid-level feeling	Degree: strong feeling
Overwhelmed	Beginning	41.20%	29.40%	17.60%	11.80%
	Midst	17.60%	35.30%	35.30%	11.80%

At ease	Beginning	0%	17.60%	35.30%	47.10%
	Midst	5.90%	29.40%	23.50%	41.20%
Distracted	Beginning	47.10%	17.60%	11.80%	23.50%
	Midst	25.00%	50%	18.80%	6.30%
Excited	Beginning	5.90%	5.90%	5.90%	82.40%
	Midst	5.90%	0.00%	47.10%	47.10%
Out of control	Beginning	70.60%	11.60%	17.60%	0.00%
	Midst	68.80%	25%	6.30%	0.00%
Suspicious	Beginning	41.20%	23.50%	23.50%	11.80%
	Midst	17.60%	17.60%	23.50%	41.20%
Frustrated	Beginning	47.10%	41.20%	5.90%	5.90%
	Midst	41.20%	29.40%	17.60%	11.80%
Curious	Beginning	0.00%	5.90%	0.00%	94.10%
	Midst	0.00%	5.90%	17.60%	76.50%
Skeptical	Beginning	0%	11.80%	47.10%	41.20%
	Midst	5.90%	23.50%	35.30%	35.30%
Bored	Beginning	58.80%	29.40%	5.90%	5.90%
	Midst	52.90%	41.20%	5.90%	0.00%
Confused	Beginning	41.20%	29.40%	23.50%	5.90%
	Midst	41.20%	23.50%	23.50%	11.80%

Emotions felt by mid-level CMQ scorers in the course of doing research



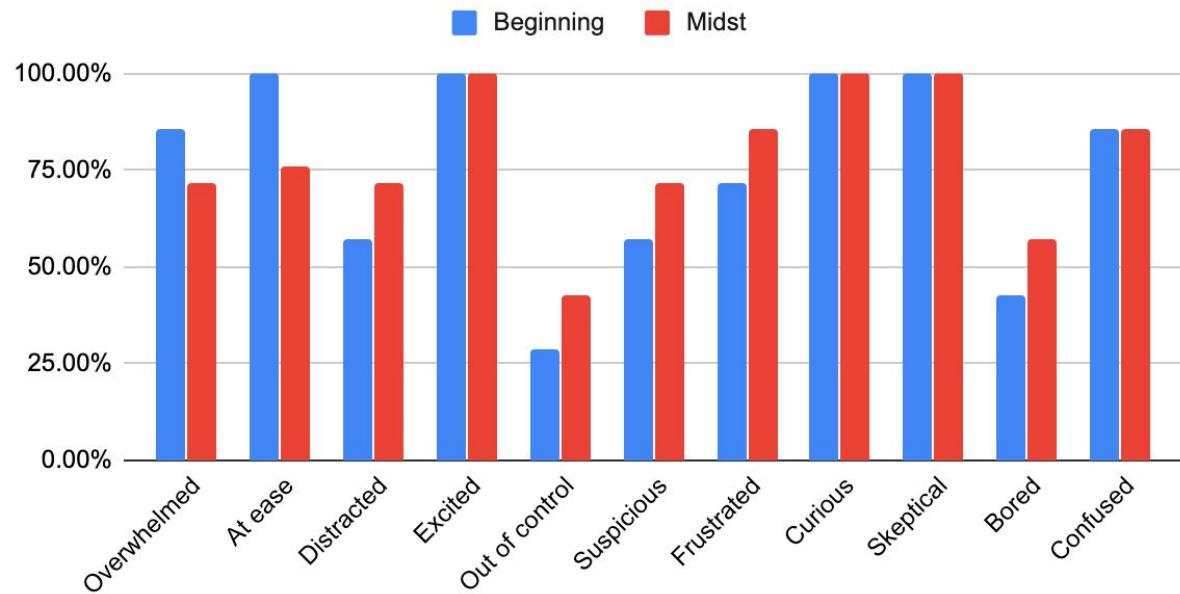
As compared to high CMQ scorers, mid-level CMQ scorers seem to have a more marked difference in frequency of emotions felt at the beginning versus in the midst of the research process. In the middle of the research process, MCMQ respondents felt more frequently overwhelmed, less at ease, more frequently distracted, more frequently suspicious, more frequently frustrated, and more frequently bored. Again, I specify “frequently,” here so as to emphasize that the visualization is of the percentage of MCMQ respondents who indicated that they felt these feelings *at all*, regardless of degree.

For low CMQ scorers:

Emotion felt	Point in process	Degree: no feeling	Degree: weak feeling	Degree: mid-level feeling	Degree: strong feeling
Overwhelmed	Beginning	14.30%	57.10%	0%	28.60%
	Midst	28.60%	42.90%	0%	28.60%
At ease	Beginning	0%	14.30%	14.30%	71.40%

	Midst	14.30%	28.60%	18.60%	28.60%
Distracted	Beginning	42.90%	42.90%	0%	14.30%
	Midst	28.60%	42.90%	28.60%	0%
Excited	Beginning	0%	0%	28.60%	71.40%
	Midst	0%	28.60%	28.60%	42.90%
Out of control	Beginning	71%	28.60%	0%	0%
	Midst	57.10%	28.60%	14.30%	0%
Suspicious	Beginning	42.90%	14.30%	14.30%	28.60%
	Midst	28.60%	42.90%	0%	28.60%
Frustrated	Beginning	28.60%	42.90%	0%	28.60%
	Midst	14.30%	28.60%	42.90%	14.30%
Curious	Beginning	0%	0%	0%	100%
	Midst	0%	0%	0%	100%
Skeptical	Beginning	0%	33.30%	33.30%	33.30%
	Midst	0%	42.90%	14.30%	42.90%
Bored	Beginning	57.10%	42.90%	0%	0%
	Midst	42.90%	42.90%	14.30%	0.00%
Confused	Beginning	14.30%	57.10%	14.30%	14.30%
	Midst	14.30%	42.90%	14.30%	28.60%

