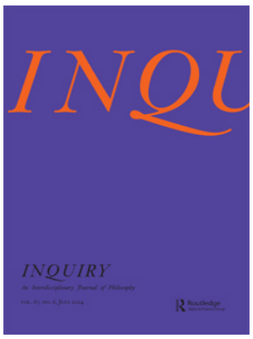

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Inquiry
An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/sinq20

Should we worry about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts?

Melina Tsapos

To cite this article: Melina Tsapos (12 Jul 2024): Should we worry about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts?, Inquiry, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375774

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375774

INQUIRY
https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375774

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Should we worry about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts?

Melina Tsapos

Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Concerns have been raised by both researchers and authorities regarding conspiracy theorists rejecting experts. To address the validity of these concerns, we need to delve into two key inquiries regarding who qualifies as an expert on conspiracy theories, and what constitutes an epistemically rational response (from a conspiracy theorist) when faced with expert testimony. The first inquiry presents a challenge when considering a reputationalist versus a realist account of experts. On the reputationalist account rejecting experts may be viewed as little more than rejecting those whom society has collectively deemed as experts. Alternatively, adopting a realist account raises the challenge of determining who the genuine experts are. I argue that the realist account is the more compelling option for pursuing the first question. Moreover, I explore two prevalent accounts from existing literature that prescribe how epistemic agents should respond to expert testimony: the Preemptive View and the Community View. Through an examination using the simulation program Laputa, I demonstrate that both accounts are insufficient. Consequently, I argue that without a clear identification of experts in the broader context of conspiracy theories, the initial concern lacks a solid foundation, and the sense of urgency may be unwarranted.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 23 May 2024; Accepted 19 June 2024

KEYWORDS Experts; conspiracy theory; conspiracy theorist; Laputa simulation program; epistemic networks

1. Introduction

We like to know things, and we typically cite reasons and evidence for the things we claim to know. As part of our set of reasons, we sometimes refer to experts that support our position. In logic, such a move is considered

CONTACT Melina Tsapos melina.tsapos@fil.lu.se Lund University, LUX, Helgonavägen 3, Lund, Sweden

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375774.

fallacious: *argumentum ad verecundiam* (an appeal to authority). In social epistemology, deferring to expert testimony is not necessarily so. An expert is considered to be a reliable information source that may put us in a better position to know things on matters ranging from disease diagnoses to climate change (Zagzebski 2012). Indeed, according to Neil Levy 'accepting experts' testimony is a far more reliable route to truth' than relying on one's own skills (Levy 2022, 355).

One reason people have for believing that conspiracy theories are dangerous, is that conspiracy theorists believe these accounts on the basis of them rejecting expert opinions. Rejecting experts is dangerous because, as Jolley, Marques, and Cookson (2022, 1), for example, argue, it causes distrust and misinformation to spread: 'conspiracy beliefs are likely to have the power to mobilize citizens in ways detrimental to a smooth-running society'; Douglas (2021) suggests that conspiracy theories are associated with political apathy, support for non-normative political action, climate denial, vaccine refusal, prejudice, crime and violence; and a joint campaign by UNESCO, the European Commission, Twitter and the World Jewish Congress to stop the spread of conspiracy theories warns that conspiracy theories can harm people, their health and safety.[1] And some, such as Uscinski et al. (2020) – who see conspiracy theorists rejecting experts as part of the problem – claim that conspiracy theorists do so because they are psychologically predisposed to reject experts. Normative actions to stop the spread or communication of conspiracy theories have thus been proposed. Sander Van der Linden (2023), for example, suggests inoculation against conspiracy theories, as against an infectious virus; a perspective echoed and supported by many authorities, researchers and the mainstream media.

In this paper, I focus on the worry that conspiracy theorists rejecting expert opinion will worsen our epistemic landscape, and I will assess whether this worry is well founded. First, we must determine who the experts on conspiracy theories are. I'll argue that there are three levels of experts on conspiracy theories. For the first two levels, when conspiracy theorists reject these, it is not typically a unique feature as we all do this; and so this fact does not substantiate the worry or the subsequent proposal to stop the spread of conspiracy theories. For the third level of expert (the most knowledgeable about conspiracy theories tout court), the story is less clear. I employ two accounts – the reputationalist account and the realist account – to try and identify this third level

[1] I suppose they mean when conspiracy theories are believed to a sufficient degree.

and argue that only one account, the realist, does justice to the social nature of the worry.

Turning, then, to the question of urgency, we must determine how a conspiracy theorist should react to expert testimony in order to be epistemically rational. I do so by examining two positions: The Preemptive View and The Community View. Analyzing simulation results from both views using the simulation program Laputa, I conclude that if our aim is to have a higher veristic value, we should worry that conspiracy theorists reject experts' testimony (where expert are understood in the realist sense). Nonetheless, lacking identification of experts on conspiracy theories in the general sense, we are unable to determine the urgency of conspiracy theorists rejecting experts' testimony. I conclude by discussing some potentially additional factors, beyond epistemic considerations, that could contribute to people rejecting experts and be a source for worry, including distrust in motives and a lack of alignment of interests.

