(Not) Part of the System:
Resolving Epistemic Disconnect
Through Archival Reference

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Abstract: Information seeking practices of conspiracists are examined by introducing the new archival user group of "conspiracist researchers." The epistemic commitments of archival knowledge organization (AKO), rooted in provenance and access/secrecy, fundamentally conflict with the epistemic features of conspiracism, namely: mistrust of authority figures and institutions, accompanying overreliance on firsthand inquiry, and a tendency towards indicative mood/confirmation bias. Through interviews with reference personnel working at two state archives in the American west, I illustrate that the reference interaction is a vital turning point for the conspiracist researcher. Reference personnel can build trust with conspiracist researchers by displaying epistemic empathy and subverting hegemonic archival logics. The burden of bridging the epistemic gap through archival user education thus falls almost exclusively onto reference personnel. Domain analysis is presented as one possible starting point for developing an archival knowledge organization system (AKOS) that could be more epistemically flexible.

1.0 Introduction

Kony Rowe, creator of the popular 9/11 truth film *Loose Change*, responded to accusations that his film contained several inaccuracies 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" (as quoted by David Aaronovitch 2010, 14). Similarly, Rob Brotherton (2014, 227) references the notorious David Icke, propagator of the theory that all powerful figures are secretly large 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.'" The call to "do one's own research" is a frequent one among conspiracy theorists. Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming (2014, 54) have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of "folk sociology." Research practices among conspiracists, however, remain under-examined and

undertheorized. This exploratory study constitutes a first step into the arena of theorizing their information seeking behaviors and research needs.

The information seeking behaviors of conspiratorially-minded[1] individuals are notably different from other user groups who do their research in information institutions. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, their epistemic outlook is often incongruous with the epistemological commitments upon which the institution's knowledge organization systems (KOS) are founded. This paper introduces and seeks to understand the "conspiracist researcher," an individual whose epistemic outlook exists somewhere on the continuum of conspiracism (Figure 1), and who conducts primary-source research both online and within physical archives. Conspiracist researchers need not be researching a specific conspiracy theory, nor do they have to believe in any specific conspiracy theory. Their existence as a user group is determined according to their epistemic outlook(s).
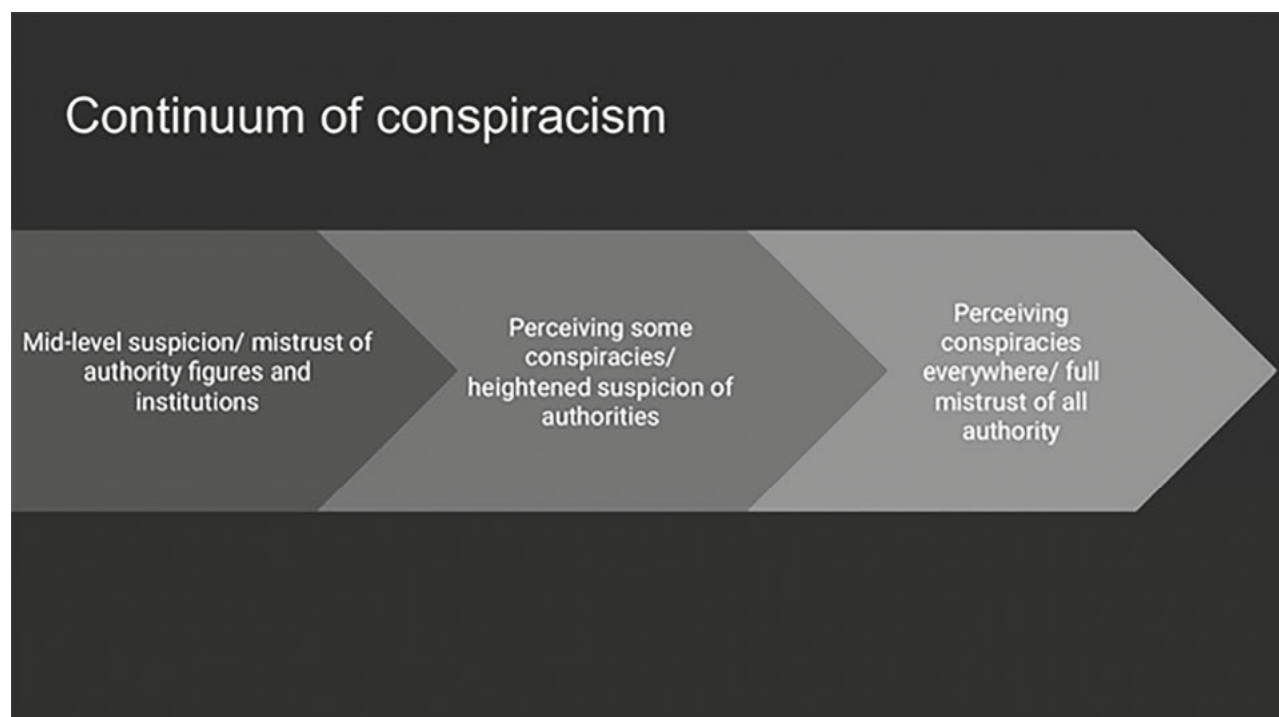
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Figure 1. The continuum of conspiracism.

Thomas Milan Konda (2019, 5) analyzes conspiracism both psychologically and epistemologically. From his viewpoint, philosophers working within epistemology have discussed conspiracy theories, but the majority of these conversations have either discussed the challenges of defining "conspiracy theory" (Dentith 2016, 573), or have centered around whether or not conspiracy theorizing is justifiable or reasonable as a form of sense-making (Coady 2012, 111-37; Dentith 2014, 14-18). The psychological approach, on the other hand, "deals with the question of why people believe in conspiracy theories" (Milan Konda 2019, 3). As stated above, my approach to discussing conspiracist researchers addresses the epistemological, on an individual level. However, my approach will not expressly confront the what and the why, as Milan-Konda's did—instead, I will examine the "how" of the information seeking process, especially as it relates to conspiracists' encounters with the archival knowledge organization systems (AKOS) of the two state archives included in my case study. Put a different way, I am interested in what makes conspiracist researchers a uniquely challenging user group within government-sponsored information institutions. Whereas many user groups make themselves distinct according to what they are researching (e.g., genealogists), working on (e.g., writers) or their level of education and/or status (e.g., academics), epistemology is what makes conspiracist researchers distinct. Conspiracist epistemic outlook can be characterized by mistrust, opposition to authority and officiality, indicative mood, and an insider/outsider attitude towards knowledge. My research

questions are as follows: 1) How are conspiracist researchers epistemically distinct?; and, 2) How do reference personnel working in two state archives resolve disconnect(s) between archival logics and conspiracist logics?

Provenance, as opposed to content- or subject-based systems of classification, is the primary classificatory logic of archives. Since the late twentieth century, scholars in archival studies have questioned what exactly provenance refers to, and reconsidered the field's commitment to the principle (Horsman 2002). I will show that, at the institutions in this case study, staff have subverted the powerful organizing logic of provenance through in-person reference work. The reference personnel I spoke with operated as a kind of bridge between provenance-based KOS and researcher. Flexible and adaptable to both KOS standards and user needs, these reference personnel are at once working part of the AKOS, and outside of it, able to subvert and make workable its epistemological commitments. The reference personnel I spoke with practiced epistemic empathy (a term primarily used in education, see Horsthemke 2015) as a technique for one-on-one archival user education. With the particular user group of conspiracist researchers, reference personnel had to put aside their own epistemic commitments, and those of their institutional AKOS, in order to connect with and assist researchers. The burgeoning field of archival knowledge organization (AKO), as well as the larger fields of knowledge organization and archival studies, must begin to address the importance of the reference interaction for epistemically unique groups and the ways in

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which reference functions—or has the potential to function—as a part of a system of archival user education and, indeed, as a facet of functional (archival) KOS.