Emotions felt by low CMQ scorers in the course of doing research



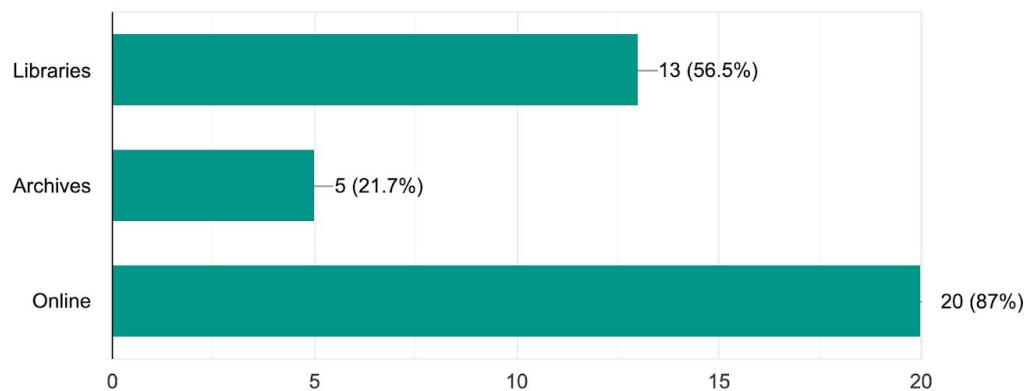
It is important to state, again, that the LCMQ dataset is the least nuanced, as it only consists of seven data points. However, treating this as though it were a bigger dataset, it is intriguing that the emotions felt more frequently in the midst of the research process are again different for LCMQ respondents. Feelings of being distracted, out of control, suspicious, frustrated, and bored become more frequent. Feelings of being overwhelmed and at ease become less frequent. Across all CMQ scores, feelings of curiosity remained high and consistent (with one hundred percent of respondents indicating that they felt this feeling to some degree, often strongly--see appendix). Feelings of confusion also remained somewhat consistent, though where markedly lower than curiosity.

Finally, RQ3 asks where individuals with high conspiracism go to conduct research. 41.7% of high CMQ scorers conducted research in physical places (libraries and archives); 29.4% of mid-level CMQ scorers conducted research in physical places; and 42.9% of low CMQ

scorers conducted research in physical places. Overall, the majority of respondents did not conduct research in physical places (62.3% answered “no” to the question of whether or not they did). Respondents overall also indicated that they prefer to conduct research online, as opposed to in libraries and archives.

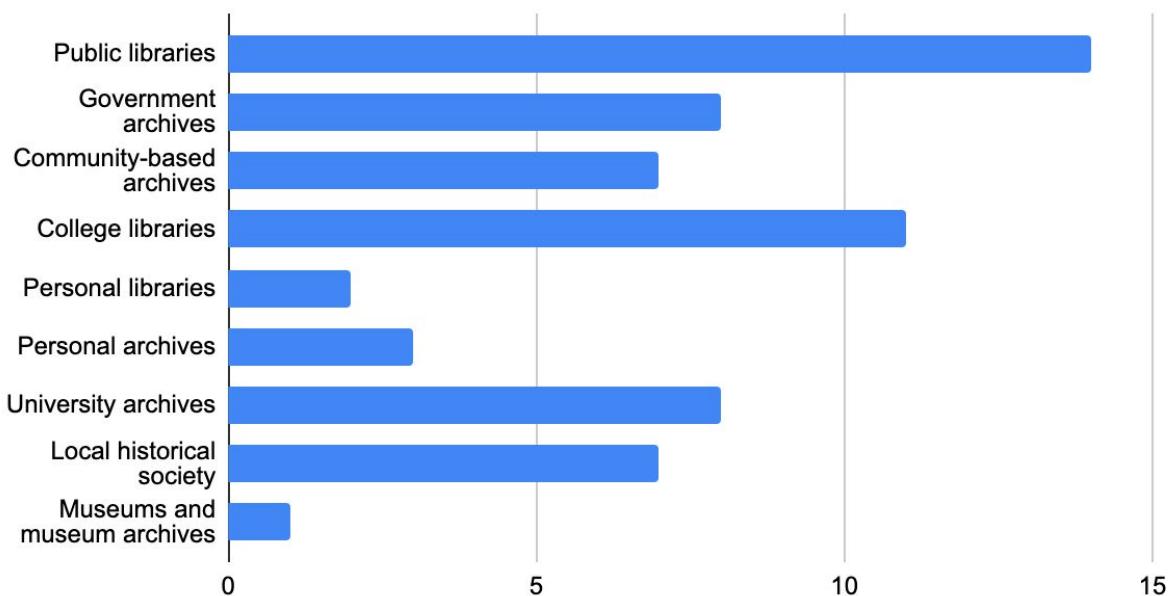
Where do you prefer to do research?

23 responses



Only 23 of 60 respondents total indicated that they conducted research in physical places. Of the fifteen high CMQ scorers who indicated they conducted research in physical places, 14 indicated that they do research in public libraries, 11 in college libraries, eight indicated government archives, seven checked off community-based archives, seven indicated local historical societies, three checked off personal archives, two checked off personal libraries, and one indicated museums and museum archives. For a comparison of these categories, see the figure below:

Research sites of high CMQ scorers who go to physical places to conduct research



Because data for this area are even thinner than previous data, with only 23 respondents' research practices being in-person at information institutions, I have opted to only visualize HCMQ data. These data indicate that HCMQ individuals who conduct their research in-person go to a wide variety of information institutions to do so, with public libraries, college libraries, and university archives being the most common.

The 23 out of 60 respondents who indicated that they conduct research in physical places indicated the following answers for the following questions:

1. When I do research in libraries, I feel like I can find what I'm looking for easily.
2. When I do research in an archive, I can find what I'm looking for easily.
3. When I am doing research online using a library database, I am usually able to find the information I'm looking for.
4. When I am doing research online using primary sources, or documents, the website is