2. Who are the experts on conspiracy theories?

Determining who the experts on conspiracy theories are begs the question of what a conspiracy theory is. A conspiracy theory has been defined in many ways in the academic literature. One kind of definition is to consider conspiracy theories as theories about conspiracies, where a conspiracy is a secret complot or plan by a small group of people (Dentith 2014; Pigden 2007; Tsapos 2023). Another type of definition narrows the scope by adding *relativizing terminology*, for example by defining conspiracy theories as claims that are 'contrary to the claims of authorities' (Coady 2006, 2007; Harris 2018; 2023; Keeley 1999; Räikkä 2009).

However, as Clarke (2024, 4) argues, relativizing definitions of conspiracy theories should be understood as complicated variants of non-relativizing definitions:

> The use of relativizing definitions of the term 'conspiracy theory' leaves open the question of how the relevant epistemic authorities conceive of conspiracy theories. The authorities in question are *epistemic* authorities rather than truth-makers. Their mere say-so does not make a theory a conspiracy theory. The relevant epistemic authorities must be employing some or other conception of conspiracy theory when they decide whether a theory invoking a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory or not. This other conception can't also be a relativizing conception (on pain of infinite regress), so it looks like it will either be a pejorative or a neutral conception. In effect, then, relativizing definitions of conspiracy theories should be understood as complicated variants of non-relativizing definitions of conspiracy theories. People who employ them

> are 'passing the buck' and appealing indirectly to whatever non-relativizing conception of conceptions of conspiracy theories their relevant epistemic authorities employ at the time.

Thus, given that some conspiracy theories are viable and some are not, I will take a neutral definition of the term to properly investigate what expertise on conspiracy theories really entails.[2]

I propose that there are three levels (or types) of experts on conspiracy theories: (1) the particular level (an expert on a particular matter relevant to a conspiracy theory), (2) the domain level (an expert specialized on a conspiracy theory domain) and (3) the general level (an expert who has knowledge that is applicable to conspiracy theories in general).[3] An expert on level 1 is an expert on a particular matter relevant to a conspiracy theory (e.g. an expert on SARS-Cov-2 or a ballistic expert). A level 2 expert is an expert on a conspiracy theory domain (e.g. the Wuhan Lab Leak Theory, some version or all versions of the JFK assassination conspiracy). And a level 3 expert is an expert on conspiracy theories in general (an expert who has knowledge which is transferable or applicable to most conspiracy theories).

When rejecting level 1 experts (and level 2 in some instances), I argue, conspiracy theorists are not necessarily rejecting experts on *conspiracy theories*, but they might be rejecting the conclusion on a particular fact pertaining to the conspiracy theory that the expert on, say, ballistics has concluded about the direction of the bullet that killed John F. Kennedy. If the claim that 'conspiracy theorists are psychologically predisposed to reject experts' means that they reject a particular fact, or particular conclusions drawn by such an expert – that perhaps doesn't fit their narrative or contradict other information they may have – then it doesn't pick out any unique feature of conspiracy theorists; belief bias and motivated reasoning is a cognitive trait that few are unaffected by (Epley and Gilovich 2016; Trippas et al. 2018).

On the other hand, consistently rejecting level 1 and 2 expert testimony would perhaps be a more unique psychological feature. So, the

[2]It has been argued elsewhere that the definition of conspiracy theories as pejoratives fails to provide much empirical value (Pigden 2024), and so I will not consider it further here.

[3]Of course, we could also claim there is a fourth level of experts: experts on the academic research on conspiracy theory – a research domain sometimes referred to as Conspiracy Theory. However, if such experts are conceptualized as experts on the academic literature, their expertise is not relevant for determining the validity of conspiracy theories, and is not relevant for consideration in this account. Hagen (2022, 425) has argued that this is not what most researchers on conspiracy theories are interested to study, noting that 'many of the scholars who have shown an interest in studying conspiracy theories appear to lack adequate acquaintance with the relevant evidence and arguments to contribute significantly'.

claim that conspiracy theorists are psychologically predisposed to rejecting expert testimony with respect to level 1 and 2 could be understood as a claim that conspiracy theorists do so consistently across the board of subject matter and expert levels. But is this right? There are no studies to my knowledge that support such a claim. Rather, there are some that seems to suggest the opposite: that some conspiracy theorists often refer to facts made by experts that they just happen to agree with (Harris 2018; Klein, Clutton, and Dunn 2019; Klein, Clutton, and Polito 2018; Levy 2022), or that is in support of their theory (or narrative), which is a form of confirmation bias; again, a relatively common and normal cognitive trait that is also found as a characteristic of people who reject particular conspiracy theories just because some expert rejects such a theory. So, the important question that remains to be asked is whether conspiracy theorists reject level three experts – experts on conspiracy theories proper – consistently, such that they can be psychologically categorized as being predisposed to rejecting the relevant experts?[4]