In Section 2 I introduce conspiracist epistemology, existing on a continuum. In Section 3 I begin by illustrating the ontological and epistemological knowledge organizational logics present in most archives, including the two state archives in this case study: provenance and access/secrecy. I will subsequently illustrate how the conspiracist epistemic logics detailed in Section 2 conflict with these archival logics. This section is concluded with a summary of the barriers for doing research in archives, particularly for conspiracist researchers. My method, which is based in grounded theory and qualitative semi-structured interviewing, is presented in Section 4. Section 5 includes both data and analysis, giving examples of reference encounters with conspiracist researchers, how reference personnel attempt to build trust with conspiracist researchers (such as explaining archival processes, going above and beyond in their effort, and practicing transparency). Finally, in Section 6 I begin to consider the question of what an epistemically flexible AKOS could look like, through the lens of domain analysis, and I conclude by gesturing towards further research.

2.0 Conspiracy theorists, epistemology, and expertise

2.1 Some definitions: conspiracy, conspiracist, conspiracist researcher

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 (2014, 23) 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." 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. Dentith (*ibid.,* 30) goes on to define a conspiracy theory as any speculation about an event that alleges conspiratorial causes for that event. This definition allows for conspiracy theorists to be discussed in terms of their myriad actions and beliefs, not simply their political, historical or cultural function. It is important to note here that not all conspiracy theories are false by virtue of their status as such.

Jack Braitch (2008) differentiates between "conspiracy theorizing" and "conspiracism." In his words (2008, 4), conspiracism "gathers conspiracy theories together under the unity of an 'ism' to describe a body of thought that regards conspiracies as a driving force in history." Braitch points out that this term is often employed as a way to talk about conspiracy theorizing as a potentially dangerous social phenomenon. Thomas Milan-Konda (2019, 2) defines conspiracism as "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." Based in Daniel and Jason Freeman's hierarchy of paranoia (2005, 80), the continuum of conspiracism (Figure 1) is a way of conceptualizing cospiracism on a trajectory or spectrum, with perception of conspiracies and mistrust of authority as operating principles. On one end of the continuum, there is mistrust of some authorities and perception of some conspiracies, and, on the other, mistrust of all authority figures and perception of conspiracies everywhere. It bears repeating that, especially on the milder end of the spectrum, "perception of conspiracies" does not necessarily equate to perception of "false" conspiracies, and "mistrust of authority" does not necessarily equate to "unfounded" mistrust of authority.

Braitch (2008, 5) also discusses several other terms related to conspiracism, including "conspiracy research," which he says "attempts to authorize and legitimize the knowledge claims of the enterprise. Calling it 'research' obviously tries to give the accounts intellectual grounding in social science or journalism." Yet if the kind of information seeking that conspiracists conduct is not research, then what is it? I am combining the terms "conspiracism," and "conspiracy research" by introducing the notion of "conspiracist research," as a way to emphasize the kind of mental framework that is present (conspiracism, as Milan-Konda defined it) and the fact that it involves information seeking (research).

Conspiracist researchers operate on a different kind of epistemic wavelength than state archives and their staff. But how, exactly, are they epistemically distinct from staff and from other user groups? There is certainly a rift between how conspiracist researchers think about knowledge production within archives and how archivists think about knowledge production within archives. Conspiracist researchers demonstrate three main epistemological commitments: mistrust or suspicion of the repository at which they are conducting research, the people who work there, and/or the government writ large; inherent opposition to the official story, narrative, or evidence (related to this is a general opposition to experts and "epistemic authorities") (Jane and Fleming 2015, 135); and a tendency towards an "indicative mood" (Kuhlthau 1991, 363, citing Kelly 1963), that is, an attitude towards research in which the researcher holds on to the ideas she has already formed, "reject[ing] new information and ideas." An individual need not demonstrate all of these epistemic commitments at once in order to be considered a conspiracist researcher, though some conspiracist researchers do.

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2.2 Epistemic characteristics of conspiracists

Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009, 204) argue that belief in conspiracy theories is caused by a "crippled epistemology" on the part of the conspiracist, which is a result of "a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational resources." Beyond the disturbingly ableist terminological choice, this perspective lacks nuance. What determines the relevance of an informational resource? Who has access to which resources? What role might epistemology actively play in such questions of access and relevance? Further, Sunstein and Vermeule go on to argue that "crippled epistemology" comes out of conspiracists producing knowledge within "isolated epistemic communities" (Dentith 2016, 576). That is, conspiracists engage in information seeking and knowledge production within communities that are cut off from outside epistemic influences. While this may be true of some conspiracists, the existence of conspiracist researchers proves this to not always be the case.

Dismissing conspiracy epistemology, as Sunstein and Vermeule do, fails to recognize its critical potential. Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of "folk sociology." Harambam and Aupers (2014, 466) argue that conspiracy theorists resist scientific dogma by redefining and reshaping the boundaries of scientific knowledge, "compet[ing] with (social) scientists in complex battles for epistemic authority." In many ways, theorizing conspiracies functions as one counter-hegemonic method for subverting authoritative systems and institutions, especially those that are actively dismissive of what they see and label as irrational.

Conspiracy theorizing can thus be considered a justifiable reaction to decreased control over knowledge caused by the division of labor. Jane and Fleming (2014, 54; emphasis added) argue:

> 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.

Conspiracist thought has, in some sense, exaggerated Enlightenment epistemological notions: skepticism becomes mistrust of authority; privileging first-hand inquiry and independent thinking turns into sole reliance on one's own observations and rejection of all mediated information. Jane and Fleming's ideas evoke Michael Buckland's (2017, 11) notion of contemporary society as a document society (in contrast to the oft-invoked "information society"), in which humans rely on increasingly mediated forms of information, often in the form of documents. The tradeoff for more leisure time[2] and more informational resources is that a given individual has less control over his or her informational environment. Whitson and Galinsky (2008, 115) found that inducing a lack of control results in an increase of illusory pattern perception, including "seeing images in noise, forming illusory correlations in stock market information, perceiving conspiracies, and developing superstitions." Confusion and feelings of being out of control can thus have a massive impact on pattern perception. Whitson and Galinsky's findings complement Jane and Fleming's (2014, 54) suggestion that the more knowledge is mediated through documentary means, the less control individuals have, and the more suspicious or skeptical they might become.

Conspiracist mistrust of authority figures and institutions goes hand-in-hand with an overreliance on first-hand observation and experience. In other words, "authority is displaced to the self, as the individual subject as the arbiter and final court of all knowledge claims" (Jane and Fleming 2014, 47-48). Such overreliance or overconfidence in one's own observations, memories, and knowledge can lead to characteristic "confirmatory reasoning," otherwise known as confirmation bias (the tendency to fit new information into one's extant worldview or narrative). Indeed, Freeman and Freeman (2008, 120) go as far as to link this style of reasoning directly to generalized suspicion: "even at the mildest end of the paranoid spectrum, there's a clear link between a confirmatory style of reasoning and suspicious thoughts." Confirmatory reasoning can have a profound effect on information seeking styles. Carol C. Kuhlthau (1991, 363), in the framework she devised to support her information search process (ISP) model, cites George Kelly's indicative and invitational moods as part of her framework: "Kelly describes two attitudes, referred to as moods, which an individual may assume during the phases of construction: invitational, which leaves the person open to new ideas and receptive to change and adjustment according to what is encountered; and indicative, which causes the person to depend on the construct he or she presently holds and to reject new information and ideas." Indicative mood, related to confirmatory reasoning, can thus be considered an aspect of conspiracist epistemology.

In sum, conspiracists (and by extension, conspiracist researchers) display a few interwoven epistemic characteristics. Mistrust of all authority figures and institutions and inherent opposition to the narratives posed by such authorities (1), and concomitant exaggerated individualism and

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overreliance on first-hand inquiry (2), can manifest as a tendency towards indicative mood and confirmation bias (3). All of these characteristics exist on a continuum.

2.3 Conspiracism as a form of subjugated knowledge

Another way to envision conspiracism epistemologically is through the Foucauldian lens of "subjugated knowledges." Foucault introduces the idea of subjugated knowledges in *Power/Knowledge* (1980, 81):

> By 'subjugated knowledges' one should understand something else...namely a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated; naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.

He goes on to intimate that criticism itself emerges from the foundations of such subjugated knowledges (82). Conspiracism is a form of subjugated knowledge, in that it is often dismissed as inherently wrong or irrational (Popper 1969; Cassam 2015), and many conspiracists are dismissed or ostracized by virtue of their belief in or their championing of conspiracy theories. Foucault also contrasts subjugated knowledges with "official" knowledges, or those hegemonic knowledges that are widely accepted and often ingrained in our systems of information organization. Within the environment of this case study, conspiracism, as a form of subjugated knowledge, directly comes up against established official knowledges, as they are enacted by these state archives' AKOS and within the documents themselves.