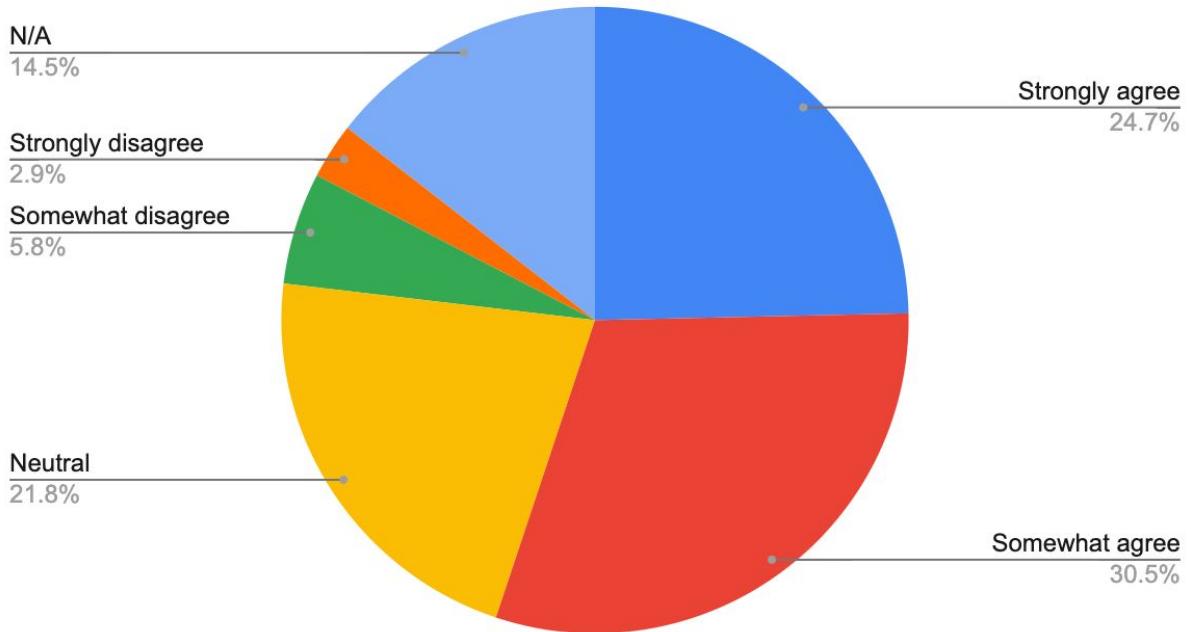
usually straightforward and I can find what I'm looking for.

5. When I have conducted research in an archive, the people who worked there were helpful.

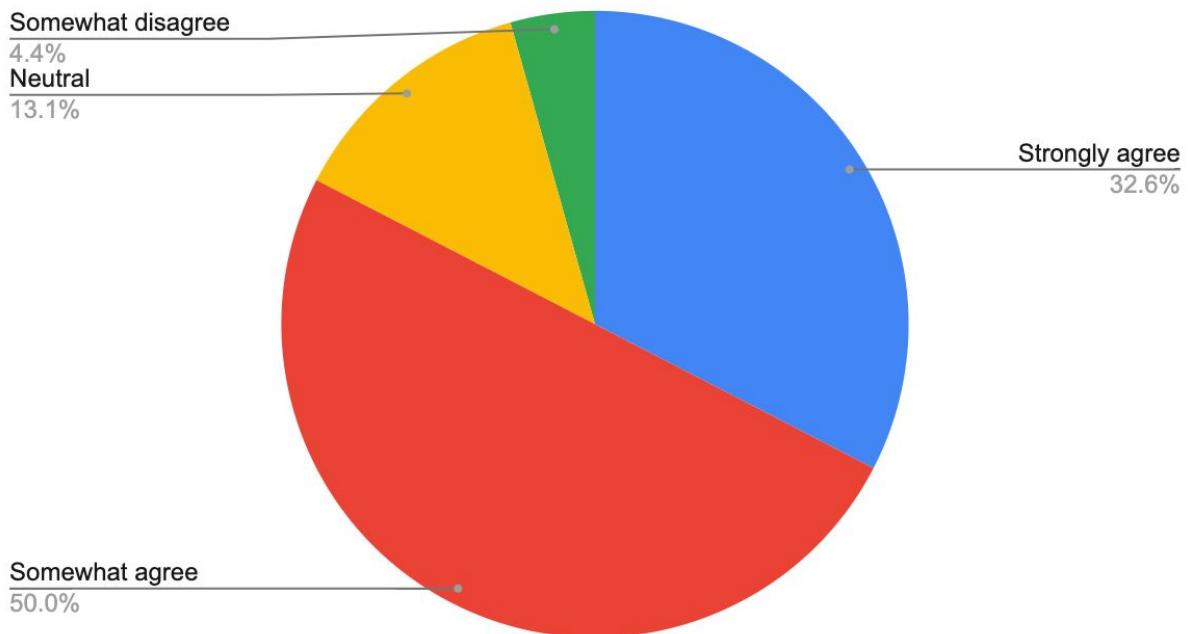
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	N/A
1	30.4%	43.50%	17.40%	8.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
2	8.70%	34.80%	26.10%	4.30%	4.30%	0.00%	21.70%
3	34.80%	56.50%	8.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
4	26.10%	34.80%	21.70%	13.00%	4.30%	0.00%	0.00%
5	39.10%	21.70%	17.40%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	21.70%

Extrapolating from this, these five questions can be divided into *archives* and *libraries* questions, with questions 1 and 3 referring to research in libraries, and questions 2, 4, and 5 referring to research in archives. From there, I determined the mean value for *archives* questions and *libraries*, giving me an impression of how the respondents felt about how easy or difficult it was to do research in an archive or a library. In this case, “strongly agree,” indicates that the experience with an archive or library was a positive one.

Overall ease of doing research in archives



Overall ease of doing research in libraries



As you can see, there were more mixed feelings about archives. In part, this was because a few of the respondents--14.5% of them--had not done research in archives, whereas all respondents indicated having done research in libraries. 82.6% of respondents indicated a positive experience doing research in libraries, whereas only 55.2% of respondents indicated a positive experience conducting research in archives. This finding is in line with literature in archival studies that indicates that archives struggle with user-friendliness more so than libraries.

