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Do the Research!: Conspiracy Theorists and Public Libraries

By Timothy Cole Hale

Author's Note: *This literature review was undertaken as academic research toward the completion of the author's Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree.*

Have you ever heard the conspiracy theory that the moon landing was filmed in Stanley Kubrick's basement? What about the one where airplanes leave behind chemtrails to poison the masses? Many people love to read or hear conspiracy theories, viewing them as nothing more than a form of entertainment. In fact, one of the most listened to podcast is *The Joe Rogan Experience*, whose host dedicates several episodes per month to discussing conspiracy theories (Tapia, 2021). For years, one of the biggest YouTube stars was Shane Dawson, who made a name for himself largely by investigating conspiracy theories, and he even released a cosmetic line called Conspiracy (Haskins, 2019). But what happens when conspiracy theories become dangerous?

Within the last decade, conspiracy theories have increasingly crossed into mainstream media. One of the most infamous was that the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting was fake, a theory propagated by Alex Jones, who was later ordered by a judge to pay over \$1 billion in damages after spreading the conspiracy (Sullivan, 2022). Another is that the coronavirus is fake—or its vaccine is fake, deadly, or equipped with a tracking system, resulting in the growth of the anti-vaccination movement (Rite Aid, 2021). More still are the various right-wing and QAnon conspiracy theories that may have led to the United States Capitol attack on January 6, 2021 (Rubin et al., 2021). While most conspiracy theories are outlandish, many people believe them to be true for several reasons, as I will reveal in the following literature review.

The Grand Challenge

In attempting to prove conspiracy theories to be real, amateur researchers try to back their claims with information. For historical conspiracy theories—the John F. Kennedy assassination, for example—they may turn to archives. For contemporary theories, some may use the public library's internet to find fringe media or other information on online forums. Some may even seek the subject in library materials and demand library managers offer what they consider “balanced” collections when unable to find them. In short, libraries and archives are major institutions within the information society, and the number of people interested in misinformation and disinformation is rising (Kuzelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022); it is possible that people with an interest in conspiracy theories will utilize libraries for their research.

This literature review addresses two questions in relevance to public library managers and conspiracy theorists. The first is: what is the ethical responsibility of information managers in providing misinformation and disinformation regarding intellectual freedom? Secondly: is it the responsibility of an information manager and their institution to train their community on literacy skills and, if so, how should it be done with individuals who may be paranoid and have a predisposition to be suspicious of authority figures?

Points of Clarification

Before continuing, two areas of this literature review must be acknowledged and clarified. The first is that while postmodernists believe that *truth* and *knowledge* can never be fully known or objective, readers should accept that facts exist and that biases arise from how facts are interpreted and presented (Anderson, 2017). Secondly, a clarification of definitions is necessary. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2022) defines conspiracy theories as “[t]he belief that events are being secretly manipulated by powerful forces with negative intent. Typically, conspiracy theories involve an imagined group of conspirators colluding to implement an alleged secret plot” (p. 4). Information disorder is defined by Kandel (2020) as the “sharing or developing of false information with or without the intent of harming” (p. 280). Wardle (2019) identified three types of information that make up the umbrella of information disorder, and they are: disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. Wardle defined disinformation as “content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm” (p. 8). When disinformation is spread, and the person spreading it does not realize that it is false, it then becomes misinformation.

Wardle (2019) also defined the third type, malinformation, as “genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm” (p. 8). Malinformation is pertinent to conspiracy theories because when a few theories are proven to be true, the results usually damage the reputation of a person or organization. For example, many people remain distrustful of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) because of the revelation of illegal human experimentation through brainwash and psychological torture during Project MKUltra (U.S. Congress Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 1977), as well as the proposed terrorist attacks committed against the U.S. and civilians in Operation Northwoods (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1962)—

indeed, in instances such as these, some conspiracies are later found to be real. In this literature review, conspiracy theory is used interchangeably with misinformation and disinformation as all three are forms of false or inaccurate information. If one nefariously made up a John F. Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory and disseminated it, it would be disinformation; those that continue spreading the theory with its distorted facts would be sharing misinformation; in either case, it remains a conspiracy theory.

Lastly, the phrase *fake news* has propagandistic relevance to misinformation and disinformation. However, because of its overuse, the weight of the phrase has been diminished (Haasio et al., 2019), and therefore the phrase will not be used in this review. Instead, we will focus on the keywords which make up information disorder in describing conspiracy theories and their origins and proponents.