Jack Braitch (2008, 7) engages with the framing of subjugated knowledges to talk about conspiracism as well:

> Studying conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledges would demonstrate how some accounts become dominant only through struggle. An official account comes to *be* official only through a victory over, and erasure of conflict with, conspiracy accounts. Among the competing accounts for any event, the official version is not merely the winner in a game of truth--it determines who the players can be.

The power of knowledge determines not only what can be considered "true" but also who can engage in the production of knowledge and who can make "legitimate" knowledge claims. The label of "conspiracy theorist" can be dangerously pejorative and can even be potentially harmful to democracy insofar as it quells and silences political critique (deHaven-Smith 2013, 9). The hegemony of official knowledges can in fact be the instigator for isolated epistemic communities. When a group of people whose membership is determined by epistemic commonalities, like conspiracists, are treated with disdain, insulted, and uncritically dismissed, they become less and less likely to listen to outside voices and narratives.

Furthermore, the labeling of conspiratorially-minded individuals as "conspiracy theorists" may make them even more conspiratorially minded. Ian Hacking's (1996) notion of "looping human kinds" offers a useful perspective. In his words (369), "To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past. This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different. That is to say the kind changes." Classifying people according to their epistemic viewpoints, and making value judgements about those viewpoints solely because they differ from our own, generates a feedback loop that solidifies conspiracy theorists' identity as conspiracy theorists. Bowker and Star (1999, 290) make a parallel argument: "If someone is taken to be a witch, and an elaborate technical apparatus with which to diagnose her or him as such is developed, then the reality of witchcraft obtains in the consequences--perhaps death at the stake." Replace "witch," with "conspiracist," and "death at the stake," with "epistemic ostracism," and the consequences of classifying conspiracists as such become clear. As the data will show, many of the reference archivists with whom I spoke were uncomfortable classifying conspiracist researchers as conspiracist researchers, for fear of being prescriptive or pejorative. It is a particular challenge to introduce, coalesce and discuss the conspiracist researcher user group without "looping the kind," so to speak.

Conspiracism is, in part, a result of the disconnect between Enlightenment epistemology and increasingly mediated information resources. Exploring how government archivists, as representatives of institutional knowledge, interact with users who operate within epistemologies of subjugated knowledge(s), could shed some light on how this epistemic disconnect manifests in practice—and how archivists are addressing it.

3.0 Archival knowledge organization

3.1 The logics of the AKOS

Knowledge organization (KO) is inextricably linked with library and information Science (LIS), and as such is not often discussed in relation to archival praxis (Tognoli et. al 2013, 204). In the words of Birger Hjørland (2016, 475), KO is "about describing, representing, filing and organizing documents, document representations, subjects and concepts." Archival KO (AKO) exists, but the field of study is a nascent one. Iterations of works (the contents of most libraries) are perhaps easier to categorize according tradi-

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tional KO systems of indexing and classification according to subjects and contents of materials. Library classification systems must be robust enough to both act as a tool for shelving items in context, retrieving them, and browsing them in catalog form (478-9). For Hjørland (480), AKO is predicated on different principles than traditional KO, with the most significant principle of AKO being provenance (as opposed to subjects or contents). Similarly, according to Guimarães and Tognoli (2015, 564-5), "classification and description, considered the core functions of archival knowledge organization, are based on the application of [provenance]." Discussing the classification of early archives by subject, Sweeney (2010, 4317) illustrates that, because archives house unique documents rather than iterations of works (as do libraries), archivists discovered that the bigger the holdings of an archives, the less feasible item-level subject classification was. The concept of provenance quickly overtook subject classification as the primary organizing logic of archives.

Provenance is a complex, contested, difficult-to-define concept. At its most basic, it can be described as the notion that all records from a single origin (person, organization, etc.) should be kept together, maintaining their "original order," to the extent possible. In archives, records are classified by *fonds* or "record groups," rather than subject: the creator and context are privileged as organizing guidelines. For a document to be an "archival record," Guimarães and Tognoli (2015, 566) intimate that it must be grouped and kept together with other records from the same source, into a record group or fond: "Consequently, to understand a document, it is essential to know exactly where it was created, in the structure of which process, for what purpose, to whom, when and how it was received by the interested person, and how it got into our hands." Within the archival field, provenance—as the primary principle of knowledge organization in archives—has lately been called into question both definitionally and functionally (Horsman 2002). Some problematizations of provenance put forth the idea that creatorship is not the be-all end-all of a record's value. The idea that readers, users, and subjects of documents should be on par with creators in terms of status has been an oft-discussed topic in archives literature (Gilliland 2012). These conversations challenge the epistemological basis for provenance, which prioritizes the creator(s) above users and subjects alike (Wood et. al. 2014). Despite how common these conversations have become, most archives are still based in the logics of provenance, due to the embeddedness of knowledge organizational principles and the systems that emerge from them. Yet, continuing to question provenance as the only method of AKO is the only way forward, towards an archives and archival field that is more aware of its own social significance.

Government archives have other significant organizing logics beyond provenance. Two principle logics, "access" and "secrecy" can be considered two sides of the same coin. Richard J. Cox (2011, 67-85) writes about problems of secrecy within presidential libraries, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and prison archives. Cox concludes that government secrecy is increasing at the same time that archival praxis is privileging open access to records. Writing specifically about the NARA reclassification case, in which NARA (in 2002) worked with the CIA and FBI to quietly re-classify already declassified materials (*ibid.,* 103), Cox (*ibid.,* 85) enumerates that this case "quickly moved the American National Archives from being a window into a besieged archival repository to appearing to be a co-conspirator in an effort to close down previously open government records." Just as true government conspiracies have occurred in the course of U.S. history (Watergate, MK-ULTRA, etc.), this case shows that true archival government conspiracies have also taken place.

Government archives occupy a dual role as at once a part of the state, and a tool for holding the government, its agencies, and its representatives accountable. State archives in general seem to have less of a problem with government secrecy than prison or federal government archives. The nonprofit Council of State Archivists (2013) cited "collecting records that make transparent government possible," as one of the primary functions of state archives. Indeed, government archives are beholden to access policies, based both in law and institutional policy. Archival reference and access are tied up together; ideally, reference services are a method for providing access to archival materials. Access, as an archival concept, is defined by Mary Jo Pugh (2017, 158) simply as "who gets to see what and when." Pugh goes on to outline how access is determined by many factors, most importantly privacy, confidentiality, and freedom of information. Archivists are beholden to the creators and subjects of records, as well as to the users of archives, and the needs and requests of these stakeholders can differ greatly. This balancing act is one of the more challenging tasks archivists must perform in the course of their duties. In Pugh's words (2017, 159), "Access policies protect records from harm and some information from premature disclosure, while making as much information available to researchers as possible. An access policy mediates among the competing demands of privacy, confidentiality, public right to know, and equality of access." Having a standardized policy in place takes some of the pressure off of individual archivists, allowing them to negotiate stakeholder needs according to structured policies.

In her examination of global right to information (RTI) policies, Elizabeth Shepherd (2017, 266) discovered that archivists often facilitated access according to policy, but "seldom played a role in the operation of secrecy laws, which

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developed separately from archival legislation." On the other hand, Cox (2011, 129) and Ericson (2005, 148) argue that the archival community should be taking more action to curb government secrecy. Ericson suggests that SAA's *Code of Ethics* acknowledges the need for open access, but that the language is commonly interpreted as applying only to manuscript curators—and not, for example, to government archivists.