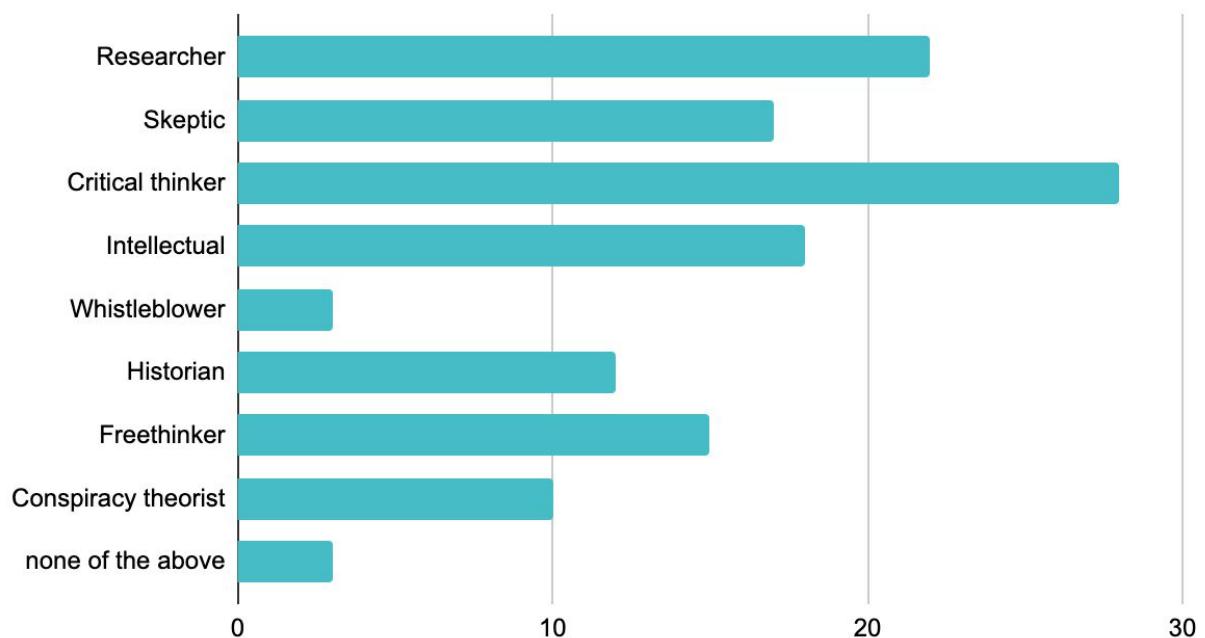
4

Although research-related identity was not one of my research questions, it is something that I am interested in in relation to this project. I provided several terms to choose from (“check all that apply”), derived from scholarly work that has been done on conspiracy theory, as well as conspiracists’ own vernacular. These included: “researcher,” “skeptic,” “critical thinker,” “whistleblower,” “intellectual,” “conspiracy theorist,” “freethinker,” “historian,” and “none of the above.” The table below includes the number of times each identity was indicated, which does not map onto the number of respondents, as this was a “check all that apply” question. Subsequently, I have included four bar charts below, indicating the distribution of HCMQ, MCMQ, and LCMQ respondents, and then all respondents.

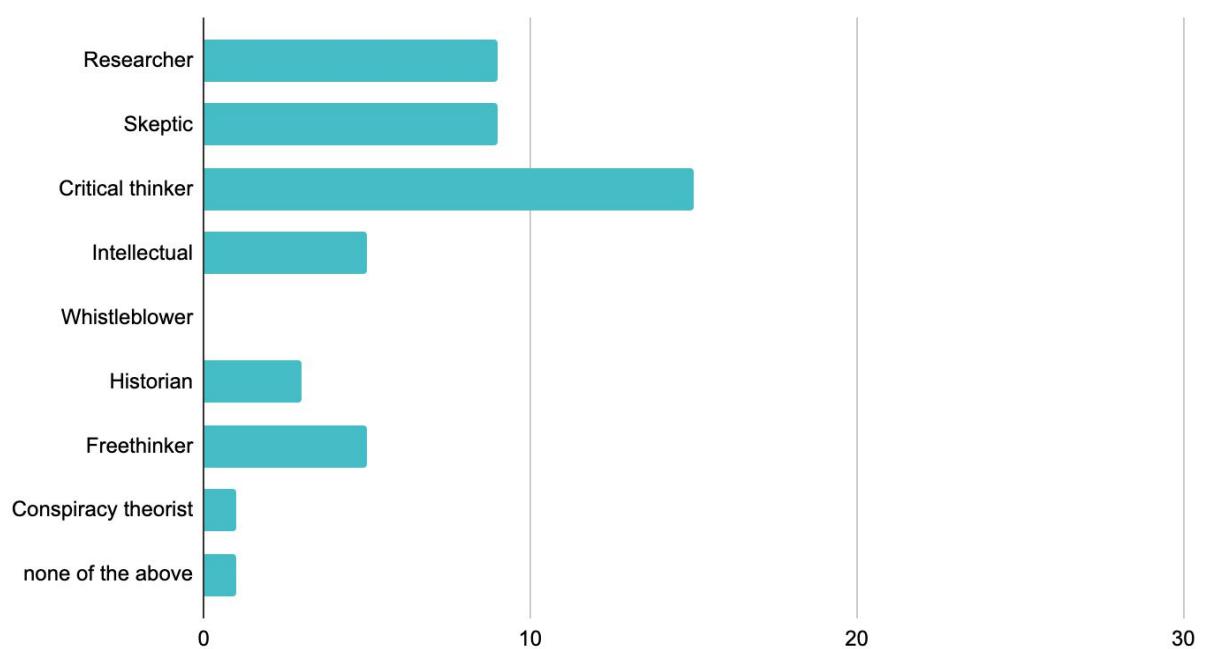
	Researcher	Skeptic	Critical thinker	Intellectual	Whistleblower	Historian	Freethinker	Conspiracy theorist	None of the above
HCMQ	22	17	28	18	3	12	15	10	3
MCMQ	9	9	15	5	0	3	5	1	1
LCMQ	4	4	4	1	0	1	3	0	1
TOTAL	35	30	47	24	3	16	23	11	5

⁴ 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>.