While it is relatively easy to identify experts on the first two levels, the third level of experts is still an open question. For one, this is because we do not have a known method to recognize these experts, nor do we have an institution that accredits expertise on conspiracy theories in this sense. A similar point has been argued by Dentith, who writes that there is 'no one group you can appeal to', and 'there are no accredited experts (or even accredited institutions) when it comes to conspiracy theories' (Dentith 2018, 198–199).[5] And, although I take Dentith to be mostly

[4]On level one, for example, conspiracy theorists might be rejecting a ballistics expert on a particular fact that is part of, perhaps even crucial to, a conspiracy theory. But the expert is not an expert on the conspiracy theory as a whole. On level two, the expert is an expert on a conspiracy theory domain. For example, a journalist, CIA agent or a historian could be an expert on one particular version of a conspiracy theory or multiple versions about an event, such as the JFK assassination. These experts' knowledge does not necessarily transfer to other conspiracy theories – although it sometimes could if the conspiracy theory is in some essential way similar. However, the expert in this case only applies their expertise in the capacity of whatever their expertise is on; which is not on the validity of conspiracy theories in general. The third level expertise requires knowing what conspiracy theories have in common and how to determine their validity or lack thereof. We may illustrate the difference between the expert levels, by using examples of how an experts' expertise on one level does not apply to another level. Imagine a conspiracy theory claiming that researchers and authorities covered up and lied to the general public about what they knew about a virus that caused a pandemic. According to the conspiracy theory, the people responsible had knowledge that the virus was created in a laboratory and had accidentally leaked from the lab. A level one expert – perhaps a virologist – could have knowledge whether the virus was lab created, but not weather the researchers and the authorities colluded to cover it up; a level two expert – e.g. a journalist or historian – could tell us about the conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 attacks or the Spanish flu in 1918, but they cannot help us on the validity of this particular conspiracy theory in question. A level three expert is someone who is an expert on conspiracy theories such that their expertise would be applicable for a conspiracy theory about the cover-up, but not necessarily on viruses leaking from labs in general, or pandemics in general where no theory about a conspiracy is suggested.

[5]I take Dentith as referring to expertise in the realist sense here (i.e. *know more than others)*.

right – since we are in fact currently lacking an identification of such experts – I don't believe it is necessarily the case that we couldn't have such experts. For example, there could be models that could tell us something about conspiracy theories in general, and thus someone who knows the model could provide expertise by knowing more than others on conspiracy theories (Goldman 1999).[6] Grimes (2016, 2021), for example, while identifying the lacuna for such expertise – ascertaining the likelihood of a conspiracy theory's viability – proposes a model to analyze several commonly held conspiracy theories. Grimes model examines the theoretical bounds for the magnitude and timeframe of any posited conspiracy theory. Subsequently, it is conceivable that we may develop a successful model or method for such ends, in which case we could have experts who know more than others on determining the viability of any given conspiracy theory.[7]

Both Dentith and Grimes consider experts to be those that know more than others. Others, like Levy (2007) and Harris (2018), seem more focused on the fact that experts are recognized as experts, accredited with a label of sorts. In order to identify the level three experts, we must first consider what the idea of expert consist of. What does it take for someone to be an expert? In the next section I will discuss two features, following Goldman (2018): experts according to the reputationalist and the realist account.

To identify level three experts we may either consider the reputationalist account (the view that experts are essentially a social phenomenon and a matter of having the right reputation) or the realist account (the view that experts' knowledge is truth-linked). However, the choice will give rise to a challenge. Under the realist account we are left with the difficulty of identifying the experts. Under the reputationalist account we might be able to identify the experts but, as I will argue, we cannot assume that they are relevant experts. If we identify experts by the reputationalist account, the worry that conspiracy theorists reject experts amounts to not necessarily a concern for the epistemic landscape of a society, but segregation of trust and disagreement on how to view institutional authorities. As such, I will argue that the realist account is the more applicable if our concern is that rejecting experts would put us in

[6]Experts on conspiracy theory would require that the expert knows something about the content of the conspiracy theories as defined – again, not to be confused with someone who knows about the research literature on conspiracy theories, or other details that are not necessarily relevant for the proposition itself.

[7]However, Grimes model has been criticised and its usefulness brought into question (Hagen 2023; Tsapos 2024). However, what I take Grimes' account to show is that we could hypothetically have such expertise.

a worse situation regarding the epistemic landscape of our society and for individuals themselves as epistemic agents.

