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Should We be Generalists about Official Stories? A Response to Hayward

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In "The Applied Epistemology of Official Stories" (2023), Tim Hayward offers a thorough and convincing rejection of Neil Levy's claim that we ought to defer to official stories from relevant epistemic authorities. In this response, I take no issue with Hayward's criticism of Levy. Rather, I suggest that Hayward's position could go further, and he already implies a deeper problem with the concept of an 'official story'. In fact, I'm so swayed by several of his claims against things called 'official stories', that, in this essay, I investigate the feasibility of a generalist position towards 'official stories'.

### Hayward's Criticism of Levy

The growing literature on official stories is a subset of conspiracy theory philosophy. The well-known division in conspiracy theory philosophy is between generalism and particularism, a distinction originally defined by Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010) as a matter of rationality, though, lately, the debate is more broadly over whether we ought to define 'conspiracy theories' neutrally or pejoratively (more on this later) (see Dentith 2016, Harris 2022).<sup>1</sup> A lesser discussed division, which cuts across these two camps, concerns the relationship of conspiracy theories to official stories, with 'contrarians' arguing that a conspiracy theory ought to be defined as an account that contrasts with an official story (Coady 2007, Hagen 2022) and 'minimalists' who argue that a conspiracy theory is any explanation that posits conspiracy as a salient cause of an event (thus, official stories can also be conspiracy theories) (Pigden 1995, Dentith 2016).

David Coady (2007) was the first to define conspiracy theories as accounts that run contrary to an official story, but he also argues that this does not require conspiracy theories to be considered irrational, since

[Q]uite often the official version of events is just as conspiratorial as its rivals. When this is the case it is the unofficial explanation that will inevitably attract the label "conspiracy theory," with all its negative connotations (125).

On the other hand, Neil Levy (2007) argues that conspiracy theories, as such, are not irrational, but a conspiracy theory that conflicts with an official story offered by certain epistemic authorities is "*prima facie* unwarranted" (182). Importantly, Levy distinguishes between political officialness (official stories offered by political authorities) and epistemic officialness (official stories offered by epistemic authorities). He says that political officialness is no indicator of truth, so it may be overly naïve to accept a political official story; however, official stories from epistemic authorities ought to be deferred to due to the socially constitutive nature of knowledge production.

In "The Applied Epistemology of Official Stories," Hayward disputes Levy's claim, arguing that even in the case of epistemic authorities, "[a]ny presumption of deference to official stories must be regarded as defeasible" (3). Hayward's criticism of official stories is more reserved at some points in the essay and remarkably wide-ranging and deep-cutting in others.

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<sup>1</sup> However, the usefulness of this distinction is challenged by Boudry and Napolitano (2023).

For example, in the first section, he claims that official stories from epistemic authorities are “generally worthy of deference,” though when, in rare cases, a story is being “seriously contested” by concerned members of the public who ordinarily accept these stories, this establishes “a principle of exception that would suspend the default applicability of the general rule of deference” (2).

In the third section, he establishes that citizen investigations can be as epistemically rigorous and reliable as the investigations of official sources, thus demonstrating that official stories aren’t always the best option to defer (the fifth section is an applied example of a citizen investigation). In the fourth section, he discusses situations when epistemic authorities are co-opted by political or economic forces, thus undermining their objectivity. These three claims alone sufficiently show that it isn’t *always* rational to defer to official stories from epistemic authorities.

However, Hayward makes other claims that are much more critical of the *entire concept* of ‘official stories’. He points out that epistemic institutions throughout history have been wrong or misguided, having supported various “mythological stories, ideological stories, or blatantly discriminatory stories” (4). If race science was once the official story, we ought to be wary of the stories we call ‘official’ today.

But where the argument against all things called ‘official stories’ gets pivotal is his insight that official stories exist *because* there are already existing contrarian stories. There is only a need for an official story insofar as it responds to these alternative explanations. As he puts it:

[T]he very use of the concept of an *official story* might be said to have its roots in suspicion, for in practice a story only generally gets referred to as ‘official’ when it is overtly noticed that endorsement by officials gives it preemptory authority (2; original emphasis).

This point is more far-reaching than his stated conclusion.

While there are cases of contrarian accounts that directly disagree with the official story by rejecting its claims, Hayward has inverted the assumed temporal order: official stories *exist to counter* an already existing story or stories. So, in one sense, this makes official stories the contrarian account since the story is a response to already existing (now ‘counter’) narratives. As Hayward says: “The use of phrases like ‘that’s the *official* story’ generally implies awareness of another, unofficial, and potentially truer, one. So a question for those who broadly share Levy’s view is *why allow presumptive deference to something presumptively dodgy?*” (2; original emphasis). This is where we can begin to see that Hayward’s main, more limited position that official stories are generally rational to believe except when seriously contested butts up against his more critical point that ‘official stories’ *as a class* are inherently suspicious.