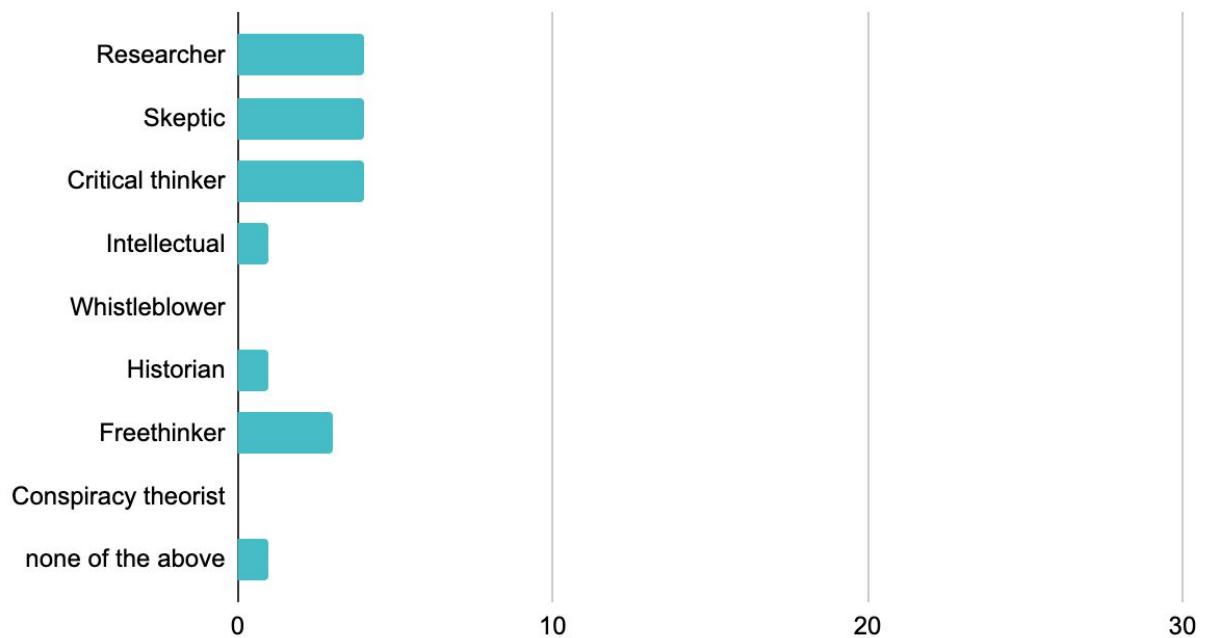
High CMQ Scorers' research identities



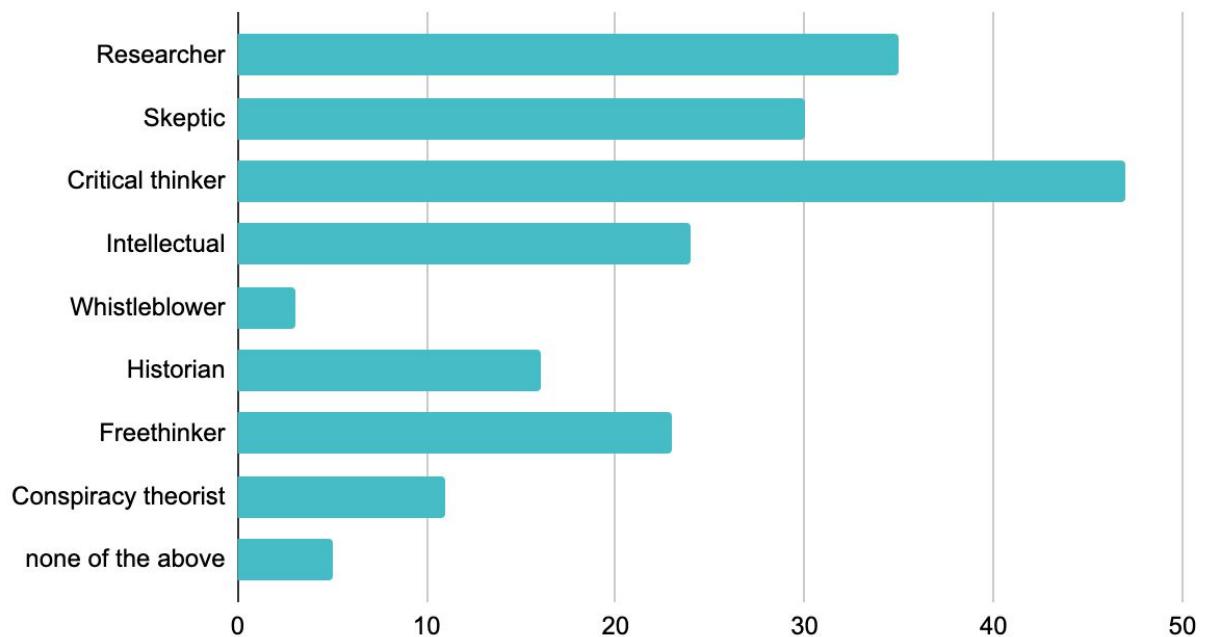
Mid-level CMQ scorers' research identities



Low CMQ scorers' research identities



Distribution of all respondents' research identities



Overall, the most popular designation among all three groups was “critical thinker,” followed by “researcher,” and then “skeptic.” HCMQ scorers were the most likely among the three classes to think of themselves as “conspiracy theorists.” HCMQ scorers were also the only group to self-identify as “whistleblowers,” but this may also be due to the level of detail available for the HCMQ dataset.

Working with this pilot data has given me several insights into how I will re-work this survey. First, if it would not be too intrusive a question, I want respondents to be able to indicate which forum, subreddit, or listserv they found the survey on. This way, I can see what the distributions are by subreddit, as well as by CMQ score. In this same vein, I want to distribute the survey to a much wider variety of subreddits and forum websites, so as to try to get a larger sample of MCMQ and LCMQ respondents. This may include r/genealogy, and other historical research subreddits and forums, as well as citizen science forums and listservs. It may be more difficult than I am anticipating to acquire an equivalent sample of LCMQ respondents, as the norm could be HCMQ.

Further, my data analysis techniques were equivalent to a layperson’s, as I have not yet had the opportunity to take a statistics course. I will be doing that in the next year or so to strengthen my data analysis skills. I also received some feedback from respondents via the posts I made on reddit--this is another thing I would need to incorporate into my survey: a space for general feedback--more than one user stated that they lived outside the United States, and that they felt that the media organizations listed and the political affiliations question did not apply to them, so they were not sure how to answer. As the CMQ is designed to be cross-cultural, I think

it is important that I revise these particular questions, as much as possible, to be internationally applicable.

Overall, I felt that the questionnaire as it is now does a relatively good job of answering my research questions. I think that more detailed data, and a more nuanced analysis of such data, would reveal a lot more about the answers to my research questions than I was able to in this paper. Because my questions are comparative, it is of particular importance that a detailed set of MCMQ and LCMQ data be obtained for the full study.

Appendix

Full distribution of questionnaire responses listed below. For this full distribution, I have not subdivided into the HCMQ, MCMQ, and LCMQ classes--rather, I include responses from respondents overall.