Literature Review

It is necessary to first understand where conspiracy theories come from and why people gravitate to them at certain points in history. Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk (2022) explored the origins of conspiracy theories, and to comprehend why conspiracy theories have gained increased popularity in the last four years, they investigated three movements built around them: QAnon, the anti-vaccination movement, and the anti-5G movements. They followed the origins of the theories and what attributed to the theories’ increased support. Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk identified various psychological, emotional, and social factors, as well as epistemic and political motives that cause people to believe in disinformation.

A motive not addressed by Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk but that cannot be overlooked is discussed at length by Rose-Wiles (2018) who states that, due to time constraints and because our modern society is programmed to want

immediate answers, people believe the first piece of information they see—especially if it has an emotional effect. For example, if a student is required to locate three articles related to a research topic, they often translate this to be the first three results of a Google search; the results could contain a conspiracy theory. Rose-Wiles goes on to cite a Pew research study in which 67% of Americans said they get at least some news information from social media, while 20% said that is where they *often* get their news. There are potential negative effects to receiving information from social media because anybody can post a meme or image that appears to quote an authentic study—in fact, these negative effects were witnessed when Russian agents were alleged to interfere with the 2016 presidential election by utilizing social media to share false information (Adams, 2019). Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk (2022) also divided conspiracy theorists into two groups based on intended end results, and they are:

- (1) people who actually believe in them and share them with good intentions (to let others know, to warn them) or (2) malignant individuals whose aim is to generally discord or discredit an opponent or critic or, alternatively, distract attention from misconduct or lack of competence. (p. 2376)

It is with this second group that malinformation should be addressed as conspiracy theorists are spreading information that they perceive to be true to hurt others. Nonetheless, even if the information is *believed* to be true, it is still not malinformation if it is false.

An example of a mainstream conspiracy theory that was attempted malinformation was birtherism—the belief that Barack Obama was not born in Hawaii but in Kenya, thus making him ineligible to become president (Donaldson & LeFevre, 2022). Donaldson and LeFevre used the theory of birtherism to explore how mental states and sociopolitical opinions lead to conspiracy theories. Most interesting in their research is the focus on how some conspiracy theorists have a delusion similar to the Texas sharpshooter

fallacy—parts of data are overemphasized while others are ignored (Donaldson & Lefevre, 2022). Donaldson and LeFevre investigated why people question certain records, such as Obama’s birth certificate, while believing other records in the same archival collection to be authentic. They also debated challenges with heuristic, systematic, and the combined heuristic-systematic information processing, emphasizing the importance of information literacy (Donaldson & LeFevre, 2022).

First, we as information professionals must consider whether misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation belong at libraries. To decide this, we must contemplate the second principle of the American Library Association’s (ALA) (2021) Code of Ethics, which states, “We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (para 6). This principle was furthered by ALA’s Freedom to Read Statement which was first issued in 1954 and amended in 2004, in which the ALA (2004) posited:

We trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe. We do not believe they are prepared to sacrifice their heritage of a free press in order to be “protected” against what others think may be bad for them. We believe they still favor free enterprise in ideas and expression. (para. 2)

Still, some scholars challenge intellectual freedom. For example, Lor et al. (2021) put forth a morality challenge which begins by acknowledging that, as champions of intellectual freedom, library managers should provide patrons with any materials they want. However, citing earlier experiments in which patrons received instructional materials to make bombs and freebase cocaine, Lor et al. (2021) argued this “laissez-faire” approach is less ethical than breaching intellectual freedom (p. 21).

Despite the opinions of Lor et al. (2021), most literature seems to point to the profession

disseminating the information and not setting the precedent that libraries become censors. The stance is that libraries must provide opposing viewpoints for people to make decisions—even if the resources requested are dangerous or incorrect. Hassio et al. (2019) debated whether libraries should house only truthful information or include pseudoscience and disinformation as well. After going back and forth on the issue, Hassio et al. (2019) stated that both belong in the library so long as the information does not contain hate speech or information that can become harmful to a group or individual—I argue that espousing conspiracy theories (such as COVID-19 being fake) is harmful. Nonetheless, Hassio et al. (2019) added that it is essential for libraries to ensure that they offer the most reliable information and that they promote skills among patrons to determine the credibility of true information over disinformation.