Now going back to his first limited claim that we should defer to official stories except when there is ‘serious contestation’, the question is whether official stories are necessary *only* in cases of *serious* contestation or necessary in *any* case of contestation. If it’s the latter, then that means we should *never* defer to official theories. In other words, if there is only a need for an official story when there are already existing narratives, then it seems as though those

narratives constitute enough serious contestation to warrant needing an ‘official story’. But if we shouldn’t defer to official stories in cases of serious contestation, then there would never be a time in which we should defer to official stories, since they only exist in cases of serious contestation. Moreover, it may be the case that sometimes ‘official stories’ are created to counter an existing narrative but other times there are multiple narratives, and one simply gets endorsed as the ‘official story’. The former situation seems more supportive of a presumption of dodginess than the latter since the countering narrative is created out of a motivation to undercut another narrative rather than for its own sake.<sup>2</sup>

In section four we get something of an answer to this question through a discussion of the use of strategic communications. Hayward says that many contrarian accounts, especially misinformative ones, are spread by malicious actors through ‘strategic communications’, whose aim is to “persuad[e] an audience to accept a pre-established story” (11). But even though not all contrarian accounts are strategic communications, *all official stories are*. He says:

For regardless of whether the *content* of a given official story is reliable or not, the *form* of an official story—in virtue of fulfilling its official function—is that of a strategic communication. Even if its content might be arrived at by deliberative methods of inquiry, its communication, as *official*, is presented as a matter not for deliberation but for public *acceptance* (11; original emphasis).

In Hayward’s view, ‘official stories’ as strategic communications are both anti-scientific and anti-democratic because they seek to end the deliberative process. Once a story receives its status as the ‘official story’, the conversation is over. He says, “An official story, by contrast, is not up for debate. It is not submitted to public scrutiny with an implicit invitation for critical feedback. It is communicated not to advance debate but to settle it” (11). Strategically communicating a story does not mean that the content of the story is problematic, but Hayward points out that it nonetheless may involve a “material self-contradiction.” Epistemic authorities gain and maintain their authority through the process of open and honest debate. Hayward explains this earlier in the essay saying,

[S]cientific knowledge is almost always subject to uncertainty and disagreement. This means that a scientific adviser’s confidence—to the extent it is epistemically justified—can never be completely unconstrained or unhedged (7).

In other words, if the process of an open and honest debate is what gives a person or group’s story epistemic authority, then when the story is made the ‘official story’, this ends the process of open and honest debate, and the story, therefore, loses its authority. Epistemic authority exists as long as the process is ongoing, but ‘official stories’ dictate an end to the process, which then ends the proper claim to epistemic authority. Moreover, ending the scientific or democratic debate looks suspicious, since this isn’t how we expect experts to act. Patrick Brooks (2023) has recently made the argument that when experts act in ways that are contrary to our expectations of their social and epistemic role, we ought to

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to M Dentith for offering this distinction.

be skeptical, and this behavior can even justify belief in conspiracy theories. If ‘official stories’ end scientific debate, that looks suspicious, and we are justified in our skepticism of the official story.

However, it may be that Hayward is overstating the problematic aspect of strategic communication. It seems that at least some scientific hypotheses have reached a point where (at least) the main claim is widely accepted and worthy of asserting, even if inquiry continues on the details. Evolution and climate science are two examples of this. The main claims (that the temperature of the Earth is rising due to human causes and species evolve from other species through a process of natural selection) are considered settled, while many details are still being worked out.

### **The Case for Official Story Generalism**

Hayward has made a convincing case against Levy’s claim that it is always rational to defer to official stories from epistemic authorities, but does his view entail a more widespread skepticism toward ‘official stories’? In other words, should we be generalists about official stories? And what would that entail? Similar to the debate over the proper way to define ‘conspiracy theories’, the challenge here is that everyone seems to use the term ‘official story’ in a different way. In what follows, I present four different ways to define ‘official stories’: the narrow epistemic view, the wide epistemic view, the received view, and the ordinary language view.

