

# EPIC2020

Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference

## CASE STUDY

### Fighting Conspiracy Theories Online at Scale

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*This 2019 project conducted in the US and the UK sought to understand which conspiracy theories are harmful and which are benign, with an eye towards finding ways to combat disinformation and extremism. This case study demonstrates how ethnographic methods led to insights on what “triggered” conspiracy belief, the social and emotional roles conspiracy theories played in believers’ lives, and how conspiracy belief was often a reflection of a person’s sense of societal alienation. We discovered that any extreme interpretation of a conspiracy theory could be harmful. The findings of this project changed how the client — and by extension the developers behind major tech platforms — understood harmful conspiracy-related content. The aim of this project was to inform how to scale and amplify the work of individual conspiracy debunkers.*

**Keywords:** *Conspiracy theories, fieldwork, engineers*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Jigsaw, a technology incubator within Google, and ReD Associates, a strategy consultancy, undertook ethnographic research on conspiracy theorists across the United States and the United Kingdom. The project set out with the initial mandate to understand which conspiracy theories are harmful and which are benign, with an eye towards finding ways to combat disinformation and extremism online. Although a small cadre of self-motivated conspiracy theory “debunkers” generate content online, their efforts are insufficient to tackle the proliferation of conspiracy misinformation online—some of which motivates serious violence (The August 2019 El Paso shooting of 23 people in a Walmart was fueled in part by a belief in the “white genocide” conspiracy theory).

In its constant aim to navigate between the tension of undue restraints on speech and harmful speech, Jigsaw (and more broadly, Google) stood to benefit from being able to surgically parse harmful conspiracy content from the harmless; that way, only the harmful could be penalized. More generally, in Google’s quest to better understand niches within a user base of over two billion, an ethnography of conspiracy theorists stood to render rich portraits of dimly understood and often reflexively vilified Internet users to those who broadly shape some of the Internet’s most popular services.

This case study demonstrates how ethnographic methods led to insights on what “triggered” conspiracy belief, the social and emotional roles conspiracy theories played in believers’ lives, and how conspiracy belief was often a reflection of a person’s general sense of societal alienation.

Our initial assumption - that some conspiracy theories were more harmful than others because they could excite acts of violence - was ultimately revised, for two reasons. First, we found that any conspiracy theory, if followed to an extreme length, could become harmful.

Second, we found that the more useful outcome from our ethnography was not that there were *types of theories*, but rather *types of theorists*. At a certain point in our study, we pivoted and sought to help identify the types of conspiracy theorists that are more likely to respond to at-scale technological deterrence strategies.

By focusing on two specific ethnographic encounters, we demonstrate why it is more important to distinguish between types of theorists rather than types of conspiracy theories. Our conclusion is that “extreme” theorists themselves cannot be affected by debunking content, because they will not consider factual argumentation at all. Extreme theorists are distinguished by their visceral, emotionally driven beliefs. Rather, debunking content is best deployed to people who are milder in their conspiracy belief, at a stage where the belief has not yet become embedded and visceral. In-person ethnography was essential in arriving at this understanding, since the personas and behaviors revealed by our in-person visits often overturned the personas and behaviors suggested by a conspiracist’s digital presence.

The findings of this project changed how the client — and by extension engineers behind major tech platforms — understood harmful conspiracy-related content and how to scale efforts to curtail extremism fueled by conspiracy theories.

In this paper, we begin by providing background on debunking as a strategy to dissuade people from upholding conspiracy theories and explaining why the methodology was based on an ethnographic approach. Second, we share two cases from our fieldwork to illustrate our main argument that the most strategically feasible way of combatting conspiracy theories requires us to segment different types of theorists. Lastly, we discuss how our findings impacted the way Jigsaw approached users who consume conspiracy theories online. This case study stands as an example for why ethnographic research on what happens offline helps explain, contradict, and influence what happens online. This perspective is necessary to developing and designing for online products and understanding the users themselves.

## BACKGROUND

Belief in conspiracy theories, particularly in the U.S., is not new, but the internet has made it possible to spread fringe beliefs rapidly, widely, and efficiently (Merlan 2019). Conspiracy theories continue to spread online at an alarming rate. Believers in extreme versions of conspiracy theories are sometimes moved to action. For instance, in 2016, a gunman stormed a pizza parlor in Washington DC, convinced— because of conspiracy theories circulating online— that it was the site of a child sex trafficking ring. Understanding the line between a playful conspiracy theory and one that motivates people to harmful action is crucial. So, too, is understanding what can be done to help debunk conspiracy theories in a way that is persuasive, so that people who start to fall down conspiracy rabbit holes can climb back out.