2.1. Two accounts of experts

What does it take to be an expert? Is it a matter of reputation within a community, or a matter of what one knows independently of reputation? Philosophers have very differing intuitions on this question. According to Harris (2023) the epistemic authorities are recognized as authority on a subject by 'virtue of credentials', implying some type of recognition as a necessary feature. Uscinski et al. (2020, 2) found that 'authoritative information' is being rejected based on 'deep distrust of experts and *authority figures*' (italics are added), which is a further indication of the emphasis on experts being recognized, and/or having authority of some kind. Goldman (2018, 2021) identifies these as the reputationalist account. The reputational account, as the name suggests, takes it that there is something essentially social in the phenomenon of being an expert. On this view one does not qualify as an expert by the virtue of what they know. Rather, the qualification depends on the social context and others considering a person to be an expert. Goldman's definition of such an expert is that 'a person is an expert only if s/he has a reputation for being one' (2018, 3).

In contrast, others, such as Zagzebski (2012), suggest that experts are a reliable information source that may put us in a better position. Goldman identifies the realist account that takes the expert (in some specified field) to be someone who genuinely possesses appropriate knowledge. In other words, the expert can correctly answer or resolve the questions or problems appropriate to that domain.

In the case of the reputationalist, trust in the expert is key. The problem that arises, as Goldman puts it, is that 'reputation has little to nothing to do with actual expertise' (Goldman 2021, 87). According to Goldman

> [b]eing an expert does not require a reputation for possessing a high level of knowledge and skill. One can be an expert even if one keeps one's knowledge or skills quite private, rarely if ever displaying credentials or hanging out shingles to advertise one's skills or accomplishments. There can be genuine experts who have no clientele, following, or publicly established record.

As for the realist, being an expert is essentially a *comparative* state of affairs, and truth-linked, with some minimum threshold criterion added. The expert knows more than others on average. But meeting this

comparative criterion is not sufficient for being an expert. There is also an absolute criterion in addition to the initial, comparative criterion, and one cannot qualify as an expert simply by there being others who have an even more inaccurate or misguided set of beliefs and problem-solving tendencies. That is, the candidate must have a substantial amount of accurate knowledge and/or problem-solving ability to earn the title of expert.

The distinction between the realist and the reputationalist account naturally has its consequences on who we take to be the experts on conspiracy theories. The reputationalist account applied to experts on conspiracy theory take the experts to be those who the community appoints or agrees on to be the expert (as argued by Harris (2023) for example). Conspiracy theorists rejecting expert testimony, then, under this account amounts to little more than claiming that conspiracy theorists reject who society appoints as expert – which may very well be a worry, but not in an obvious way a veritistic worry, which is the primary concern for this investigation.

The realist account applied to experts on conspiracy theories takes it that they know more than others, relative to some threshold, about the viability of conspiracy theories. Although the threshold itself is vague, we may still claim to have a definition of the experts on conspiracy theories. However, we have not identified them, and it is contested if we can ever do so (Dentith 2018; see discussion above).

Thus, we are left with a challenge, *the experts (on conspiracy theories) challenge*: either that conspiracy theorists rejecting experts' testimony means little more than them rejecting who society has appointed as such, or it means that the problem of identifying the experts remains. And until we have done so the jury is still out on the question of urgency. Nevertheless, I argue that the realist account is the only interesting option for investigating what sort of action or response a conspiracy theorist should adopt to be epistemically rational, with which I proceed.

3. How should a rational conspiracy theorist react to experts' testimony?

Assessing the urgency of the matter requires an examination of what constitutes the appropriate response by conspiracy theorists to expert testimony. For this analysis, I am mainly concerned with their reliability (as individuals in a community) to learn the true answer to some underlying proposition that is to be evaluated when it comes to obtaining

knowledge in the sense of gaining a justified true belief based not just on the evidence available to them but also in context with what experts claim about the question or issue. I will examine the communication structure in communities to determine which structures are more effective in fulfilling the community's epistemic goal of reaching the correct conclusion.

The question of which social-epistemic practices are likely to promote, enhance, or impede epistemic outcomes has long been a central topic of discussion in epistemology. David Hume (1991) argued that we are generally entitled to trust what others tell us, but this entitlement only arises by virtue of what we previously learned from others. For example, we can recall occasions on which we were told things that we could not independently verify (for example, by direct perception), but that we later determined to be true. This track-record of reliability derived from the past occurrences, the reasoning goes, warrants us inferring (via induction) that testimony is generally reliable.