**The Narrow Epistemic View** follows Levy’s attempt to limit what we mean by ‘official story’ (or at least the kind we ought to defer to) to only those narratives offered by epistemic authorities. The benefit of this view is that it reduces what counts as an ‘official story’ to fewer instances and only really important ones (similar to Cassam’s (2023) irrational ‘Conspiracy Theories’ as opposed to the rational ‘conspiracy theories’ that are just explanations involving conspiracy). In this view, the epistemic authorities self-identify their story as the ‘official story’. But, as Hayward argues, epistemic authorities can be blinded by historical-cultural norms (e.g., racist or sexist assumptions) or can become co-opted by political or economic concerns. Moreover, if Hayward is right, and an official story ends a debate when presented as a strategic communication, this then is both anti-scientific and anti-democratic. This, then, would give us good reason to be skeptical of anything labeled an ‘official story’. If we define official stories narrowly, then an official story must be proclaimed to be ‘the official story’ by the epistemic authority, but the act of proclamation ends the debate thereby undercutting the authority of those experts making the proclamation, which creates a self-defeating situation.

**The Wide Epistemic View** is a less demanding definition, simply positing that what makes an explanation official is that it comes from relevant epistemic authorities. The challenge here is that by casting a wide net, there is no particular authority that designates a story as the ‘official story’. It is also unclear what sorts of narratives or explanations fall into the category of ‘official’ or ‘unofficial’. Without the ‘official story’ designation demarcating the level of certainty the epistemic authority has in the story, this view ends up being too wide. It would include any explanation from epistemic authorities. Even if we can designate which epistemic authorities are worth listening to and which aren’t, it certainly isn’t the case that

any explanation from an epistemic authority is correct. That’s the whole point of academia! Theories are posited and, more often than not, rejected or modified.

**The Received View** defines an official story by its broad acceptance from the general public, both individuals and institutions and not just epistemic authorities. What makes a story the official view is just that it has widespread currency. But received by whom? Stories that are generally believed by the public seem worthy of skepticism since so many falsities are widely believed. It also may be that what is generally believed goes against other sorts of official stories. For example, is the received view of the JFK assassination the Warren Report or the Oliver Stone film? There could be a more limited Epistemic Received View that refers to a story being widely accepted in a specific epistemic community, like the received view in scientific literature. The challenge here is that what is widely received today may turn out to be mistaken, and to an important extent, we don’t know what will stand the test of time. The history of science is a history of mistaken positions that were once the received view until they weren’t. There wouldn’t be any paradigm shifts if the received view wasn’t challenged. Moreover, it’s hard to gauge how much support it takes to push an explanation over the line to be the ‘official story’ or at what point in time a story goes from being ‘unofficial’ to ‘official’, unless there is a formal designation (and if so, then this view is just the same as the Narrow Epistemic View).

**The Ordinary Language View:** ‘Official stories’ could be defined through their use in popular discourse. For example, some conspiracy theory generalists have used an ordinary language approach to argue that academics ought to engineer ‘conspiracy theories’ in a pejorative sense to match how the term is used in popular culture. For example, M. Giulia Napolitano and Kevin Reuter (2023) claim that “the expression ‘conspiracy theory’ seems to carry with it a negative value” and therefore, they “argue for engineering [the term] *conspiracy theory* to encode an epistemic evaluation” (2035-2036; original emphasis). Applying that approach here, I ask: who actually uses the phrase: “That’s the official story”? Hayward points out that when people say ‘that’s the official story’ they mean it in a derogatory, tongue-in-cheek way. He says, “[w]hen the distinctive term ‘official story’ occurs, it is invariably in contexts where a public pronouncement has met with scepticism” (4).

The Ordinary Language View would also have to encompass both epistemic official stories *and* political official stories because when people use the phrase, they could be referring to either. When looking broadly at the entire class of ‘official stories’, these things are certainly worthy of suspicion. Ideally, when a government puts out official stories, the stories ought to be truth-aiming, but in practice, this is not the case. Worldwide, far too many political authorities use official stories to promote misinformation. Even in societies idealistically deemed open democratic societies, the problem persists. Levy might be concerned only with epistemic authority, but in the larger scheme of things, things called ‘official stories’ are far more likely to come from political sources, and by and large, those sources deserve suspicion. Moreover, as Hayward has implied, it ought to be rare for epistemic authorities to offer official stories, and when they do, it is either in cases where those authorities have been co-opted by political or economic pressure, or, even in cases with good intentions, the practice is dangerously self-defeating.

## What Kind of Generalism?

The narrow epistemic view is self-defeating; the wide epistemic view implies excessive deference to any kind of explanation from an epistemic authority; the received view is overly populist, and the ordinary language view is overtly pejorative. So, based on these possible definitions, does this entail a position of generalism toward official stories? Well, it depends on what we mean by generalism.