Archivists working at government archives must, according to John Dirks (2004, 42), "walk a fine line in facilitating the trust of today's governments and organizations so a meaningful record will be created and preserved, while simultaneously ensuring that those records are eventually open to scrutiny ... The task is not easy and requires commitment, professionalism, and resolve." The dual organizational logic of "access/secrecy" dictates multiple aspects of arrangement and description (often, a collection's restricted materials [secrecy] will be noted to some degree in the finding aid [a tool for access], for instance). Furthermore, referring to "access/secrecy" as a singular logic emphasizes user perception of the "black box" of (government) archives: providing access to records in a way that preserves their integrity may appear to a lay user to be a method or mode of government secrecy. Even if it is true that state archives have less of a problem with secrecy than other kinds of government archives, the perception of secrecy, and the association of secrecy with government, functions similarly for users. If secrecy exists at one level of government, it may appear to exist at all levels. How are users to know that the in-

dividual reference archivist who is providing them with physical access to certain records is not the individual who decides what should be kept secret? Pugh's illustration (Figure 2) of the "black box" of archival activity illustrates that, unless the archivist verbally tells them, users have no idea what goes on when an archivist interacts with an AKOS in an effort to answer their research questions.

Government archives operate on two organizational axes: access/secrecy and provenance (context and creatorship). The combination of the unfamiliarity of archival logic(s) alongside the "black box" of government secrecy can result in a cocktail that is ripe for suspicion of and conspiracy theorizing about government archives and their staff. Cox (2010, 129) insists that many of the problems faced by archives in the twenty-first century can be traced back to waning public trust in archival institutions. He suggests that ethics codes can be performative—functioning primarily as a method of reassuring the public that archival institutions and their employees are indeed trustworthy. While the efficacy of this sort of high-level performance of trustworthiness is questionable, the archivists I spoke with working at state archives made genuine attempts to build trust at the interpersonal level. Furthermore, although many calls for shifting the privileging of provenance are made at the level of archival description, this paper will show that some archives have subverted the organizational logics of the archival principle of provenance through one-on-one in-person reference work. In Pugh's words (2017, 157), "Because reference archivists frequently mediate
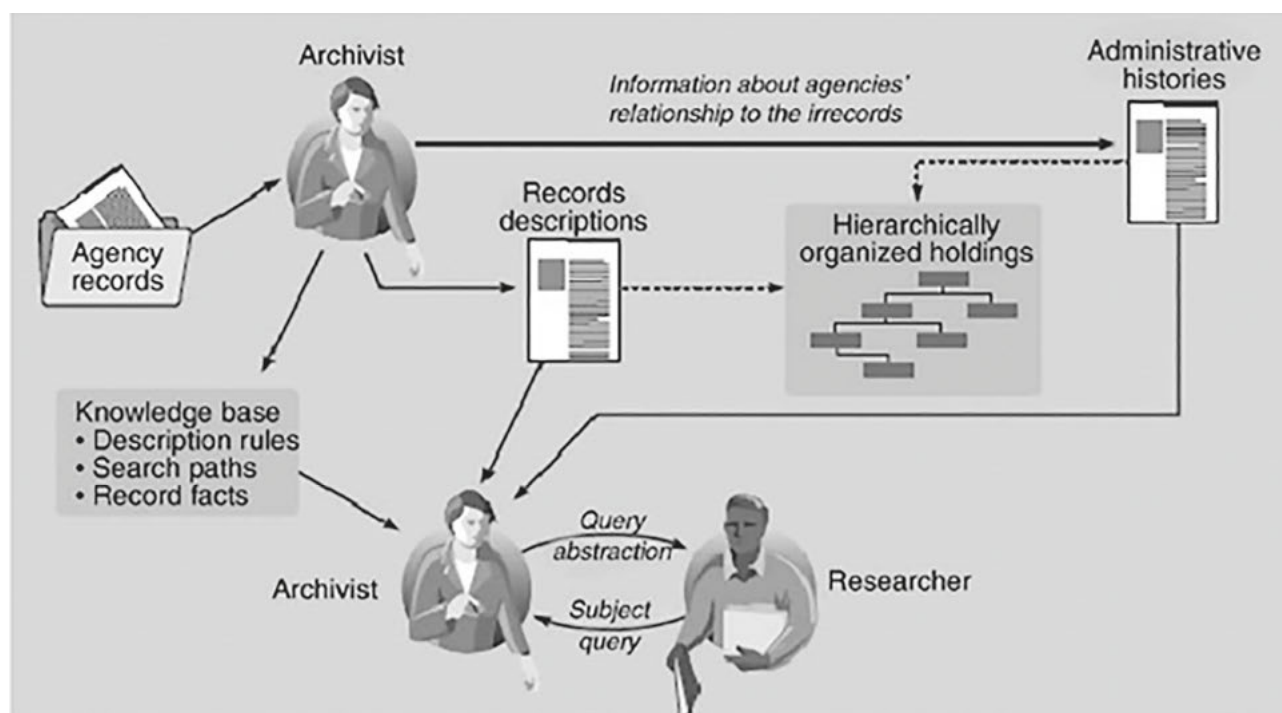

Figure 2. "Inside the black box," from Pugh 2017.

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among users, finding aids, and records, understanding the human dimension is critical to providing intellectual access to archives." That is, the human dimension is part of how the system of archival knowledge organization functions day-to-day. Therefore, the reference archivist, integral to the system, is at once a part of it and outside of it.

3.2 The challenges of seeking information in archives

Yakel and Torres (2003, 51) 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." Several tangible barriers exist for conspiracists to develop archival intelligence. First, some challenges exist for all novice users in archives: the early stages of information seeking are almost always a practice in vulnerability and confusion (Kuhlthau 1991), and archives themselves are not intuitive to the average novice user. Information seeking in archives will likely look and feel different from what users are used to when using libraries and search engines (Pugh 2017). For conspiracists specifically, the classificatory logics of the AKOS (provenance; access/secrecy) and the epistemic logics of conspiracists (the official story is always the wrong story, etc.) contradict one another. Finally, extrapolating from Whitson and Galinsky (2008), feelings of confusion inherent in doing research in an archive may push an individual further along the continuum of conspiracism.

Carol C. Kuhlthau's (1991) model of information seeking, the "information search process" (ISP), was the first foray into modeling knowledge production as a continuous experience. Kuhlthau's ISP has six stages, each of which has affective, cognitive, and physical features. Kuhlthau emphasizes (363) the importance of the affective: "Affective aspects, such as attitude, stance, and motivation, may influence specificity capability and relevance judgements as much as cognitive aspects." Figure 3 shows each of the six stages, from initiation to presentation, and characteristic feelings, thoughts, actions, and tasks associated with each stage. Stage one, initiation, is often characterized by feelings of "uncertainty." Stage three, exploration, similarly, is characterized by "confusion, frustration, and doubt." Kuhlthau states that stage three is often where the search may be abandoned as a result of an inability to adequately articulate an information need. In her words (366-7), in the exploration stage, "Information encountered rarely fits smoothly with previously-held constructs and information from different sources commonly seems inconsistent and incompatible. Users may find the situation quite discouraging and threatening, causing a sense of personal inadequacy as well as frus-

tration with the system." The early stages of information seeking are an exercise in vulnerability and often result in anxiety and self-consciousness. Doing research in an archive may compound such feelings.

Due in part to provenance's privileging of context and creator rather than subject (as is the case in libraries and online search), archives struggle with usability, particularly with regard to novice users. Many early attempts at fostering greater access to materials saw archives making collections available online, either by digitizing records, making digital finding aids available, or both. As a result, researchers who are not familiar with the classificatory logics of archives have encountered them online without the mediating presence of a reference archivist or the controlled space of a reading room (Duff and Yakel 2017, 197). Finding aids—which function at multiple levels as a generalized organizing document, a guide to a collection for researchers, and an archival administrative document—remain difficult to decipher for those who do not already possess knowledge of archival praxis. Daines and Nimer (2011, 4) suggest that finding aids, as researcher tools, "effectively [create] an access barrier to the materials they describe." Yakel (2003, 2) also argues that archival arrangement and description, although intended to provide access, can serve as a barrier: "Researchers must know the schemas and codes and understand the underlying systems of privileging, classifying, and selecting that comprise both arrangement and description." Many researchers have no prior knowledge of the inner workings of archives, and yet many of the tools with which they are expected to work (e.g., finding aids) rely on their possession of this knowledge.

Numerous users thus come to the archive unprepared for the complexity of information seeking and working with primary sources. Although provenance, as the primary feature of the AKOS, is vital for understanding context, it makes information seeking within the archive less intuitive (Pugh 2017, 153). Duff and Yakel (2017, 27) reference Terence Eastwood's notion that archival records, as byproducts of activities, are virtually unsearchable using typical content- or subject-based queries. This can result in a feeling, even when conducting research with the assistance of a reference archivist, of not having "gotten all of it," in the words of one researcher interviewed by Yakel and Torres (2003, 70). Doing research in archives often feels as though one is searching incorrectly, or that the reference archivist may not know enough to direct you towards the relevant information.