Jigsaw has studied misinformation for years, but conspiracy theories caught their attention as a less well understood form of misinformation that was closely, and repeatedly, linked to real world violence. They began focusing on the questions of how conspiracy theories could be so powerful that they motivate violent action, and how to deter conspiracies. A popular approach used to counter conspiracy theories is debunking. This typically entails engaging others one-on-one in great depth, or sometimes via broadcast, to counter very specific, and often highly technical, arguments. Jigsaw looked for efforts to

scale debunking and came across the work of Mick West, an expert at conspiracy theory debunking.

Mick is a successful video game programmer (noted for his role in the popular Tony Hawk skateboarding series) who retired early and became a full-time debunker. He's the author of a book titled *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect / A Guide to Helping Friends, Family and Loved Ones*. We also consulted the foundational scholarly literature on conspiracy theories, including *The Paranoid Style of American Politics* by Richard Hofstadter, and *Conspiracy Theories* by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, whose notion of the conspiracy theorists' "crippled epistemology" we employed in our analysis.

It was Mick's book that was the touchstone, though; in it, he outlines a process that involves taking seriously the points offered by the believer and offering counterinformation. Rather than being dismissive, he brings a deep sense of empathy, a wealth of knowledge, and tremendous amounts of patience and care to each interaction.

Mick has been debunking conspiracy theories for years, and he's an inspiration for his deeply empathic approach. He has made dozens of videos on YouTube and runs a forum called Metabunk where he hosts debates on theories as varied as 9/11, Chemtrails, and the notion that the moon landing was a hoax. His book contains a few great success stories of people who have been *deep* down their rabbit hole, but have gradually been coaxed out.

Still, Mick West is only one man. And even though there are other conspiracy debunkers online, too, the problem is simply too big for a handful of hobbyist debunkers to make a real dent in.

A large portion of society believes in a conspiracy theory to some degree - in the 2015 article, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Styles of American Politics," political scientists Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood found that in any given year, about *half of the American public* endorses at least one highly dubious conspiracy theory. No matter how popular Mick West's websites become, this painstakingly personalized approach to debunking simply can't scale to meet demand for this challenge.

This raises the question, how does one "scale" debunking? And is it even possible, or achievable in ways whose costs do not outweigh its benefits?

## **STUDYING CONSPIRACY THEORISTS**

Academic research on conspiracy theories, limited to the Western, English-speaking context, has largely focused on the psychology of individuals who believe in conspiracy theories and why they believe in them (Kluger 2017, Preston 2019, Roose 2019, van Prooijen and van Vugt. 2018). Psychological factors exploring why certain individuals are motivated to uphold conspiracy theories highlight universal traits that make one receptive to this type of content, or how the belief in conspiracy theories is reflective of other existing psychological behaviors. For instance, a variety of cognitive differences were found to increase susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking, such as schizotypy, paranoia, or delusional ideation (Dagnall, Drinkwater, Parker, Denovan, and Parton 2015). Individuals with cognitive differences are engaged in a world where conspiracy theories have explanatory power. Believing in conspiracy theories can fulfill emotional goals by feeling good about the world or exerting a feeling of control and order amid feelings of powerlessness (Hart 2018; Kluger 2017; Imhoff and Lamberty 2016; Grzesiak-Feldman 2013; Whitson and Galinsky

2008). Also, social exclusion may lead people to support conspiratorial beliefs because they provide social meaning and value (Graeupner and Coman 2017). Psychologists have argued that people who were from low-status groups (less education and wealth) were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al 2019; Freeman and Bentall 2017). What we found particularly relevant to this study is how one conspiracy theory acts as a gateway to other conspiracy theories. Once a person accepts one conspiracy theory, he/she is more likely to be receptive to other conspiracy theories (Brotherton, French and Pickering 2013; Jolley and Douglas 2014; van Prooijen and Douglas 2018).