The Narrow Epistemic View only recognizes very specific cases as ‘official stories’ and ignores the broader class of ‘explanations’ offered by epistemic authorities that have not been given the ‘official story’ label. This could entail a generalism close to the version defined by Buenting and Taylor, that things labeled ‘conspiracy theories’, or in this case, ‘official stories’, are, by definition, irrational to believe. But this form of generalism is easily defeated by the particularist argument that both conspiracy theories and narrowly epistemic official stories can turn out to be true, even if they look suspicious.

A generalist position could acknowledge that these narrowly epistemic official stories can be true but that we have significant reasons to approach them with *prima facie* skepticism. This mirrors the argument by Boudry (2022) for a ‘moderate generalism’ towards conspiracy theories, whereby “we should be somewhat attentive to the particulars, but insist that at bottom virtually all bad [conspiracy theories] suffer from the same epistemic defects” (616). The Narrow Epistemic View seems the best candidate for the *prima facie* skepticism of moderate generalism since it is by definition dangerously self-defeating and inherently suspicious.

Yet, even if an explanation designated the ‘official story’ is dangerously self-defeating and/or looks suspicious, nonetheless, the story is coming from relevant epistemic officials, and this seems to be enough of a reason to, at least, avoid a general position of *prima facie* skepticism. The intention of labeling a story ‘official’ may be to end debate on the matter, but this could also be done for good reasons (e.g., sufficient evidence for climate change or evolution), good reasons but done suspiciously (e.g., climate change e-mail scandal), good reasons but wrong (historical-cultural norms that turn out to be incorrect), or for bad reasons (political co-optation). The Narrow Epistemic View of official stories therefore doesn’t lend itself to a moderate generalist position because the reasons for skepticism are varied and depend on the specific case. This fits better with Boudry’s ‘moderate particularism’, which “warn[s] against hasty generalizations” (2022, 615).<sup>3</sup> Since the designation ‘official story’ lacks epistemic character—the designation doesn’t speak to the truth of the story—we shouldn’t believe or disbelieve an official story just because it’s designated the ‘official story’.<sup>4</sup>

Would this moderate generalism work with the Wide Epistemic View, or would *prima facie* skepticism toward any explanation from an epistemic authority (despite recognizing its possible truth) be overly paranoid? One answer to this question is that this is exactly how academics approach each other’s work. But I think the academic’s position is more open-minded than a position of *prima facie* skepticism. We certainly shouldn’t automatically defer

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<sup>3</sup> Though Boudry’s ‘moderate particularism’ seems to be the standard view of ‘particularism’ offered by particularists.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Kurtis Hagen for helping me clarify this point.

to *any* explanation from an epistemic authority, but neither should we automatically approach them with skepticism. The Wide Epistemic View therefore supports a moderate particularism.

A better general objection to the Wide Epistemic View is that it's lost the meaning of 'official story'. If every explanation from an epistemic authority is the official story, then none are. This view creates multiple official stories, and they would conflict, requiring one to be deemed the 'official story', leading back to the problem of the Narrow View. Yet, focusing on one 'explanation' as official, without falling into the 'official label' trap of the Narrow View, requires moving to the Received View, that one explanation is official because it has the most support.

But the Received View is nearly as ambiguous as the Wide Epistemic View. If we adopt the Wide Epistemic View of official stories, we shouldn't be generalists about official stories because the term, again, lacks epistemic character. We shouldn't believe or disbelieve explanations just because they come from an epistemic authority. Likewise, we shouldn't believe or disbelieve an 'official story' just because it has broad support. An 'official story' isn't true or false because it is offered by an epistemic authority, or because it is widely believed by epistemic authorities. Again, the particularist objection holds. We ought to look at each 'official story' on its own merits, not believe or disbelieve because of the source of the story or its popularity. And it almost goes without saying that the Ordinary Language View of official stories, doesn't support a generalist position for the same reasons. Just because the term is ordinarily used skeptically and dismissively, or because some academics use the term positively, doesn't mean those explanations are either true or false.

So, despite some convincing reasons to be generally skeptical of 'official stories', there are too many considerations involved to adopt even a moderately generalist position. We have reasons to be generally skeptical of things called 'official stories', but not because those stories are more or less likely to be true or false, rather because the label 'official story' has no epistemic character. The label reflects no truth value from its object, even if the designators intend it to do so. Each individual 'official story' needs to be weighed on its own merits.

We should be generally skeptical of labels that attempt to monolithically define varied, complex explanatory phenomena, such as 'official stories' or 'conspiracy theories', but this position isn't generalism, it's particularism.

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