To work with an AKOS, then, a user must effectively translate their query into provenance-appropriate terms having to do with "an organization's functions and activities," as no system yet exists that can accurately translate content-index terms into provenance terms (Duff and Yakel 2017, 207). This means that archival users must ei-

TABLE 2.   Information search process (ISP).

Stages in ISP	Feelings Common to Each Stage	Thoughts Common to Each Stage	Actions Common to Each Stage	Appropriate Task According to Kuhlthau Model
1. Initiation	Uncertainty	General/ Vague	Seeking Background Information	Recognize
2. Selection	Optimism			Identify
3. Exploration	Confusion/ Frustration/ Doubt		Seeking Relevant Information	Investigate
4. Formulation	Clarity	Narrowed/ Clearer		Formulate
5. Collection	Sense of Direction/ Confidence	Increased Interest	Seeking Relevant or Focused Information	Gather
6. Presentation	Relief/ Satisfaction or Disappointment	Clearer or Focused		Complete

Figure 3. The Information search process, from Kuhlthau 1991.

ther: a) encounter an AKOS without an intermediary, and more likely than not leave the encounter feeling confused or threatened by the alien organization of the system and its apparent lack of searchability (frequently the case with online archival holdings); or, b) encounter an AKOS through an intermediary, who does the work bridging the gap between user and AKOS (frequently the case at physical archives). Archivists work with the objects (naturalized to them) of the AKOS—the finding aid, records, and boxes, in context and concert with one another—and act as the researcher's primary access point to the archives. In both of these cases, however, the structures of the AKOS presume that users already possess archival intelligence. 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.

Several tangible barriers exist for conspiracists to conduct research in government archives. First, some challenges exist for all novice users in archives: the early stages of information seeking are always a practice in vulnerability and confusion (Kuhlthau 1991); and, as we have seen, archives themselves are not intuitive to the average novice user—many barriers to use exist within the archive (Pugh 2017). The confusion of conducting research in an archive, particularly a government archive, could have particular significance for conspiracists. Extrapolating from Whitson and Galinsky (2008) and Nyhan et al. (2016), it is possible that the kind of confusion inherent in conducting research in archives—especially when the documents they are looking at contain redactions—could result in a user being pushed further along the continuum of conspiracism. The connection made by Whitson and Galinsky between confusion and illusory pattern perception, including perception

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of non-existent conspiracies, illustrates this hazard. On the other hand, the reference interaction has the potential to act as a pivotal moment in which the reference archivist could mitigate confusion, perhaps even moving a conspiracist researcher towards the more moderate end of the continuum.

The logics of (government) archives are also incongruous with conspiracist epistemic commitments. The knowledge organizational logic of provenance prioritizes the creator (that is, the individual who originally created the record) over the subjects and users of a given record. Creators are authorities by virtue of having the power to create and maintain records—archives are themselves sites at which power is made manifest and indelible (Harris 2002). We can see how the conspiracist logic of mistrust of authoritative individuals and institutions would come up directly against the primary logic of provenance, not to mention the access/secrecy paradigm. The reference interaction itself, on the surface, seems to conflict with conspiracist epistemic commitments as well. To do research, conspiracists must place their trust in a reference archivist—an expert on the archive. Further, the archive, as an institution, privileges authority. Mandatory archival reference itself thus conflicts with the conspiracist maxims of overreliance on first-hand inquiry, as well as suspicion of experts and authorities. The data will show that the reference interaction can be a site for epistemic bridging—but only if the reference personnel in question subvert aspects of the AKOS and display epistemic empathy.

4.0 Method

The data for this paper come from six semi-structured interviews conducted in August and September of 2018 with five reference employees at two state archives in the American west. Four interviewees worked at State Archives A, and the other one worked at State Archives B. To protect their privacy, all interviewees will be referred to using pseudonyms. I used cold emailing and snowball sampling to recruit interviewees. All interviewees were informed of their rights, gave verbal consent, and were informed about the purpose of the study in accordance with UCLA Internal Review Board procedure (see figure 4 for the informed consent document given to all interviewees; see Figure 5 for the interview schedule submitted to UCLA IRB). As the interviews were semi-structured, not all of the questions listed were asked in every interview, nor were they worded exactly as they appear. Rather than forming and testing hypotheses, I used grounded theory to allow theoretical categories to emerge in the course of processing my data (Charmaz 2014). 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 small; in the future, I plan to interview more reference employees at state archives in other states. The voice of the archivist is also centered, even though I am discussing researcher groups. I will be designing another study in which I plan to speak with suspicious and conspiracy researchers directly. Finally, the interview format was somewhat irregular for this pool of interviewees. I was able to conduct two hour-long interviews (the first pertaining to their work in general, the second to conspiracy researchers) with two interviewees, but the other three interviewees had to be interviewed using a different format. Andrea (a library assistant II at state archives A) and Linda (the collections archivist at state archives A) were interviewed in the two-interview format. Patrick (a government archivist at state archives A) and Brian (the other government archivist at state archives A) were interviewed together, in an hour-and-fifteen-minute long interview. Finally, Timothy (a reference archivist at state archives B) was interviewed in one session for an hour and fifteen minutes.

5.0 Data and discussion

5.1 The emergence of a new user group

When asked to describe the kinds of researchers they would associate with the notion of a "conspiracy researcher,"[3] the interviewees I spoke with related accounts of many different kinds of researchers, and in the process revealed their own struggles with classifying and defining researchers who could fit the category. These archivists continually grappled with how to define and discuss conspiracy theorists and the type of research they do and how to talk about researchers who seem to be conspiratorially-minded but who may not be researching a conspiracy exactly.

Interviewees tended to show either discomfort or confusion around categorizing researchers, on the one hand, and defining "conspiracy theory," on the other. Linda described her views on conspiracy as follows: "I think there's probably like (laughs) levels of conspiracy, maybe like a range? It can be someone who—genuinely has a delusional disorder, or some sort of personality disorder…or that has ideas of things that maybe didn't actually happen … to people that are skeptical, skeptical of events, or maybe distrust government or distrust the media, there's maybe a trust issue." Here we can see that Linda considers conspiracism to be on a continuum, similar to the one presented earlier in this paper (Figure 1). Similarly, Patrick makes a distinction between "out there" conspiracists and those who are a little closer to home: "And some of it's interesting because you do have the people that aren't 'out there' but that are clearly kind of pursuing a narrative." In such a way, Patrick characterizes conspiracists on the less-extreme side of the continuum according to their indicative mood; that is, their tendency to exclude all information that is not in accordance with their own worldview.

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UCLA Research Study Information Sheet

Illuminati(ng) the Archives: Conspiracy Researchers and Suspicious Researchers as User Groups

Yvonne M. Eadon, PhD student, and Sarah T. Roberts, PhD, from the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a reference employee at [INSTITUTION]. 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 "conspiracy researchers") as well as researchers suspicious of an institution and its staff (what I call "suspicious researchers") as two distinct archival researcher/ library patron groups with unique needs.

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 three forty-five minute to an hour-long interviews.
- 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.
- Interview questions will be about your work, your personal job history and interest in archives and/or historical research, your perspective on conspiracies and conspiracy theories, as well as about the encounters you have had with conspiracy researchers. Questions may also diverge from this list.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about three hours over the course of roughly two months. Follow-up may happen via email.

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 the fields of archival and library reference to understand the specific needs of conspiracy researchers and suspicious researchers. This is of particular importance because conspiracy theorist logic is often not expressly "rational,"

Figure 4. Informed consent document given to all interviewees.

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and their viewpoints and needs must be understood by reference professionals if the population is to be served in a thoughtful, critical, and reflexive way.

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. To maintain the use of pseudonyms, a key will not be used--I will keep track of pseudonyms mentally.

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.