Beyond psychology, scholars of media studies have examined the role that social media has played in spreading conspiracy theories and helping to form new types of communities online (Jolley and Douglas 2014; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel III 2007; van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013). Despite the fact that conspiracy theories found online are theoretically accessible to anyone, researchers have found that conspiracy theory content tends to stay within specific communities that are already receptive to it or are actively seeking conspiracy theory content (Douglas et al 2019). One study found that conspiracy theories, in the case around the Zika outbreak, was not spread online through a central authority but rather through a series of decentralized networks (Wood 2018). This suggests that people share and consider conspiracy theories outside of, or separate from, “official” stamps of approval or authority figures.

Our research builds upon existing studies in three ways. First, we focused on the role context, or large-scale social, economic, and political factors, play in shaping conspiratorial worldviews. This is distinct from psychological perspectives that are primarily focused on types of cognitive profiles that make one susceptible to conspiracy theories. We probed further into how the environments that people were living in were connected to the formation of conspiracy worldviews. For instance, conspiracy theories positing that because a small group of elites control the global economy helped people understand their lack of social mobility. Second, similar to the research on the instrumental nature of conspiracy theories, our research is focused on the generative nature of adopting a conspiratorial worldview. Beyond fulfilling the need for control and power, we explored the social aspects of engaging in a conspiratorial worldview, including making friends, having a sense of purpose, and feeling excitement when theorizing with others. Third, we investigated the relationship between what people do online vs. offline. We traveled to meet theorists in person to gain a wider view of their everyday lives in their homes and workplace. We sought to understand how people go from consuming conspiracy theory content to acting upon it. We define “acting upon it” as everything from forwarding a website to others, to liking a post, to meeting other believers in the local library, to openly considering, on theoretical grounds, harming the culprits responsible for conspiracies.

The goal of this study was to learn whether a relationship exists between types of conspiracy theories and potential for harm. Even though a correlation between extremism and belief in conspiracy theories exists, it is not the case that believing in conspiracy theories will automatically lead to extreme or violent behavior (Bartlett and Miller 2010). We conceptualize harm broadly to include the individual consequences on their personal relationships (e.g. estranged parents), health (e.g. refusing cancer treatment), and social status (e.g. being outed as a white nationalist). We also define harm in terms of actions taken against others who believers blame as perpetuating or benefiting from conspiracies, such as

immigrants. In addition, we also considered but did not directly investigate the harms that conspiracy theory belief has upon faith in governments and institutions (Coaston 2018).

## **METHODOLOGY**

To better understand how to stem the tide of false and potentially harmful conspiracy theories, Jigsaw had to better understand how people came to hold a conspiratorial worldview, what conspiracy thinking does for them and their lives, and what people do, if anything at all, with their beliefs. We wanted to understand how conspiracy theories fit into their overall life and what role conspiracy theories played in motivating other actions, offline. While it is an important area of study to understand the psychological factors that explain how a person even comes to believe in a conspiracy theory, we were more focused on tracing life histories and identifying any patterns between belief and action, specifically with an eye toward harms that are linked to believing in conspiracies. Rather than investigating levels of education and intelligence or cognitive deficits, we wanted to understand contextual, circumstantial, and personal factors that led someone down the rabbit hole, as well as what factors kept them from falling deeper. What role did the people around them, or life events, play in upholding or backing away from theories?

To answer these questions, our team of five researchers conducted in-person, in-depth interviews with 42 conspiracy theorists across the US and UK, as well as expert interviews with academics and journalists investigating conspiracy theories. In accordance with our initial hypothesis that some conspiracies were harmful and others innocuous, we recruited respondents across three different conspiracies: two theories we believed could be tied to real world harm and a third “control group” theory we believed was likely to be harmless. In the “believed harmful” camp were theorists who believed in “false flag” events (the notion that, for instance, mass shootings have been staged—which has been linked to harassment), as well as believers in “white genocide” (the notion that immigration trends indicate a deliberate plot to eliminate whites—which has been linked to mass shootings). In our “believed harmless” camp were believers in various science-related conspiracies (e.g. chemtrails, flat earth).

We used websites like 4chan and Twitter as starting points for recruitment and observations. By searching for the term “white genocide,” for instance, or a related term called “the Kalergi Plan,” we were able to follow, converse with, and ultimately recruit participants over Twitter. We also used surveys with questions designed to screen for conspiracy belief, and we drew from our personal networks as well. Since many conspiracy theorists are of course skeptical of strangers, going through intermediaries was often helpful.