C. A. J. Coady in contrast argues that the observational basis of ordinary epistemic agents is much too thin and limited to allow an induction to the general reliability of testimony. He writes:

> [It] seems absurd to suggest that, individually, we have done anything like the amount of field-work that [reductionism] requires … [M]any of us have never seen a baby born, nor have many of us examined the circulation of the blood nor the actual geography of the world … nor a vast number of other observations that [reductionism] would seem to require. (Coady 1992, 82)

Therefore, some epistemologists embrace testimonial anti-reductionism (Burge 1993; Coady 1992; Foley 1994). Anti-reductionism holds that testimony is itself a basic source of evidence (O'Connor, Goldberg, and Goldman 2024). No matter how little positive evidence a hearer has about the reliability and sincerity of a given speaker, or of speakers in general, by default she has prima facie warrant in believing what the speaker says. Burge writes: '[A] person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so' (Burge 1993, 457).

These two differing intuitions on testimony can be traced in the literature. I will discuss each in turn, and perform a reconstruction informed by the conspiracy theory literature, calling the intuitions so applied the Preemptive View and the Community View. Turning, then, to determining what sort of effect conspiracy theorists rejecting experts has on the epistemic landscape, it turns out that looking at the level three experts under

the realist account is the most relevant alternative to pursue given the above reasons. As such, I will proceed to the second question of how a conspiracy theorist should react to expert testimony in order to be epistemically rational.

According to Zagzebski, The Preemptive View suggests that humans are better off accepting some authority's testimony as reason for their belief in *p*. However, as Masterton and Olsson (2013) have shown, whether we should defer or update our beliefs based on testimony depends on how we understand the testimony. The Community View hinges on the assumption that truth will prevail in the free marketplace of ideas. However, since nothing comes from nothing, increased communication and trust by itself does not produce higher veritistic values (Olsson 2011).

I will analyze simulation results from The Preemptive View and The Community View using the simulation program Laputa and conclude that if our aim is to have a higher veristic value, we should worry that conspiracy theorists reject expert testimony (where 'expert' is understood in the realist sense). Nonetheless, lacking identification of experts on conspiracy theories in the general sense, we are unable to determine the urgency of conspiracy theorists rejecting expert testimony.

3.1. The preemptive view

How exactly should the difference between epistemic authorities and everyone else be accounted for? In his paper, *Epistemic Dependence*, John Hardwig urges that rationality sometimes consists in refusing to 'think for oneself' (Hardwig 1985, 340). When a layperson relies on an expert, Hardwig says, that reliance is necessarily blind. Zagzebski's (2012) echoes a similar view in her account of preemption, and holds that a preemptive reason is 'a reason that replaces other reasons the subject has' (2012, 102). The Preemption thesis for epistemic authority states that an authority stands in for me in determining that *p*; and according to Zagzebski 'The fact that an authority … [testifies] that *p* is a reason for me to believe that *p* which replaces my other reasons relevant to *p* and is not simply added to them' (2012, 107). Treating the authority's belief that *p* as just one reason among others to believe *p* 'will worsen my track record in getting the truth' (114–115). Zagzebski claims that preemption leads to better results, since it is 'quickly learned by rats, but humans resist it and are outperformed by some other animals.'

The empirical evidence Zagzebski is referencing in support of her thesis is worth dwelling on for a moment. She states that there are a number of studies that indicate that animals, such as rats and pigeons, maximize (by not matching the probability of where they will get food). In other words, if they discern that one choice is better the majority of the time, they will choose that option *all* the time. Humans, faced with the same situation, attempt to match probability (Gallistel 1990; Mlodinow 2009) – meaning that they try to predict and match the proportion between the choices. For instance, when predicting a green or red light, humans proportion their choice to match the probability that it will be either green or red light. If the green light flashes 75 percent of the time, humans will typically predict green 75 percent of the time. In a similar condition, rats will choose the light that flashes 75 percent of the time (in this case green) 100 percent of the time. The result is that the rats' method will make them right 75 percent of the time, and humans will do worse. According to Zagzebski it follows that humans are better off preempting even if it is hard for us to accept that. It is 'especially hard for us to accept that when the authority is human', she notes. The key idea here is that when you get testimony from an authority that *p*, the authority's testimony is now the only reason you need for believing *p*, i.e. any other reasons you may have had are now preempted in the sense that they no longer count for or against *p*.

In the philosophical literature on conspiracy theories, we find that Cassam (2023), Levy (2022) and others have argued that lay people ought to accept experts' testimony rather than be 'thinking for themselves' or doing their own research. On reconstruction the Preemptive View is as follows: in order for lay people to be epistemically rational regarding conspiracy theories, they ought to defer to expert testimony. Both Cassam and Levy argue that we are justified to be prima facie suspicious of conspiracy theories. If experts, then, were to take an initial skeptical position on conspiracy theories, on reconstruction this would add that for a conspiracy theorist to be rational he or she should always defer to experts, who typically have a prima facie suspicion toward conspiracy theories. However, since there are valid general objections to the Preemption View, which also applies to the reconstruction, let's turn to these, starting with questioning the validity of the empirical evidence.