For the full questionnaire, please visit this link: <https://forms.gle/bjDBoSr7XRDiBMgq5>

Question	Response options	No of respondents indicating option & percentage
How frequently do you do in-depth research on a single topic?	1-2 times per week	13 (20.30%)
	3-4 times per week	16 (25%)
	A couple of times a month	10 (15.60%)
	Every day	14 (21.90%)
	I don't do research	4 (6.30%)
	Less than twice a month	7 (10.90%)
When you do in-depth research, on average, how many sources do you consult?	1-5	17 (28.30%)
	11-20	12 (20%)
	6-10	25 (41.70%)
	More than 20	6 (10%)
What makes you want to do research?	OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: unique answers provided, too long to list here	
I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about	Strongly agree	27 (45%)

	Agree	28 (46.70%)
	Neutral	5 (8.30%)
I think that politicians usually do not tell us the motivations for their decisions	Strongly agree	26 (43.30%)
	Agree	25 (41.70%)
	Neutral	6 (10.00%)
	Disagree	3 (5.00%)
I think that government agencies closely monitor all citizens	Strongly agree	11 (18.70%)
	Agree	17 (28.30%)
	Neutral	16 (26.70%)
	Disagree	10 (16.70%)
	Strongly disagree	3 (5.00%)
	Don't know	3 (5.07%)
I think that events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities	Strongly agree	4 (6.70%)
	Agree	7 (11.70%)
	Neutral	21 (35.00%)
	Disagree	14 (23.30%)
	Strongly disagree	10 (16.70%)
	Don't know	4 (6.70%)
I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.	Agree	23 (39.00%)
	Disagree	11 (18.60%)

	Neutral	10 (16.90%)
	Strongly agree	10 (16.90%)
	Strongly disagree	5 (8.50%)
Trust in following news sources:		
	CNN	26 (44.8%)
	Wikipedia	30 (50%)
	InfoWars	1 (1.8%)
	Public libraries	50 (84.7%)
	Fox News	5 (8.5%)
	The Library of Congress	34 (60.7%)
	University libraries	51 (85%)
	The Atlantic	18 (32.1%)
	The National Archives	37 (64.9%)
	MSNBC	12 (21.1%)
	The New York Times	29 (50%)
How confident were you, overall, in assessing the trustworthiness of the organizations listed in the previous question (number 4), on a scale of 1 - 5 (1 being not at all confident, 5 being wholly confident)?	confident (score of 4 or 5)	38 (63.3%)
I tend to do research on a lot of topics at once.	Strongly agree	12 (20%)
	Agree	22 (36.70%)
	Neutral	6 (10.00%)
	Disagree	17 (28.30%)
	Strongly disagree	3 (28.30%)
I have been researching the same topic(s) for	Strongly agree	16 (26.70%)

months or years.		
	Agree	32 (53.30%)
	Neutral	6 (10%)
	Disagree	4 (6.70%)
	Strongly disagree	2 (3.30%)
I find myself getting “sucked in” to the research process when I am interested in a topic.	Strongly agree	36 (61.00%)
	Agree	15 (25.40%)
	Neutral	5 (8.50%)
	Disagree	3 (5.10%)
	Strongly disagree	0 (0%)
I get bored easily when conducting research into a topic that I initially found interesting.	Strongly agree	1 (1.70%)
	Agree	4 (6.90%)
	Neutral	9 (15.50%)
	Disagree	36 (62.10%)
	Strongly disagree	8 (14.8%)

When doing in-depth research, please rate all emotions you feel AT THE BEGINNING/ IN THE MIDST of the research process on a scale of 1 to 5. If you do not feel one of the emotions at all, please indicate 1. Indicate 5 if you feel the emotion very strongly.

Emotion	Point in process	strong	mid-level	low	none
Overwhelmed	Beginning	14 (23.3%)	14 (23.3%)	18 (30%)	14 (23.3%)
	Midst	12 (20%)	23 (38.3%)	13 (21.7%)	12 (20%)
At ease	Beginning	30 (50%)	15 (25%)	12 (20%)	3 (5%)
	Midst	23 (39%)	20 (33.9%)	10	6 (10.2%)

				(16.9%)	
Distracted	Beginning	13 (21.7%)	11 (18.3%)	(21.7%)	23 (38.3%)
	Midst	7 (12.1%)	12 (20.7%)	(34.5%)	19 (32.8%)
Excited	Beginning	46 (76.7%)	7 (11.7%)	4 (6.7%)	3 (5.0%)
	Midst	33 (55.9%)	16 (27.1%)	5 (8.5%)	5 (8.5%)
Out of control	Beginning	6 (10%)	8 (13.3%)	(23.3%)	32 (53.3%)
	Midst	3 (5.2%)	7 (12.1%)	(22.4%)	35 (60.3%)
Suspicious	Beginning	15 (25%)	12 (20%)	(28.3%)	16 (26.7%)
	Midst	13 (22.0%)	21 (35.6%)	(20.3%)	13 (22.0%)
Frustrated	Beginning	9 (15%)	11 (18.3%)	(33.3%)	20 (33.30%)
	Midst	7 (11.9%)	20 (33.9%)	(23.7%)	18 (30.5%)
Curious	Beginning	59 (98.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0%)
	Midst	50 (84.7%)	6 (10.2%)	3 (5.1%)	0 (0%)
Skeptical	Beginning	21 (35.6%)	23 (39%)	(18.6%)	4 (6.8%)
	Midst	17 (28.8%)	19 (32.2%)	(23.7%)	9 (15.3%)
Bored	Beginning	4 (6.7%)	5 (6.3%)	(23.3%)	37 (61.7%)
	Midst	2 (3.4%)	7 (11.9%)	(32.2%)	31 (52.2%)
Confused	Beginning	11 (18.3%)	17 (28.3%)	(21.7%)	19 (31.7%)
	Midst	7 (11.9%)	19 (32.2%)	(25.4%)	18 (30.5%)

What is the purpose of your research? (check all that apply)	Curiosity	56
	Investigation	24
	Writing a book	6
	Casual interest	46
	Blogging	7
	Other	6
Do you go to physical places to do your research? ("yes" directs to next section)	Yes	23 (38.3%)
	No	37 (61.7%)
Check off the types of places you have visited:	Public libraries	14
	Government archives	8
	Community-based archives	7
	College libraries	11
	Personal libraries	2
	Personal archives	3
	University archives	8
	Local historical society	7
	Museums and museum archives	1
Where do you prefer to do research?	Libraries	13 (56.5%)
	Archives	5 (21.7%)
	Online	20 (87%)

1. When I do research in libraries, I feel like I can find what I'm looking for easily.
2. When I do research in an archive, I can find what I'm looking for easily.