Prior to conducting research, the team familiarized themselves with media coverage and scholarship on conspiracy theories and interviewing experts. We actively cultivated having an open mind and took particular care in understanding what language to use, and how to present ourselves in ways that would not cause us to lose our credibility (e.g. showing our familiarity with theories online rather than boasting about academic credentials). We consciously did not use the phrase “conspiracy theories” because of the negative connotations, but rather spoke about “alternative narratives”, “research,” and “truth.” Our approach was to be honest in presenting ourselves as former academics and journalists and offered our sincere interest in understanding and listening to their points of view, and to

have them guide us through the websites, videos, and channels that they used as sources of information. We also offered to meet in public places and did not record or take pictures, unless permission was granted.

It should be noted that in the end, all of the people we met with were not any different than the types of people we usually meet in other types of studies. Our research participants represented a variety of fields including teaching, technology, construction, and healthcare. Building rapport with them was similar to any other interactions we have in the field, though with more awareness around language, being actively empathetic, and not drawing suspicion with recording devices.

Ultimately, we made in-person visits, each lasting several hours, in or around people's homes. (One of our researchers also explored the lighter side of conspiracy culture by attending the "Storm Area 51" event held in October.) The insights gathered through fieldwork were analyzed alongside literature on grappling with the history of, or sociological studies of, conspiracy theories, including: *Kill All Normies, Fantasyland*, and *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power*.

## **OUR FINDINGS: DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE THEORISTS, NOT THE THEORIES**

As discussed, our initial hypothesis was that certain *theories* are more extreme or harmful than others. In other words, that a person's likelihood to commit harm was related to the type of conspiracy they believed. We had an assumption that pseudo-scientific conspiracy theories like flat earth or chemtrails—the belief that the government is spraying mind-controlling chemicals from planes—were relatively innocuous. Meanwhile we assumed that racially-tinged theories like white genocide were perhaps dangerous by definition.

But what we found surprised us. We learned that it was less important to distinguish between *theories*, and more important to distinguish between *theorists*. What matters is how much of a person's life is taken over by a conspiratorial worldview. If everything is part of the conspiracy, a person can no longer trust anything or anyone. An extreme conspiratorial worldview frames the elite "they" as powerful and as the enemy. Thus, it is not surprising that some studies have found that belief in conspiracy theories could be a predictor of having committed crimes or stating that they would commit a crime (McNamara 2019; Herrema 2019). In our own study, believers of extreme versions of conspiracy theories justified killing the enemy, if they knew who it was, because they would be saving others. It was not a particular theory that drove people to action but rather how much that person lived within an extreme conspiratorial worldview.

*All* conspiracy theories, we came to learn, have the potential to be harmful — more on that in a moment. And when it came to conspiracy theorists, we found, there was a very wide spectrum in terms of how hardened a person's conspiracy belief is. This becomes very relevant to know when you are hoping to try to "debunk at scale."

To explain why, we will first discuss a trip the three authors made to Montana.

## **DEEP DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: THE HARDENED THEORIST**

In November 2019, we flew to a remote town in Montana to meet some friends of friends who believe the earth is flat. We met a couple who bonded over conspiracy theories

and attend weekly meetups where they discuss and “test” conspiracy theories (for instance, by pointing telescopes at the horizon to try to determine the shape of the earth).

The woman we met with, whom we will call “Jennifer,” grew up with hippie parents who moved the family deeply off the grid. Homeschooled through youth, by her mid-30s Jennifer was living with her parents in a remote corner of Montana, without internet reception. It was only through her gig house-sitting that she was able to access the internet at all — which was how she met “Carl,” her first romantic partner, on an environmentally-themed dating website.

Soon, Carl began sending Jennifer thumb drives full of conspiracy material that she could consume on her home computer. Jennifer mainlined hours and hours of videos; down Carl’s rabbit hole she went, and by the time we met her, her idiosyncratic beliefs were legion. She believed the Earth was flat and there was a nefarious agenda to mislead us about its true shape. She believed that Hitler was a great man and that the Holocaust didn’t happen. She believed the government or the cabal controlling it sprayed mind-weakening chemicals from airplanes. There was hardly a conspiracy theory we had encountered that Jennifer *didn’t* believe in. Her whole worldview had been reprogrammed, doubly so now that Carl had moved to Montana to be with her. She, Carl, and others in their remote area began hosting a weekly conspiracy meetup, that doubled as something of a self-help group.