  You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

(Figure 4. Continued)

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Interview Session 2

1. When did you first provide reference assistance to a conspiracy researcher?
2. Describe that particular initial instance. What was it like? What were you thinking at the time? What did you think after the reference interaction had concluded?
3. How would you describe how you viewed those interested in conspiracies and conspiracy theories before you first provided reference assistance to a conspiracy researcher? How, if at all, has your view of those interested in conspiracies and conspiracy theories changed since that reference interaction?
4. Can you describe other experience(s) giving research help to users who are researching conspiracies and/or conspiracy theories?
5. What indicates to you that a researcher may be interested in conspiracies or conspiracy theories?
6. What kind of guidance do you generally offer those who seem interested in conspiracies or conspiracy theories?
7. Is there a meaningful difference for you between "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory?" Are there researchers who are interested in conspiracies and not conspiracy theories and vice versa?
8. Do conspiracy researchers often look at the same or similar collections? If so, what can you tell me about these collections?
9. Can you tell me how your views on conspiracies/ conspiracy theories may have changed since you started providing reference help to conspiracy researchers?
10. What advice would you give to archivists who provide reference assistance to conspiracy researchers?
11. Is there anything that you may not have thought about previously that has occurred to you during this interview?
12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me so I can understand your work better, particularly as it relates to conspiracy researchers?
13. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Figure 5. Interview schedule submitted to UCLA IRB. This was used as a reference document; not all questions were asked exactly as they appear here.

Linda questions, briefly, the appropriateness of the label "conspiracy theorist," as does Andrea, who continually displayed discomfort categorizing researchers in any way. Andrea goes so far as to suggest that conspiracy theorists do not come into state archives A because—by her definition—they do not conduct their own research. To Andrea, a conspiracy theorist is defined exclusively by their indicative mood and closed-off attitude; she states that conspiracist researchers do not exist because conspiracy theorists "do not do their own research." Clearly, the way in which some researchers conduct research is upsetting to Andrea, and, to her, does not count as research. This illustrates the epistemic rift between reference personnel (Andrea in particular) and conspiratorially minded researchers.

When asked about "conspiracy researchers" that they had encountered, archivists spoke of many different sorts of researchers—most of whom were not researching any particular conspiracy theory. Linda cited "suspicious" or "mistrustful" researchers as the largest conspiracy-adjacent group she had dealt with, and also described researchers who did property research to investigate hauntings they had experienced. Timothy similarly told me about researchers who came to state archives B to investigate the supposed haunted nature of the building. Timothy, Brian, and Patrick also described researchers who were interested in mining history—treasure hunters looking for lost gold deposits. Finally, Andrea described what she called a "bigoted" researcher, whose primary goal was to prove that members of

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an indigenous tribe never occupied his land and thus could not lay claim to it. Timothy, Patrick, and Brian also described "sovereign citizens," who were both donors (or wanted to be) and researchers. The term "sovereign citizen," is an umbrella term that refers to a variety of individuals and groups who share many of the same beliefs, including that "they are not subject to federal law, as the federal government is illegitimate and has no jurisdiction over them" (Milan Konda 2019, 264).[4] Although it does not fit all of these kinds of researchers (notably, paranormal researchers), the common denominator between these researchers is mistrust of government and suspicion of either the records within the state archives, the archivists themselves, or the state archives as an institution. This is a hallmark of conspiracist epistemology, going hand-in-hand with overreliance on firsthand inquiry.

As a response to the difficulty of classifying all relevant researchers as "conspiracy researchers," I am thus introducing the new archival user group, "conspiracist researchers." This user group exists along a continuum, like conspiracists in general, that is defined according to the epistemological characteristics outlined above: mistrust of authority figures and institutions and the narratives they disseminate, concomitant overreliance on individualism and firsthand inquiry, and a tendency towards indicative mood/confirmation bias.

5.1 Encounters with conspiracist researchers

One of the more popular collections at state archives A is a collection of inmate records from the nineteenth and twentieth century. Linda described a "whole sheet" of redaction guidelines for these records, which the staff at the archives are legally obligated to abide by before making them available to researchers. One researcher she helped, who was looking into criminal syndicalism, requested a large number of inmate records and was displeased when it took the staff of the archives longer than he had anticipated to process and redact the records. In Linda's words, he "was critical of how the collection was arranged, which is ironic because it's one of our better finding aids ... the impression I and others got from him is that he thought we were trying to hide something intentionally, rather than trying to fulfill our archival duty of maintaining provenance and original order and structure ... that was challenging to discuss with him since he already was working under the lens of being critical towards government." Linda's statement makes visible the profound difference between her epistemic commitments and those of the researcher she was helping. The researcher in question encountered two operating organizational principles for government archives with which he was unfamiliar: accepted archival praxis, rooted in provenance, on the one hand (the arrangement of the collections, for instance),

and access/secrecy, on the other (the redaction of the records before they were made accessible). Lacking control or understanding of why the archival policy was such, the researcher became suspicious. He became so suspicious that, in Linda's words, "he felt like we should ... rearrange this so that all the stuff is in one collection, essentially. Create an artificial collection—pull things from other collections and put all the stuff that he wanted into one collection, which is not something we would have done." Just as Whitson and Galinsky (2008) found in their study, this researcher's encounter with archival logics that he found difficult to decipher resulted in pattern perception; the pattern perceived being the new arrangement he suggested to Linda. This also illustrates his tendency towards indicative mood and confirmation bias: he thought that his own research narrative made more sense than the provenance-based system of arrangement that was already in place.

All four interviewees from state archives A described another long-term researcher who was suspicious of government. He was frequently referred to as a "constitutionalist," and at the time of the interviews, had been working closely with Brian for a couple of years. At the start of his research, Linda remembers him contesting a traffic ticket, as well as a fishing license, citing the book of Genesis in court as his justification. From there, he began to look into the validity of state laws as a whole. As Patrick describes it, "I think the gist of his argument is that there was a bill passed back in the '20s where there was a typo where state was not capitalized, so it was the 'state of [STATE]' lowercase, and not capitalized, so his thinking is that every law passed since then is null and void." Linda enjoyed working with this researcher: "He was kind of an interesting person and had a lot of distrust of government, but he was one of the most pleasant researchers I've had. And ... he was not distrusting of us, we provided all the access he wanted, all the materials he had requested." This illustrates that conspiracist epistemology can operate at multiple levels: this researcher likely mistrusted abstract government, and perhaps even other instantiations of state government, but he did not seem to mistrust the archivists themselves or state archives A as an institution. Further, he may have possessed a measure of archival intelligence already: as a former lawyer, he was likely familiar with the structure and typical contents of records he was searching for.

Patrick and Brian described another researcher, who was attempting to prove that the county he lived in did not officially exist. He came in looking for the legislative document that incorporated the county he lived in—he was trying to contest his property taxes by attempting to prove that the county had never been incorporated and, therefore, did not exist. After some hunting, they were able to find the bill:

> We ended up finding the bill and he looked at the bill and he ... read over it for a minute, and you could tell

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he was very disappointed. And then ... he changed tracks, and ... you could see him spinning his wheels, and he was ... thinking "well maybe the ... boundaries were different back then, and maybe ... if the boundaries didn't line up with ..." He just—that was a dead end, so he was just going to find another way to keep the hunt going. So I think ... for a lot of these people, I think that's kind of what it's about? It's the hunt, you know what I mean? They're into this topic and they want to find—it's almost like a treasure hunt ... They want to find the, you know, the smoking gun.

Timothy encountered researchers who were similarly searching for an absence: many people come to state archives B looking for oaths of office for judges, peace officers, etc., as a way of keeping them accountable to the constitution. In Timothy's words, "I think people will often seek an oath of office if they don't find one, or if we don't find one for them, I think they'd use that as perhaps a case ... if they're ... convicted of something such as a traffic ticket or something—'well, my peace officer didn't file an oath with the state archives, I could call into question his [authority].'"

Rather than looking for a document that will prove their argument, these researchers are searching for an absence that will prove their point. Not only can documents mean different things to different parties in various contexts and times (Buckland 2018, 427), but their presence, absence, or difference from the "imagined record" (Gilliland and Caswell 2016) can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The researchers from state archives B may become upset when they find the document that disproves the absence, but the state archives A researcher decided to continue looking for proof of the absence elsewhere. This indicates these researchers' tendencies towards indicative mood and confirmation bias, in which an individual seeks and sees only what they expect or want to discover (Brotherton 2014, 224). The researcher at state archives A wanted to continue, in Patrick's words, "the hunt." Here, the nature of the epistemic disconnect between researchers and reference personnel again becomes clear: the goal of a reference archivist is most likely to find the artifact or document that the individual is asking for; the goal of the researcher, in this case, is to find resources that fit in with their existing worldview or theory. Such conflicting goals can make for a challenging reference interaction for both parties.