3. When I am doing research online using a library database, I am usually able to find the information I'm looking for.
4. When I am doing research online using primary sources, or documents, the website is usually straightforward and I can find what I'm looking for.
5. When I have conducted research in an archive, the people who worked there were helpful.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	N/A
1	7 (30.4%)	10 (43.5%)	4 (17.4%)	(8.7%) 2	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
2	2 (8.7%)	8 (34.8%)	6 (26.1%)	(4.3%) 1	(4.3%) 1	0.00%	(21.7%) 5
3	8 (34.8%)	13 (56.5%)	6 (8.7%)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
4	26.10%	34.80%	5 (21.7%)	13.00%	4.30%	0.00%	0.00%
5	9 (39.1%)	5 (21.7%)	4 (17.4%)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	(21.7%) 5

Where do you go to do research online? (check all that apply)	Wikipedia	52
	Google	58
	YouTube	32
	Facebook	12
	Reddit	48
	Library websites	44
	News websites	51
	Blogs	40

	Library databases	40
	Archive websites	46
	Other	12
EXPERIMENTAL SECTION	Total responses	Number/ % trust (score of 4 or higher)
Quotation of “In October 2017, the National Archives declassified a cache of documents related to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Not much new information was contained in these documents. The remaining documents that are still classified--less than 1%--likely pose national security risks.” as attributed to:		
The New York Times	11	5 (45.5%)
The National Archives	21	9 (42.9%)
InfoWars	5	2 (40%)
an academic article	12	2 (16.7%)
a user in r/conspiracy	12	1 (8.3%)
Do you consider yourself to be any of the following? Check all that apply.	Researcher	35 (18%)
	Skeptic	30 (15.5%)
	Critical thinker	47 (24.2%)
	Intellectual	24 (12.4%)
	Whistleblower	3 (1.5%)

	Historian	16 (8.2%)
	Freethinker	23 (11.9%)
	Conspiracy theorist	11 (5.7%)
	none of the above	5 (2.6%)
Age	Under 18	2 (3.30%)
	18-24	12 (20%)
	25-35	26 (43.30%)
	36-56	17 (28.30%)
	57-67	2 (3.30%)
	68-75	1 (1.70%)
Education level	Some high school	1 (1.70%)
	High school diploma	5 (8.50%)
	Some college	13 (22.00%)
	College diploma	20 (33.90%)
	Some graduate school	8 (13.60%)
	Master's level degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)	11 (18.60%)
	Doctoral degree (PhD, M.D., etc.)	1 (1.70%)
Political affiliation	Strong democrat	8 (14.30%)
	Democrat	10 (17.90%)
	Democrat-leaning independent	7 (12.50%)
	Independent	5 (8.90%)
	Republican-leaning independent	4 (7.10%)
	Republican	1 (1.80%)
	Strong republican	0 (0.00%)
	Other	21 (37.50%)

Record of Advising History

Prof. Johanna Drucker: Advisor Fall 2016 – Winter 2018

Prof. Sarah T. Roberts: Advisor Winter 2018 – current

Whenever I speak to potential students—Master’s level and PhD—about the program at UCLA, I always emphasize the fact that working with the faculty of UCLA Information Studies is a significant merit of the program; it is not an exaggeration to say that they lead the field. I have been lucky enough to have been advised by two members of Information Studies faculty over the course of my time in the program: Dr. Johanna Drucker and Dr. Sarah Roberts. Dr. Drucker brought me into the program and advised me for the first critical year of my time here. A challenging period for a doctoral student, her support and the encouragement of my cohort kept me moving forward in the program. She consistently invited me to follow my research interests, held me to a high standard, and allowed me to flourish intellectually. I also had the opportunity to be a Special Reader for her class, IS 211: Artifacts and Cultures, in the Fall of 2017. This was my first foray into grading and teaching, and Dr. Drucker was instrumental in giving me the basis for understanding what it takes to teach a large class of masters-level students.

In part because of Dr. Drucker’s emphasis on following my own intellectual path, I found myself drawn towards social-science-informed research on Internet cultures of conspiracy theorists. After having taken a class with Dr. Roberts in Spring 2017, I felt that her expertise and advising style would fit my needs going forward. Since she has started advising me in Winter 2018, I have found that I have been able to hone my research topic down to a manageable project appropriate for dissertation work. Prior to my advancing to doctoral candidacy, Dr. Roberts and I would have quarterly meetings in which she would check on my progress and give pointed guidance. She has also been available by email. Dr. Roberts helped me to devise a plan for post-proposal-defense: after advancing to doctoral candidacy, I have been focusing on finishing up my MLIS, after which I will begin dissertating in earnest. In every advising session, Dr. Roberts

has a wealth of knowledge and encouragement to share with me. She is exactly the kind of mentor that I hope to be.

I have been helped and guided intellectually by many faculty members in this department. In my first year here, Dr. Jonathan Furner provided me with theoretical as well as practical direction. He has always had his door open to me, so to speak. In the following years, members of my dissertation committee, including Dr. Gregory Leazer and Dr. Safiya Noble, have challenged and guided me consistently through the development of my dissertation work, and beyond that as well. I also want to acknowledge the guidance I received in putting together the paperwork for petitioning Graduate Division for the dual MLIS-PhD degree. Dr. Leah Lievrouw, Dr. Sarah Roberts, Michelle Maye, any Amy Gershon were particularly helpful in putting the paperwork together, as well as Dr. Shawn Vancour and Dr. Michelle Caswell. Dr. Vancour likewise was a considerate mentor when I worked with him as a TA for IS 30: Internet & Society, in Fall 2018. Prof. Vancour ensured that I had multiple opportunities to lead the class in lectures and activities, asked my input in all aspects of the class, allowed me to be an active participant in the teaching process from start to finish.

Overall, I have been supported and guided by many members of IS faculty, and I am very grateful for the advice and direction I have received from multiple members of faculty and staff, as well as the freedom I have had to pursue my own intellectual interests. Although my research exists in a kind of interdisciplinary no-mans-land, connected to archives, knowledge organization, information seeking, and internet studies, I appreciate that when faculty have told me to focus my research, they never demean its interdisciplinarity. As information studies is itself an interdisciplinary meta-field, I feel this shows a deep understanding of the question we seem to always be asking ourselves and our students: *what is information studies?*

Yvonne M. Eadon

Doctoral Candidate
Dept. of Information Studies
UCLA

CURRICULUM VITAE

CONTACT

Email: ymeadon@gmail.com

Phone: 661-312-7880

EDUCATION

University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2010-Spring 2014

B.A. Comparative Literature (major language English, minor language French)

GPA: 3.9

Graduated in Spring 2014 with Highest Honors in the Major and High Distinction in General Scholarship

University of California, Los Angeles, started Fall 2016

MLIS student and PhD candidate in Information Studies

GPA as of Winter 2019: 3.96

Advanced to Candidacy Fall 2019

Concurrent degree objective approved Fall 2019

ACADEMIC HONORS AND AWARDS

Recipient of the 2014 Departmental Citation for Comparative Literature, for Overall Academic Excellence in Comparative Literature
Spring 2014

Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society
Member, nominated Spring 2014

Martin and Bernard Breslauer Fellow
2016-2017 Academic Year

Recipient of the Hoyt Memorial Scholarship
Spring 2019

RESEARCH

Comparative Literature Honors Thesis, UC Berkeley, Spring 2014, advised by Professors Joseph Lavery and Namwali Serpell

- Title: "Materialist Materiality: Anti-capitalist Resistance Through Sincerity, Alternative Economic Structures and Fetishization in the Book Design and Textual work of William Morris and Dave Eggers."