What we came to sense, meeting with Jennifer and people like her, was that there was no such thing as an innocuous conspiracy per se. *Any* theory could become dangerous or extreme, depending on what other theories it was caught up in. Jennifer’s flat earth belief was intimately tied up with the idea that a cabal of people—likely Jews, she had come to feel—were lying to her about the nature of the world. Given the right opportunity, she said, she would attack a representative of this cabal — in fact, she said, she would consider such an act a form of “self-defense” due to the “scale of the atrocity” this cabal was perpetrating on humankind. No longer did flat earth belief appear to us to be inherently innocuous. Belief in a flat earth, as discussed earlier, is a reflection of how extreme a conspiratorial worldview is. To believe in a flat earth, one must discount whole fields of expertise, such as physics and geography. In addition, to pull off a flat-earth conspiracy, one must also consider all of the instruments and narratives that propagate the theory, such as books taught in school, professors of astronomy or physics or biology.

We learned something else from meeting hardened theorists like Jennifer: that for people who have reached this hardened stage of conspiracy belief, debunking isn’t the right strategy at all. The notion of debunking presumes a sort of rational, civil debate, where each side shares facts in a sporting fashion, and some victor emerges. But for people like Jennifer, the very notion of what was a “fact” had become subverted. Any mainstream source of information was now reflexively dismissed as lies; if *The New York Times* (and its happens-to-be-Jewish ownership) toed the party line on the earth being round, could it really be trusted?

Furthermore, coming away from our meeting with Jennifer, we felt that a fundamentally *cognitive-and-rational* intervention like debunking was likely to fail against someone for whom conspiracy belief appeared to serve an *emotional* role. The conspiracy belief helped them make emotional sense of a world where they felt marginalized, disenfranchised, and alone.

The intervention needed to pull such a person away from conspiracy belief is likely multi-faceted, not to mention more intimate, personal, and personalized than social media can offer. Jennifer may well pull herself out from her rabbit hole someday, but it will likely take a perfect storm of personal and even societal factors before she is ready to do so.

The question of whether debunking can be scaled is moot with the set of conspiracy theorists like Jennifer: even if it could be, it won't work on her.

## **AT THE TOP OF THE RABBIT HOLE: THE BUDDING CONSPIRACY THEORIST**

This isn't to say, though, that debunking has no purpose. Because we did also encounter success stories in the field, showing that with the right interventions, tech platforms can help *prevent* the spread of misinformation at scale. The key, we came to feel, was to make sure debunking was deployed at the right—early—moment in a budding conspiracist's journey.

For an example of that, let's talk about the case of Lois.

When we met her, Lois, who lives outside of San Diego, believed in so-called "chemtrails." When airplanes fly at high altitude, the exhaust from airplanes cause condensation in the air — these familiar streaks in the sky are called contrails.

But proponents of the chemtrails conspiracy theory believe that in many cases, the lines in the sky aren't just water condensation, but are some sort of nefarious chemical, likely sprayed by the government. In some variants of the theory, it's all an experiment in climate control. In other variants, the chemicals are poisons that conspirators use to subtly undermine the will of the population, along with fluoride in the water.

When our researcher met Lois at an Italian restaurant in a San Diego strip mall, she explained why she believed in chemtrails. "I've seen them!" she said. She explained that back in 2015, her brother, a rancher, had pointed them out to her. Her brother said the government must be spraying poisons to "control the masses." That struck Lois as a little far-fetched, but she went home and started doing internet searches related to chemtrails. She went to NASA's website, but couldn't find anything debunking it. Instead, she eventually landed a video with a number of pilots and other self-proclaimed experts speaking out at a conference against supposed chemtrails. Persuaded by this parade of seeming experts, she shared this video on Facebook. (For a sense of the theory's reach on this platform; at one point a chemtrails-themed Facebook Group had over 100,000 members.) Lois even wrote to her senator about chemtrails, but never received a response. By the time I met Lois in the fall of 2019, she was less focused on chemtrails, which had principally been her brother's concern — and she hoped an investigative journalist would someday expose the truth.

What Lois didn't know? In the intervening years, major tech platforms like Google had identified the chemtrails conspiracy theory and had begun to implement policies that had the eventual effect of leading to more fact-based and authoritative content rising to the top of the page of chemtrails searches. As of this writing in August 2020, for instance, if you conduct a YouTube search for "chemtrails," the first videos that come up are debunking videos rather than conspiracy videos. YouTube has also inserted a box at the top of the search linking to the Encyclopedia Britannica entry for "contrail"; this encyclopedia entry also debunks the chemtrails theory.