The comparison between the methods deployed by rats and humans in the case of deferring to the green light or trying to match probability is unfortunately a misleading analogy for determining which approach on experts' testimony is more rational. The rats' response to the green

light is not analogous to response to expert testimony. This is because the rat and the human in Zagzebski's example are making predictions on the world, rather than predictions on somebody's testimony. In the case of the rat and the flashing lights, there is no need for interpretation of the prediction, as it is a direct observation of the world. But where the response is based on a prediction itself, the probability estimate is a different situation. In fact, according to Morris (1974), the proper response to a prediction of this kind is to update one's credence on the forecast (which in this context is the expert's testimony), rather than to defer to it. For a subjective Bayesian model to apply, the decisive factor as to whether one should defer to (preemptively), or update on a forecast, is the aim of the receiver. Masterton and Olsson (2013) have shown that if the prediction is interpreted as an external probability – as an assertion of an objective chance – one should defer to the prediction. But if the aim is to improve veristic value and the prediction is interpreted as internal probabilities – a forecast where the probability reflects the credence of the forecaster (for example the experts) – then one should update on the forecast.[8]

How conspiracy theorists should react to experts in order to be rational will depend on the receiver's interpretation of the testimony: either as an external probability, in which case he or she should always defer, or as internalistic, in which case he or she should update. The rat is always interpreting objective probabilities (the flashing light), and it wins by always 'deferring'. However, since the conspiracy theorists are interpreting an expert's interpretation of x (the probability that A), the rational action is to update on the belief.

In addition, Lackey (2018) has made the case that, when we want to improve veritistic value and we don't want to screen off evidence, we should update. Lackey famously demonstrated the wildly unintuitive consequences for preemption, noting that if preemption is right then you are justified in believing your pastor (who is otherwise reliable) when he tells you that women are inherently inferior to men. The upshot of the Preemptive View is that identifying the expert reduces to a level of trust.

To investigate just how trust affects the different credence outcome for a proposition, p, I use Laputa[9] (a Bayesian simulation program) to simulate

[8]The forecast being 'A, with probability x' where A is a declarative sentence whose truth is settled by state of affairs in the future. However, as it concerns conspiracy theories – typically predictions about past events – the same would apply in cases of post diction.

[9]Laputa is part of an established methodological toolkit available to study argumentation in a social setting. The model allows for studying not only the dynamics of belief but also of trust, including

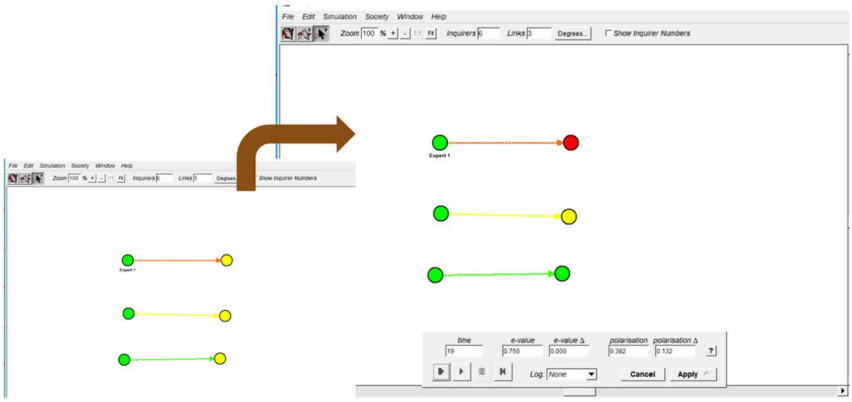

Figure 1. Simulation of three agents with 0.5 initial credence in *p*. The threshold of trust for sender's message *p* was set to (from top to bottom) 0.2, 0.5 or 0.9. After only a few inquiry steps, the agent with 0.2 trust decided $-p$ (red, top), 0.9 decided *p* (green, bottom), embracing the sender belief and 0.5 (the middle) remained undecided.

the trust dependence. The parameters of particular concern in this case that are set for each inquirer are the *initial degree of belief*. The initial degree of belief is the inquirer's initial credence in proposition *p*, represented by the color of the circles (that represent the agents). Green means agent believes *p*, orange is undecided, and red believes not-*p*. The *inquiry chance* is the probability that the inquirer will conduct an inquiry. The *inquiry trust* is the inquirer's degree of trust in her own inquiries. The links between the agents in the network likewise have a number of parameters. The *listen trust* is the recipients trust in the sender. The *threshold of assertion* is the degree of confidence in a proposition ('*p*' or 'not-*p*') required for the sender to submit a corresponding message to the recipients. For instances, if the threshold is set at 0.90, this means that the sender needs to believe *p* (not-*p*) to a degree 0.90 in order for her to send a positive (negative) message in the network. In this case, I have set the threshold to 0.90, 0.50 and 0.20 from top to bottom, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The results are quite intuitive, showing that even with the inquirers initial credence all being the same, a change from undecided to 0.9 as threshold of trust for sender of the message will convert the agent to believe *p*. And in the case where the trust is low (0.20), the undecided agent will believe not-*p*.

mutual trust among inquirers. For all the details on how Laputa operates, the various parameter settings and general advantages using this model, see Olsson (2011, 2013).