Yvonne M. Eadon

Doctoral Candidate
Dept. of Information Studies
UCLA

- Received a grade of “A” for the Honors Thesis.
- Honors Thesis led to nomination for and award of the Comparative Literature Departmental Citation.

Graduate Summer Research Mentorship, advised by Professor Sarah T. Roberts, Summer 2018

- Received funding to conduct original research in the summer of 2018
- Traveled to three distinct locations in the U.S. to interview reference personnel who had interacted with individuals doing research into conspiracy theories. Conducted a total of ten hour-long interviews with seven interviewees.

Graduate Research Mentorship, advised by Professor Sarah T. Roberts, 2019 - 2020 Academic Year

- Received funding to conduct original research during the 2019 - 2020 academic year.
- Designed and piloted a survey instrument, revision and submission to UCLA IRB in process.

PUBLICATIONS

Eadon, Yvonne. 2019. “‘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 (2). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7pv1s9p7>.

“(Not) Part of the System: Resolving epistemic disconnect through archival reference,” *in press* Special issue of *Knowledge Organization*, devoted to “Politics, Culture, and the Organization of Knowledge.”

TEACHING

Information Studies 211: Artifacts and Cultures

Special Reader for Professor Johanna Drucker, Fall 2017

- Assisted with in-class activities and group work.
- Held office hours weekly.
- Assisted Prof. Drucker with grading student work.

Information Studies 30: Internet and Society

Teaching Assistant for Professor Shawn Vancour, Fall 2018

- Assisted with in-class activities and group work.
- Held office hours weekly.
- Assisted Prof. Vancour in planning class sessions.
- Assisted Prof. Vancour with grading on a weekly basis.
- Conducted two lectures and led three group activities in the course of the quarter.

Yvonne M. Eadon

Doctoral Candidate
Dept. of Information Studies
UCLA

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Kenneth Karmiol Symposium in Archival Studies, January 2018, UCLA

Panel Presenter

- Symposium title: “[dis]memory, [mis]representation & [re]figuring the archival lens: A Symposium on Visual Archives & Forms of Representation.”
- Sat on a panel titled: “[mis]representation: Considerations of inaccuracies, multiplicities, dualities and power in portrayals.”
- Presented a paper entitled: “Illuminat(ing) the Archives: Conspiracy Theorists as Researchers in Archives”
 - Paper examined how members of an online community of conspiracy theorist researchers interact with and talk about the digitized JFK Assassination documents released by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 2017.

Archival Education and Research Institute, July 2018, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa

Panel Presenter

- Presented a paper entitled: “Folk Sociologists’ in the Archives: Conspiracy Researchers as an Archival User Group.”
 - Paper introduced the concept of a “conspiracy researcher,” or someone who researches conspiracy theories within information institutions.

Association of Internet Researchers Doctoral Colloquium, October 2018, Montréal, Canada

Participant

- Workshopped a paper entitled: “A Moment of Creepiness: The Imagined Infrastructure of Facebook Advertising.”

Society for Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting, September 2019,

New Orleans, Louisiana

- In collaboration with James Hodges, a doctoral candidate at Rutgers, proposed an open session entitled “Counter-Hegemonic Epistemologies as Innovation and/ or Contestation.”
- Panel was accepted, and received over twenty submissions.
- Collaboratively curated submissions into three distinct panels.
- Co-chaired all three sessions.
- Presented paper entitled, “Silences, Imaginaries, Ethics, and Mistrust: Identifying and Interacting with Suspicious Researchers in Archives.”

ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

InterActions Editor, 2018 - present

- Works with three other editors to put out bi-annual issues of the UCLA Graduate

Yvonne M. Eadon

Doctoral Candidate
Dept. of Information Studies
UCLA

School of Education and Information Studies Departmental Journal, *InterActions*.

- Facilitates quarterly writing workshops.
- Brings accepted submissions through the editorial process of peer review, copyediting, and editor comments; works directly with the author to get the manuscript up to publishable standards.
- Publishes issues through eScholarship and Issu.

Doctoral Program Committee Member, 2019 - 2020 Academic Year

- Participates in monthly meetings with faculty members and administrators who make up DPC
- Reviews applications to doctoral program and participates in interviews and decision-making

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

UCLA Library Special Collections Digital Forensics Lab

Center for Primary Research and Training (CFPRT) Scholar, June 2017 – June 2018

- Collaboratively helped to develop an archival workflow for born-digital materials.
- Designed a 3D-printed housing unit for a 5.25 inch floppy disk drive.
- Developed an archival processing workflow using the digital forensics software “Forensics Toolkit,” (FTK) designed for law enforcement use but appropriated for use in born-digital archives.
 - Designed, wrote and co-taught a two-session workshop for processing archivists about what FTK is and how archivists can use it for processing born-digital files.
- Participated in the revision process of “the Archivist’s Guide to KryoFlux,” an award-winning multi-institution collaborative guide for digital archivists using the KryoFlux (hardware used for imaging obsolete media).

William Andrews Clark Memorial Library

Temporary Processing Archivist, June 2017 – August 2017

- Processed the archive of the Rounce & Coffin club in full.
 - Appraised the collection, accessioning copies of documents and financially sensitive documents.
 - Arranged the collection.
 - Created a finding aid for the collection using ArchivesSpace.

The 1947 Partition Archive

Digital Archivist, May 2014-December 2014; *Oral History Program Coordinator*, January 2015-August 2016

- Trained and supervised a team of Digital Archivist interns in an archival workflow that included recording metadata, cataloguing, and working with Amazon S3 and Glacier.
- Supervised a global team of 200 volunteers.
- Responsible in part for supervising a team of eight paid interview collectors

Yvonne M. Eadon

Doctoral Candidate
Dept. of Information Studies
UCLA

working in the field in India and Pakistan

- Responsible in part for the 2016 revision of the “Oral History Documents,”
- Scheduled, organized and led monthly global team meetings, in which the global team met online to discuss that month’s fieldwork.
- Collaborated with colleagues in large-scale fundraising and crowdfunding campaigns.