This recent change in Google policy allowed for an experiment. Our researcher asked Lois to go home and, over the next week, to re-open her investigation into chemtrails. At the end of the week, we called up Lois. The difference was remarkable. She said, "I found some new articles that debunked it. I'd have to say I'm not leaning towards not thinking chemtrails are real. I don't think they're spraying chemicals." Is there even such a thing as "chemtrails,"

as distinct from normal airplane contrails, we asked? “I’m leaning 80-90% no,” Lois concluded.

What Lois’s story demonstrates is that if technology platforms surface the right kinds of debunking content, it *can* have an effect on people who haven’t yet become deeply attached to a conspiracy theory. In other words, through our ethnography we determined that it does seem possible for tech platforms to do what the debunker Mick West does, at scale.

What distinguished Lois from Jennifer is the relationship between what happens offline and online. A person who is heavily engaged in one and not the other is someone who can decrease or step back from a conspiratorial worldview. In Jennifer’s case, her offline and online behaviors are melded together and influence each other. Her social engagements with other believers in the library revolved around online content that they dissect together as a group. Her relationship with her boyfriend is founded upon their shared belief in conspiracy theories. Her increasing isolation from her family and from mainstream sources such as Google are because of her belief in conspiracies – her parents can no longer relate to her and Google cannot be trusted. Lois, on the other hand, considered chemtrails but the rest of her life, offline, is not related to or motivated by a conspiratorial worldview. In fact, her research online was short-lived, brief, and kept private between herself and her brother. Lois is not part of a crusade or dedicated to finding the truth, in which chemtrails are linked to other conspiracy theories. This relationship between what happens on-and off-line was only discovered because of our ethnographic engagement with research participants. By visiting them where they live, we could observe economic changes to the town where they lived and appreciate why conspiracy theories could explain why some companies are so powerful and rich and their main street is shuttered. We could meet with their families, we could see what it means it to live off the grid, and we could witness the other parts of their lives that were not tied to conspiracies – their jobs, market investments, and church involvement. By observing both what happens on- and off-line, we could also observe what it meant to be a budding or a “light” conspiracist vs. a hardened, deeply entrenched and enmeshed conspiracist.

We also had demonstrated that a focus on treating some theories as harmful, and others as not, ultimately wasn’t the most fruitful way to look at conspiracy theories. More fruitful was to be aware of the difference in types of conspiracy theorists themselves. Those who are newer to a conspiracy theory are the ones you are more likely to be able to reach with the facts, and therefore Alphabet’s efforts to counter misinformation will be likeliest to have impact the further upstream they are. In other words, it’s important to catch people at the top of the rabbit hole, *before* they really fall down it.

## **CHANGING VIEWS ON CONSPIRACY THEORISTS**

We delivered our findings in a set of presentations for stakeholders across Jigsaw, Google, and YouTube in December of 2019. For many of these stakeholders, it was the first time they had encountered in-depth qualitative data about the lived experience of conspiracy theorists. Of course, many employees at Alphabet are highly specialized computer scientists and businesspeople; to bring an ethnographic perspective humanizing this segment of their user base was eye-opening. The study gave teams at Alphabet new language and perspective into how conspiracies work that they would not have had from other approaches.

Not long after the completion of this study, COVID-19 hit. Those who had been briefed on our research into conspiracy theories and its relationship to harm soon had to make difficult and rapid decisions about what sorts of COVID-19 content would and wouldn't be allowed on Google's platforms.

By April, YouTube had pulled thousands of conspiracy and misinformation videos related to coronavirus from the platform. It began surfacing an informational panel that linked to national health agencies' websites—like the CDC in the U.S. It also began aggressively enforcing medical misinformation policies around false COVID-19 cures, and it expanded that policy to bar promoting actions that go against recommendations from national health authorities. This expanded policy led YouTube to swiftly remove conspiratorial posts by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who had downplayed the virus.

Decision-making at an organization as large as Alphabet is diffuse, and it would be impossible to attribute these decisions to our ethnographic study alone. What we can say with confidence was that our study was a highly relevant and valued input to educate top decision makers of the harm of conspiracies at a crucial moment when Alphabet faced a flood of COVID-19 conspiracies.