Indeed, improving information literacy is considered by most researchers to be the best form of defense when combatting conspiracy theories. In 2017, a panel consisting of six scholars was convened in Washington, D.C by the Association for Information Science and Technology. The panelists shared that information literacy should become an ever-present skill in the back of individuals' minds, similar to being health conscious, and they debated who should teach this lifelong skill (Aharony et al., 2017). Five panelists believed library personnel were the best group, as it is a profession dedicated to information science. Panelist Julien, playing devil's advocate, argued that K–12 educators are the most appropriate, "because IL skills are so central to success, development of that skill set should truly rest with K–12 teachers, who currently have responsibility for developing other fundamental skill sets" (Aharony, et. al, 2017, p. 529). To summarize, rather than teachers just teaching facts, Julien believes in teaching students how to interpret those facts.

To be sure, the debate as to whether information literacy should be taught by librarians or educators is a frequently discussed topic. Last year, UNESCO (2022) released a one-stop-shop manual, giving educators suggestions on how to approach conspiracy theories and theorists in the classroom. They provided four explanations as to why people believe conspiracy theories: it is a way to empower those who feel powerless; a way to explain unlikely events; if the true explanation for an event is complex, the conspiracy theory could be more compelling; and it could represent a pattern of delusional thinking (UNESCO, 2022). Their guide also clarified the difference between conspiracy theories and real conspiracies—for example, the Watergate Scandal in which the Nixon Administration attempted to cover up their involvement in breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters to steal information on political opponents—and how conspiracy theories can be harmful (UNESCO, 2022). While intended for educators, the UNESCO manual provides a step-by-step approach for handling conspiracy theorists that can be adapted by librarians.

Of special note are UNESCO's (2022) suggestions for what educators should do when confronted with student conspiracy theorists. Their suggestions are universal and can be transferred to information managers. The suggestions emphasize preventing the spread of conspiracy theories, which is easier than attempting to change someone's mind. This method, known as inoculation or *prebunking*, is being aware that conspiracy theories exist but building an atmosphere that encourages rational thinking (UNESCO, 2022). If people already believe misinformation, then debunking comes into play, in which case UNESCO provides four methods: fact-based debunking (point out misleading facts), logic-based debunking (point out misleading techniques), source-based debunking (point out misleading sources), or empathy-based debunking (point out how the

theory can cause harm to the target(s) of the theory).

The Center for Science and Democracy (CSD), supported by the Union of Concerned Scientists, is another group combatting information disorder. They do so by tracing the original spreaders of disinformation on topics such as climate change, COVID-19, voting rights, and racial justice—often, this is traced back to the same small group (Wadsworth, 2022). Like UNESCO, the CSD provides inoculation and debunking techniques. For inoculation, they suggest never mentioning misinformation, even to disprove it (Wadsworth, 2022). This is because of the *illusory truth effect*, which is when “the more times information is repeated, even if it is a lie, the more likely it becomes that people will accept it as truth, even when it is being disputed” (Wadsworth, 2022). If inoculating people is no longer viable because the conspiracy theory is so widespread, the CSD suggests amplifying accurate stories from credible sources, reporting and flagging inaccurate content, building relationships by talking to people who believe the misinformation, and encouraging others to follow these same steps (Wadsworth, 2022). In addition to avoiding the illusory truth effect, they also stress that under no circumstances should you attempt to sway individuals through fear, anger, or shame.

Sources abound which carry the idea that information professionals are the last line of defense when combatting misinformation and disinformation. Alvarez (2017) emphasized that because of libraries’ unique role as trusted and “partners, educators, and community champions,” librarians are primed to teach information literacy—especially when it comes to the internet (para 16). They suggested libraries offer training programs, as well as strategies that may seem as trivial as walking patrons through how they answered a reference question (Alvarez, 2017). Alvarez applauded companies such as Facebook for using technologies to flag and prevent the spread of misinformation, but

asserts that this does not prevent people from otherwise believing it. In other words, simply silencing conspiracy theorists is not enough in the long run; it is necessary to teach people how to determine false information—this is where information professionals come into play.

Anderson (2017) held that librarians have a responsibility to “defend the truth” and “help patrons discriminate between reality and lies;” Anderson goes on to address the postmodernist approach of many contemporary academics, declaring that “truth” can never be known (p. 4). Anderson set the foundation for the thought that when library managers select books, they are choosing one interpretation over another. This parallels with Branum (2008) who argued that the idea of librarians as purely objective was never true—especially since the 1980s when people going into the profession were raised during the social upheavals of the 1960s, when authority and social values were being reexamined.