Archivists also described what triggered suspicion in conspiracist researchers. In state archives A, researchers were suspicious of the arrangement of the collection (as detailed above), the staff at the archives, and/or the state government as a whole. Or, they were suspicious on multiple levels simultaneously: of the staff, the documents in the state archives, and the government. Some researchers were suspicious of the

archives staff simply because of who they were—employees of the government—but others seemed to be triggered by certain behaviors or procedures. Patrick described some users interested in donating their collections of property records, family records, etc., who would get "a little upset with us if we didn't give it the attention they think it deserves." Brian, describing the constitutionalist researcher, said that at first, he was, "a little wary," because he "got the runaround" from the other state agencies he went to, in search of specific legislative documents. Timothy also mentioned helping researchers who were expecting to "get the runaround." Researchers' former experiences with government can thus color their perception of the state archives—evidently, the label of "government archive" carries weight.

Linda reflected on why researchers might become suspicious, theorizing that it could derive from unfamiliarity with archival praxis: "I think that archivists in general are sort of a mystery, in a lot of areas. People have never met an archivist, they've never heard of the term, they're like, 'anarchist?' 'what are you?' So I think that, too, can add to a maybe already suspicious feeling than not knowing really what we do." From Linda's perspective, archivists and archives can trigger suspicion by virtue of their unfamiliarity. This is one of many usability barriers within the archive, as discussed above. Linda recognizes the importance of archival user education in the development of archival intelligence:

> I think my response to [people being unfamiliar with archivists] is trying to do as much outreach and programming and advocacy in the community; to highlight our value to the community ... I rarely ever say no, if someone asks me to come speak somewhere or do a community presentation ... I usually always jump at the opportunity, because I think that archivists in general are sort of a mystery, in a lot of areas ... I'm trying to figure out a better way for our general public, our general audience, to know what we do and why we do it, so that that is less of a mystery.

Linda makes an important point here: archivists are themselves mysterious. She recognizes the need for different kinds of archival user education, beyond relying on individualized service through the reference interaction. As an expert, she sees that her status as such may make her untrustworthy to certain individuals and recognizes that the community served by state archives A may have a unique set of epistemic needs.

5.3 Bridging the epistemic gap

Archivists employed a variety of strategies for developing trust with conspiracist researchers in the course of the reference interaction, many of which actually subverted the logics of the AKOS and/or archival praxis. This subversion

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in and of itself illustrated to many conspiracist researchers that these were, oxymoronically, "trustworthy experts."

All five of the archivists I spoke with mentioned explaining different aspects of the archival process to conspiracist researchers. Brian finds himself needing to explain "gaps" in the collection: "A lot of times, you won't have the [requested] record, because there's no ... hard and fast rule that says 'you must turn this over to the state archives.' It's a strong suggestion, but [state agencies] don't have to. And uh, so they get that. When you explain that ... And so they'll be looking for something, and they'll be like, 'why do you have a gap between here and here?' and it's like, you gotta tell em, 'well, we're not hiding it!'"

In some instances, explaining the practical reasons behind a lack of access appeases conspiracist researchers. At other points, it does not—as in the case of Linda trying to explain to the criminal syndicalism researcher that state archives A and its employees must follow the rule of law by redacting documents from the inmate collection. Linda also touches upon attempting to convey—although it is not clear how—to conspiracist researchers that "we don't have a political agenda," so that they "don't think we're trying to hide anything." Patrick also states an equivalent goal: "I try to ... show them that you're not part of the problem." That is, he tries to demonstrate to researchers that he himself is not "part of the problem." Similarly, Timothy related that he tries to "clarify things as much as possible ... put them at ease so that they'll see us as someone trying to help." These reference personnel went beyond verbal explanation of archival practices to address suspicion, changing their behavior around conspiracist researchers as a means of building trust.

Linda, in her encounter with the aforementioned criminal syndicalism researcher, developed what she described as "a good rapport" with him by the end of his research project, by adapting to his process while also attempting to maintain control over the materials: "He ... would keep things out and not keep things in order, so, learning this about him I started being overly—more helpful and more hands-on with him, just to make sure that things were kept in order." In this particular case, and only towards the end of his research, Linda drew on her role as a custodian of records to create a successful working relationship with this conspiracist researcher. This researcher, who originally showed hostile suspicion towards Linda and the state archives, became more amiable once Linda began doing hands-on work with him. Linda successfully mitigated suspicion through attention, extra effort, and hands-on, one-on-one archival user education.

Similarly, Brian described how he and Linda decided to open the reading room on the day it was closed, for their first encounter with the constitutionalist researcher:

he had driven all the way down from [the] north. And we're closed on Mondays, but he didn't know that. And he had gone to the Secretary of State's office, and they had told him that we have ... the bills he was looking for, so he came down here. So we try to accommodate, we opened up the reading room, and Linda gave me this list of bills he wanted, and I started pulling, and started just chatting with him. Very affable fellow.

The staff at state archives A, and Brian in particular, have a good relationship with this researcher. This could very well be because of the above-and-beyond precedent set by opening the reading room on the day it was closed, and the general friendliness of their first encounter. Andrea was of the opinion that this researcher might be "taking advantage of our services a little bit, because I think that Brian goes out of his way to help." Patrick, on the other hand, suggests that Brian's extra assistance: "probably helped [the researcher] in his mind separate us from the state." Patrick also admits to spending more time himself on requests from conspiracist researchers, "because we don't want them thinking we're part of the problem." Timothy also goes the extra mile: when asked how he might treat conspiracist researchers differently, he said: "if anything my bias would be towards offering a higher level of service, so they could maybe build some trust in us." These archivists react to conspiracist research with creative, generative feedback, responding to the unique needs of individual users. By providing reference, these archivists are in fact subverting some of the entrenched logics of their institution; going "above and beyond" counters the lack of usability of bureaucratic institutional archives. By subverting certain institutional organizational logics and policies, reference personnel also demonstrate to conspiracist researchers that they operate independently from their institution. Not only do these reference personnel take the research of conspiracist researchers seriously, they take their roles as reference archivists seriously and recognize the potentially transformative nature of the reference interaction.

Each of the reference archivists I spoke with demonstrated at least one personal strategy for providing reference assistance to conspiracist researchers. Andrea continuously reiterated that, when faced with a suspicious researcher, she tried to redirect their attention away from her and towards the materials. Patrick was the only archivist to call directly for empathy when dealing with conspiracist researchers, "listen to what they're saying, try to empathize, try to help them as much as you can." Linda says that she tries to "keep a poker face" when listening to conspiracist researchers, and to reserve judgement. Timothy, although he says "sometimes my reaction is not to act as professionally or charitably as I should," reminds himself that everyone, no matter their

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agenda, deserves the same level of service from a public agency. Perhaps most notably, Patrick emphasizes transparency in how he deals with records requests from conspiracist researchers: "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.'" Patrick recognizes himself as an expert, in the sense that he has access to spaces, people, knowledge, and objects that the researchers themselves do not have access to. Thus, he sees it as his responsibility to communicate the processes—many of them unique to government archives—to the researchers he works with. In recounting these processes, he chooses to become a window into the opaque AKOS, subverting the logic of access/secrecy by emphasizing transparency. In so doing, he also disproves an epistemic commitment of conspiracism by illustrating that not all experts are untrustworthy by virtue of being experts.