3.2. The community view

Embedded within the core tenets of liberal democratic ideology is the assertion that freedom of speech constitutes a fundamental human right. A prominent underpinning for this belief is the argument from truth as articulated by figures such as Milton (2005) and Mill (1975), that had an epistemic approach to democracy.[10] This argument posits that the absence of restrictions and other forms of censorship on speech fosters an environment conducive to truth. The premise rests on the idea that truth will naturally prevail in the free marketplace of ideas. In the same manner, epistemic approaches to deliberative democracy focus on the truth-tracking potential of democratic deliberation. Democracy is justified because it is both successful at solving social problems and utilizes procedures that promote epistemic virtues, e.g. robust deliberation, diversity of thought, reciprocity and commitment to truth.

Will Mittendorf (2023) has proposed an epistemic approach to conspiracy theory, one that views conspiracy theories as 'an epistemic benefit to democratic deliberation' (2023, 4). According to Mittendorf, a network with open deliberation and free exchange of information about conspiracy theories 'is necessary to form beliefs that one can accept as true'. Dentith has suggested that we need improvised communities of inquiry, since there can be no single set, no accredited experts about conspiracy theories. According to Dentith (2018, 204) a community of inquiry is

> a community-led enquiry, where members of a community cooperate in a democratic and participatory fashion to solve problematic situations [and the members] will likely include a variety of experts from different fields, some of whom will be institutionally accredited experts in some area, some of whom will have *recognised* expertise on some topic, and some of whom will be perfectly ordinary (yet interested) epistemic agents like ourselves.

On a reconstruction the Community View says that the experts on conspiracy theories are a diverse and improvised group, with unrestricted communication and diverse opinions on conspiracy theories. According to the Community View the community is the expert on conspiracy theories. Some key characteristics for this view is that it lacks institutional features, it is made up of diverse agents and, perhaps most crucial, there is free communication in the network between the inquirers. Now, there are some obvious advantages to this position. For one, we can identify the

[10]To be distinguished from the moral argument for the right to freedom of speech (see e.g. Waldron 2022).

expert, since the community is the experts. But there are also a number of benefits that are not necessarily committed to truth, or higher veritistic value, but rather things like making it harder for opponents to deny the results of such an inquiry.[11] However, since I am solely concerned with the veritistic value of a model for experts, I exclude these benefits from further discussion here.

Nevertheless, some concerns arise for the Community approach. Contrary to the commonly held intuition about free communication, Zollman (2007) made the surprising observation, known as the Zollman effect, that it is sometimes worse for communities to communicate more. Groups with more network connections – that communicate with more agents in the network – will be generically less likely to arrive at a correct consensus. A group with high connectivity needs to entertain all the possible options long enough to gather good evidence and settle on the best one. In such tightly connected networks, misleading evidence is widely shared, and so it may cause the community to pre-emptively settle on a poor theory (O'Connor, Goldberg, and Goldman 2024).

Utilizing the simulation program Laputa to test the Zollman effect, the inquiry accuracy level was set to 0.5 for all the agents in the network (and initial priors are uniformly distributed), letting other parameters vary randomly. In such a network there are mostly truth tellers (those who say p just in case their degree of belief in p exceed 0.9). But we need positive inquiry accuracy to improve the value, and since this is absent the result is that 'nothing comes from nothing' (Olsson 2011) as it were. We have, as would be expected, zero V-value.[12] This result confirms the Zollman effect and has also been shown previously using Laputa by Angere and Olsson (2017). What is more, as is shown in Figure 2, polarization occurs relatively quickly by agents converting to either red or green, (p or $-p$). None of the networks in this simulation – a run of 10,000 steps – had all or most of the agents in the network converging on either p or $-p$.

Instead, distributed networks with low connectivity are those that most reliably fix on the truth, though they are bound to do so more slowly. O'Connor, Goldberg, and Goldman (2024) compare these with the seventeenth century scientific results that were exchanged slowly, from person to person, in the form of individual correspondence. In contrast, science

[11]Thanks to M. Dentith for making this point.

[12]Following Goldman's proposal that degrees of belief (DB) have veritistic value relative to a question Q, so that any DB in the true answer to Q has the same amount of V-value as the strength of the DB. In Goldman's terminology, V-value of DB_X(true) = X (Goldman 1999; Olsson 2015).