Anderson (2017) and Branum (2008) opened the doors for two arenas to consider. The first is that if library neutrality is fake, and that if libraries have always made conscious decisions in their selection process, then it is okay to bar conspiracy theories—breaching intellectual freedom has always been present in the profession, whether conscious or not. Secondly, Anderson (2017) pointed out that in either case—in a society that censors materials or in one of true intellectual freedom—it is not the responsibility of information professionals to prevent patrons “from encountering falsehood; instead, we do what we can to help them read critically and come to valid, well-informed conclusions about what is true and good and what is false and bad” (p. 8).

Fister (2021) is another who promoted the thought that information literacy should be taught by librarians. In their article published in *The Atlantic*, they debated the responsibilities librarians have to conspiracy theorists by putting two groups of thought within the information

society into discussion. The first group are “those who have faith that there is a way to arrive at truth using epistemological practices,” while the others are “those who believe that events and experiences are portents to be interpreted in ways that align with their personal values” (para. 7). Fister’s article champions information agency and promotes information managers as the best educators of information literacy.

Libraries should not breach intellectual freedom by refusing to house materials on conspiracy theories and should instead promote information literacy; this begs the question: how? LaPierre and Kitzie (2019) proposed how public librarians can accomplish this, and they also acknowledge that libraries are often stretched thin. Their research is unique as most literature that discusses combatting conspiracy theories are limited to the education profession or academic libraries, whereas LaPierre and Kitzie filled the gap for public libraries. Upon conducting a survey, they found that many public libraries would like to provide “media literacy initiatives” but are unable to do so because of a lack of staff time (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019, p. 428). There is also a concern that patrons are less “incentivized to learn” in comparison to students at academic libraries (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019, p. 432). LaPierre and Kitzie (2019) suggested maintaining the library as a repository for accurate information, creating “memes and infographics to promote principles of information literacy,” and offering programs on the subject (p. 432). They also recommended technology courses for appropriate skill levels—for example, some patrons may need to attend a beginner’s course or “technology petting zoo” before attending a lecture on source credibility (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019, p. 44).

Barnett (2014) provided interesting insight on how librarians can discourage people from conspiracy theories by citing two case studies. The first of these is Roger Hauptman’s 1976 experiment in which he tested to see if librarians would help him locate information to make

deadly explosives (Barnett, 2014). The second study is from Robert Dowd, who in 1989 solicited librarians to assist him in locating information to freebase cocaine (Barnett, 2014). Expanding on Dowd’s research, Barnett emphasized the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ (IFLA) statement on intellectual freedom about the internet in that “Libraries should support the right of users to seek information of their choice,” and the ALA’s promise to “ensure the free flow of information and ideas” (p. 124). Therefore, Barnett supports giving people the material, but only if it is from scholarly or governmental resources. This recommendation mirrors Rose-Wiles (2018) who suggested directing patrons to databases such as Gale.

Admittedly, recommending patrons to these websites and databases that appear more credible comes with its own set of challenges—after all, the recent interest in conspiracy theories did not randomly appear. Using the presidency of Donald Trump as an example, Flynn and Hartnett (2018) pointed out that even government sources can be problematic. For instance, under the Trump administration, the Environmental Protection Agency removed dozens of online resources detailing climate change and reduced an online report from 380 to 175 pages (Hartnett, 2018). Another difficulty addressed by Flynn and Hartnett is that even if patrons use academic databases, they may find a misleading headline that reads something along the lines of “Donald Trump declares opioid crisis a national emergency”—it is true that Trump said those words, however he never went through Congress and formed the health provisions making it a legitimate national emergency. Therefore, information literacy skills are still necessary to put the materials in better context.

Potential Solutions

Despite some scholars, such as Lor et al. (2021), Branum (2008), and Anderson (2017), who

believe that librarian neutrality is a myth, I maintain that it is the professional responsibility of library managers to promote intellectual freedom as outlined by the code of ethics and statements by the ALA and the IFLA, if for no reason other than providing information for people to counter conspiracy theorists. For example, if one were convincing a group of people who do not believe the COVID-19 vaccine to be real, it would be essential to access the same anti-vaccination materials that led people to believe the conspiracy theory. Admittedly, providing access to this information risks creating the illusory truth effect discussed by the CSD. At the expense of creating this effect, books and other resources containing misinformation *do belong* in libraries. However, as Hassio et al. (2019) suggested, the most reliable information *must* be available as well.