Conspiracist researchers are a distinct, if small (three out of five interviewees cited the small size of the group), user group in at least two state archives in the American west. This user group has a unique set of needs that should be critically thought through by archival scholars, practitioners, and experts in knowledge organization. Reference interactions are critical points for conspiracist researchers, opportunities for moving either forwards or backwards along the continuum of conspiracism. They may move forward along the continuum if their epistemic commitments are proven—that is, if they experience unmitigated confusion or encounter a reference archivist who does not display epistemic empathy, or who acts fully in compliance with the power structures of their institution. Conversely, if a conspiracist researcher receives epistemically empathetic reference help that subverts some logics of the AKOS and helps them to develop archival intelligence, conspiracist researchers may stay in the same spot on the continuum, or even move backwards, towards the more moderate end. Further research will need to be done before I am able to say with certainty that this happens systematically. The organizational logics of these two state archives, provenance and access/secrecy, are made comprehensible, or at least less threatening, through reference service that functions as a bridge between AKOS and users. This kind of bridging often in fact subverts the bureaucratic logics of archives, by demonstrating to conspiracist researchers that reference personnel are not "part of the system," even as they are, in many respects, indeed part of the system.

6.0 Where should we go from here? conceptualizing epistemically flexible KO

Although most of the reference personnel I interviewed made it clear that their epistemic orientation was not in line with conspiracism, they explicitly did not reject the questions or needs of conspiracist researchers, making the AKOS work for conspiracist researchers through epistemic empathy and trust building. In fact, they may have mitigated suspicion so well that some of the researchers they worked with may have moved towards the more moderate end of the continuum of conspiracism.

There remain some significant issues with the reference desk being the main arena in which archival user education takes place. First, archivists who go above and beyond for conspiracist researchers could take away from the help given to other kinds of researchers. Making reference archivists the sole bridge between the AKOS and conspiracist researchers also places the burden of archival user education entirely on individual reference personnel. What could happen at an archive in which the reference personnel are not so experienced in working with conspiracist researchers, nor so generous with their time and energy? In another vein, what happens when conspiracist researchers encounter archival collections online, without the mitigating presence of a reference archivist? Might it be possible to design an AKOS that is flexible enough to suit the needs of epistemically distinct user groups? These are questions that need to be critically assessed by KO scholars, archival scholars, and archivists alike, and more data must be collected before they are answerable. One relevant starting point could be looking at conspiracist research from a domain analytic point of view.

A 21st-century approach to knowledge organization, the objective of domain analysis is to "reveal the contours of held knowledge, whether that be in the form of live discourse or recorded documentation, by analyzing the elements of specific communities who share a common ontology, or knowledge base" (Smiraglia 2015, 19). Domains can thus be any area of knowledge belonging to a group of individuals who have the same or similar ontological and epistemological attitudes--most often, academic disciplines. In most cases, analyzing a given domain necessitates looking at conflicting approaches and paradigmatic developments within a discipline, how these developments affect and determine which KOS are used and how they are used, and how certain KOS may or may not serve different paradigms within a given discipline (Hjørland 2017, 441-2).

The central argument of domain analysis focuses on the idea that different informational resources should be described and organized according to functional characteristics and purposes. Contrasting the LIS domain analysis with archival studies (AS) domain analysis, Guimarães and Tognoli (2015, 567) suggest that provenance could be considered a domain analytic approach to archival knowledge organization: "while the content extracted by KO (LIS) procedures is highly related to subjects, the content extracted by KO (AS) is mainly related to the identification and representation of the provenance." Furthermore, they

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argue that provenance can be a domain analytic approach in general, outside of archives, with its own particular set of knowledge organization processes (KOP).

Certainly, conspiracist researchers could be considered a discourse community—but what would a domain analytic approach to this discourse community look like, and what could the epistemic effects be? Would performing a domain analysis on this community's literature be illuminating for archivists? Is the user group too small for it to matter? Would devising or revising a KOS so that it might serve the needs of this user group mean that other groups were not served as well? Could it bolster trust between conspiracist researchers and information institutions, or could it, alternatively, be used as a tool to propagate conspiracy theories further and wider? All of these questions could be addressed in future research. In any case, domain analysis seems to be a promising way to study conspiracy theorists as a discourse community.

The relationship among conspiracy theories and theorists, informational resources, and archivists-as-experts is a complex and ever-changing one, hinging on shifting, malleable levels of mistrust and suspicion of government. Reference archivists are already overworked and many are likely not able to provide the level of assistance needed to bridge the gap between AKOS and conspiracist researchers—despite best intentions, they may not always be able to go above and beyond for individual researchers. Likewise, conspiracists may be encountering unworkable AKOS online, without the presence of an intermediary. Because of this, as mentioned in the previous section, it is necessary to begin thinking about how conspiracists can develop archival intelligence without always making the reference archivist an integral part of that process. Perhaps, at this point, we need to examine the AKOS itself and see how it could be made more epistemically flexible.

7.0 Conclusion

The documentary *Behind the Curve,* which follows a group of flat earthers and the scientists who oppose them, features a speech by Lamar Glover, a physicist at Cal State LA, given at an astronomy outreach event in Pasadena. Met with chuckles around the room when he said he would talk about flat earthers (Clark 2018, 1:09-1:13), Glover brings up an unexpected perspective: "Truthers, Flat Earthers, Anti-Vaxxers. When we leave people behind, we leave bright minds to stagnate. These folks are potential scientists gone completely wrong. Their natural inquisitive[ness] and rejection of norms could be beneficial to science if they were scientifically literate. So every Flat Earther ... should serve as a reminder of a scientist that could have been. Someone who fell through the cracks. And we as ambassadors of science are called upon to do more." Archivists, knowledge or-

ganization specialists, and scholars of information studies in general could learn from this perceptive observation, rooted as it is in epistemic empathy. We need not necessarily understand exactly where an individual is coming from, but if we as researchers ourselves and/or as reference personnel begin to understand some of the similarities between the kind of research we do and the kind that suspicious and conspiracy researchers do (the enjoyability of the hunt, the satisfaction of perceiving connections, a desire to subvert hegemonic paradigms within and outside of our discipline), then perhaps we can start to welcome this community of researchers as "researchers first." The flexibility and concomitant subversion of epistemic and archival norms enacted by the reference personnel I spoke with can certainly serve as an example for other archives and information institutions. Future research in this area could demonstrate whether or not it is possible for online encounters with KOS to function with any kind of epistemic empathy.

Although conspiracist researchers are a small archival user group, this group has significant epistemic implications. This paper has presented data from an exploratory study, a first attempt at examining and theorizing research in archives conducted by conspiracists. The data has shown that archives are difficult spaces for conspiracists to do research in; archives struggle with usability in general, and conspiracists in particular operate according to an epistemology that directly disagrees with the organizational and practical logics of archives. The reference interaction thus becomes a site at which archival user education can take place, becoming a key point at which researchers may move either backwards or forwards along the continuum of conspiracism. Reference personnel in this study focused on building trust with conspiracist researchers, especially successful insofar as the interviewees were able to subvert entrenched archival logics and practice epistemic empathy. Reference archivists operate as both a part of and outside of the AKOS, making it usable for conspiracist researchers where it may otherwise have been prohibitively confusing. Beyond the vital nature of the reference interaction, the fact that conspiracists are coming to archives at all is notable. By entering an archive for the purpose of research, conspiracists are exposing themselves to evidence, experts, and viewpoints that they may not otherwise have encountered. Despite the epistemic characteristics of indicative mood and confirmation bias, the very existence of conspiracist researchers disproves Sunstein and Vermeule's thesis that conspiracist epistemology can be traced back to isolated epistemic communities. If there are singular individuals willing to put themselves in a space that may seem inhospitable, this could be a vital thread between an otherwise epistemically isolated individual and/or community and more diversified perspectives. This is an important motivating factor for continuing to characterize this user group and theorize how we might make archives more epistemically accommodating.

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Notes

1. By "conspiratorially minded," I am referring to an inclination to suspect conspiracies, not to perpetrate them.
2. In certain places and for certain classes of people, that is.
3. The term I was using at the time.
4. Although sovereign citizenship is not itself inherently white supremacist, many prominent sovereign citizens have ties to white supremacist movements, including but not limited to the Christian Identity and militia movements, as well as prominent iterations of racist and antisemitic conspiracy theories (Milan Konda 2019, 250-260). It is also not surprising that sovereign citizens can be found doing research in state archives, for (268): "they have caused considerable harm by filing injunctions and issuing liens against the property of public officials--what has come to be called 'paper terrorism.' They flood the courts with paperwork featuring 'odd or seemingly inane use of secondary legal materials, statutes, and overruled, misunderstood, or outdated case law.'"

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