We can be more precise and confident of our impact at Jigsaw itself, which after all was our direct client. Ethnographic research has been a core research stream at Jigsaw since its conception, but now its value is established and appreciated by the organization's top leadership, who participated in some of the conspiracy theory ethnography themselves. In June and July of 2020, ReD Associates and Jigsaw teamed up again, revisiting about half of our former conspiracy theorists, as well as a cohort of new ones, to learn what conspiracy beliefs they had about the COVID-19 pandemic. This time, we brought senior stakeholders not only from Jigsaw, but also from Google and YouTube's policy teams into the "field" (redefined as Zoom calls) with us. These senior Google stakeholders reported to us their hope that actually meeting conspiracy theorists would humanize and make more visceral their own understanding of the population their policies affect; "I hope to feel I understand them better than I would just by reading an article," one said. After their participation in fieldwork, these Alphabet policymakers confirmed to us that the interviews had achieved just that: humanizing an otherwise mysterious community.

## **APPLICABILITY TO OTHER STUDIES**

Based on our research experience, we have identified three learnings that others could consider implementing. First, given the sensitive nature of our topic—believers in white nationalism— and the negative connotation around being identified as a "conspiracy theorist," we adopted a multi-pronged approach to recruitment. We learned after engaging with recruitment agencies that it was too off-putting to recruit for white nationalists and that white nationalists themselves may not want to publicly identify themselves to recruiters. Instead, we identified a variety of proxies that could help us identify potential research participants. For example, one of the questions used in our recruitment screener solicited their news sources and we listed a mix of mainstream and conspiracy-specific publications. Once we identified people who regularly consumed conspiracy theory content, we held an initial conversation to gauge their level of familiarity with the types of conspiracies we were recruiting for and how frequent their engagement was in their day-to-day lives. Because this study was focused on a particular set of theories and we were searching for people who

might potentially act upon their beliefs, we selected those who were prolific researchers and could speak at length about their practices on-and offline related to their conspiratorial worldview. We also did not rely exclusively on recruiters. We engaged with people on social media who were self-identified conspiracy theorists and approached them for an interview once we connected with them. This required several conversations to explain who we were and what we were researching. We presented ourselves as social scientists interested in meeting people who believed in alternative narratives to the ones given in mainstream media. Given the fact that some believers in conspiracy theories are suspicious of others, we also relied upon our social networks to connect with friends of friends or acquaintances. Our social networks acted as a gatekeeper and facilitated these interactions that would not have taken place had we not had someone vouching for us.

Second, we benefited from having an expert join our team and help us analyze our data. We invited Mick West at the beginning of our research project and during our analysis phase. With his wealth of knowledge and experience, we were able to solicit his feedback on our initial insights and refine our models. Because we were working on a tight timeline, having a deep expert and debunking practitioner as part of the team provided us with frameworks in which to conceptualize the data and pushed us to think in more expansive ways around how to curb extreme conspiratorial worldviews and whom to target. We also recommend selecting an expert that the client is already familiar with and trusts because then the team can share the same references, concepts, and theories from the beginning and does not require the researchers to convince clients of the expert's relevance. In addition, it allowed the researchers to gain another perspective on how the clients view potential solutions to the challenge.

Third, throughout the project researchers worked closely with the client, especially the fieldwork. This is a common practice, but we draw attention to it because experiencing going to a remote location together and conducting the interviews together meant that the client already had an understanding of the everyday lives of conspiracy theorists. At the beginning of the project, we all had the notion that perhaps conspiracy theorists would be on the fringe, rather than mainstream – ranging from college-educated and working in large corporations to retirees. In addition, we came to the realization together that our initial hypothesis was wrong. We no longer believed that one theory was more harmful than another. Rather every type of conspiracy had the potential to be extreme, and that once an extreme version was adopted, it often indicated a way of seeing the world. We did not have to spend time convincing the client why our fieldwork had overturned this initial assumption and instead focus on telling a story that humanized, or rather, normalized conspiracy theorists. This portrayal transformed conspiracy theorists from being seen as “mentally ill” to a “regular” person. Helping technologists relate to their customer was the most helpful we could be as outside consultants.

We're optimistic that this more empathetic, holistic understanding of conspiracy theorists will be vital to decision making when they wrestle with refinements in their policies about how to handle disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories on some of the world's largest tech platforms.

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## NOTES

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