By accepting that materials espousing conspiracy theories indeed have a place in libraries, it is now necessary to discuss how people access the materials. While Flynn and Hartnett (2018) addressed valid concerns about why scholarly and governmental websites warrant as much scrutiny as popular media websites, I assert that this stance is a bit exaggerated. True, online government resources change from one presidency to the next, and one should still conduct research on articles via scholarly websites, however, the situations mentioned by Flynn and Hartnett are exceptions to otherwise credible databases—or at least *more* credible databases. While relying solely on these databases may not be the best method, I conclude that it is still better and just as quick as typical web searches if one is already in a library setting—this corresponds with Barnett (2014) who put forth that librarians should only provide materials from scholarly or governmental resources. The only issue—and this is a major issue—is that most scholarly databases are protected by a paywall, and one must be connected either to their library or school's network to access the resources for free—therefore, in my experience one must visit these

institutions to use the databases. This may give popular online media outlets, such as CNN and Fox News, an upper hand, as they are readily available for free on people's cellphones.

The question is not whether libraries should house misinformation or make it difficult to access; instead, the question should be: how do we assist in making the public more information literate? Julien made valid points as a panelist, stating that information literacy should be taught by K–12 educators (Aharony, 2017). This would be a great piece of curriculum to start now, however, this leaves many adults without formal information literacy training. Therefore, as researchers cited throughout this literature review have suggested, the information profession is the best equipped to teach these skills, although other industries also have ample opportunity to teach their employees.

LaPierre and Kitzie (2019) provided best practices for teaching information literacy to librarians. One practice is to display memes and infographics, which are now available online to print. Ideally, one meme or infographic would be posted near every computer, albeit just one large poster near the computer area would suffice. It would be useful for libraries to circulate these images on their social media accounts as well. The memes and infographics should be apolitical and fun in nature. For example, a comic that tells the story of a headline that reads "Dogs Are the Best Pets," but further investigation reveals that the Dog Lovers Society wrote the headline.

LaPierre and Kitzie (2019) also recommended digital literacy courses and programs based on skill level. This could be a once-a-week course for four weeks, and people could drop by as appropriate to their skill level. LaPierre and Kitzie (2019) acknowledged that libraries are already overworked, so finding the employees to teach these courses is difficult. However, I suggest that this work could be outsourced—perhaps there is a local university nearby with journalism, history, library and information science, or other

disciplines where information literacy and following sources is essential. Library staff can reach out to professors from these universities via email and ask if they can volunteer to give lectures on the subject. If professors are constrained for time or unable to participate for other reasons, a follow-up email can be sent asking if they can recommend any outstanding students who may be willing. Or, if there are no nearby universities, the same tactic can be applied with virtual lectures.

The CSD's most important advice is to never try to change a person's beliefs via anger, shame, or trying to make them feel inferior (Wadsworth, 2022). This latter piece of advice is worth emphasizing as many conspiracy theorists have a superiority complex, believing they are enlightened and know the truth, whereas the rest of society are sheep (Mills, 2021). Conspiracy theorists also often have a predisposition to be suspicious of authority figures such as library managers, however, one must keep their composure, offer to locate the resources requested by the patron, and perhaps suggest they attend an upcoming course on information literacy. As the saying goes, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Future Research

To understand the mindset and actions of conspiracy theorists, there are several themes and topics worth researching that are within the scope of this literature review. While this review touched on psychology, there has been an increased focus in the field of conspiracy theories regarding the mental processing of people that create or are susceptible to disinformation and

misinformation since the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuzelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022). Librarians and other information specialists should be cognizant of these developments if they wish to fine-tune their approach for inoculating patrons—whether in the form of teaching information literacy or developing infographics and memes.

Conclusion

There is a fine ethical line that information specialists must walk, with one side representing intellectual freedom and the other assisting the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The purpose of this literature review was to first determine whether it is ethical for library managers to house materials that spread conspiracy theories. Based on the literature, I conclude that it is ethical, and the principles of intellectual freedom should take precedence. Secondly, this literature review addresses the thought that, while information managers should resist becoming censors, they should simultaneously protect patrons from information disorder.

Information literacy instruction is already a traditional offering at libraries and is of imminent importance at this moment as mainstream media shares disinformation to boost ratings and compete with fringe media. Protecting patrons from information disorder, whether in the form of programming or infographics that strengthen patrons' analytical skills, is a noble cause for libraries who are primed for the task.

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