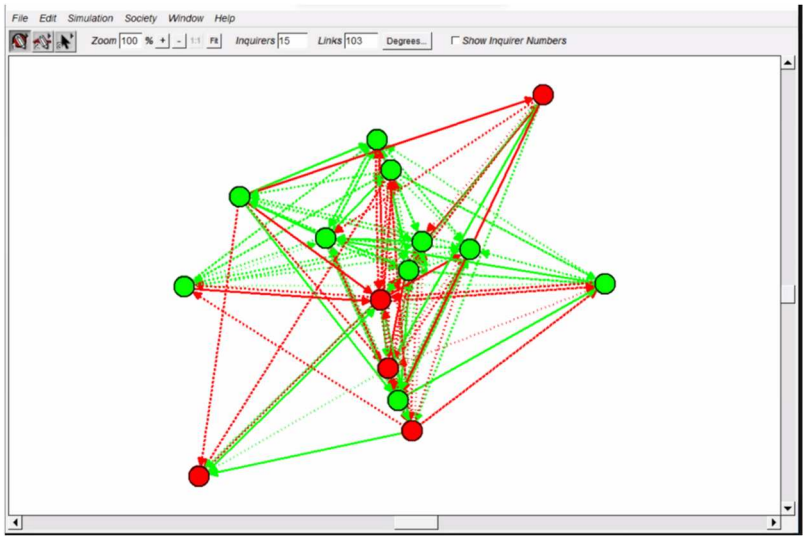

Figure 2. As expected, we have zero V-value in well-connected networks, and polarization (illustrated by two different colors, red and green circles, representing agents in the network) occurs relatively quick suggesting that level of trust and free communication has little effect.

results today are instantly available to everyone. The suggestion is that the communication mechanisms of seventeenth century science may be more reliable than the highly connected communications of today.

The corollary conclusion to be drawn – as to how to best inquire about conspiracy theories, given a realist condition – is that it is not more connectivity, but rather loosely connected communities that might be more reliable in seeking the truth. However, for many purposes and reasons, both ethical and practical, it may often be far better to work with a result that is only roughly accurate but available.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper I have considered the question if we should be worried that conspiracy theorists reject experts, a worry expressed by both researchers and authorities. I have considered this worry from an epistemic point of view; meaning that, when researchers have suggested that conspiracy theories are dangerous to believe because they are associated with climate denial, vaccine resistance, and are harmful to health and safety, I have assumed that the problems are due to conspiracy theorists reaching false, inaccurate conclusions. If instead the experts' opinions were

considered, they (the conspiracy theorists) would presumably be better off, knowledge wise. In other words, rejecting experts would be a threat to our epistemic landscape, and if conspiracy theories are psychologically predisposed to such behavior, then spreading conspiracy theories would indeed be a cause for concerns.

However, in this paper I have not addressed concerns that are not related to knowledge and truth-seeking. These could be, for example, concerns about polarization in society, distrust within families and communities and other ethical social consequences that may follow, that do not primarily concern knowledge as the main goal.[13] There might be a worry that relates to the question of how rejecting experts gives rise to such phenomena that are beyond epistemic considerations. The debate over the ethical concerns of rejecting experts has been the topic of investigation in the literature. Räikkä (2009, 458) discusses the ethical status of conspiracy theorizing and writes that

> It seems that the possible undesirable social outcomes of conspiracy theorizing as a whole do not explain the moral uneasiness that we may feel toward certain theories. The ethical evaluation of conspiracy theorizing as a cultural phenomenon should be distinguished from the ethical evaluation of particular conspiracy theories. Political conspiracy theorizing may be a valuable cultural phenomenon, even if most or all political conspiracy theories have moral costs.

Nevertheless, this account addresses the intuition that many have about why we should listen to experts. Namely, to have more true beliefs. This is also true about conspiracy theories. After a careful examination of the level of experts, and in what sense we talk about experts – the reputationalist and the realist sense – I found that, if we do in fact have such experts on conspiracy theories and we are concerned about the epistemic landscape, then indeed, conspiracy theorist rejecting experts is a worry. However, the analysis of the levels of experts showed that conspiracy theorists are not necessarily rejecting experts on *conspiracy theories*, but they might be rejecting the particular conclusion on a particular fact pertaining to the conspiracy theory that they are experts on. And if the claim that 'conspiracy theorists are psychologically predisposed to reject experts' means that they reject a particular fact, or conclusions drawn by an expert that perhaps doesn't fit their narrative or contradicts other information they may have, then it doesn't pick out any unique feature of conspiracy theorists. Rather, it is better described as belief bias and motivated

[13]One could argue, for example, that a united society is of greater value than a society with more true beliefs. My account does not have much to say about such value preferences.

reasoning, which is a cognitive trait that affects most (if not all) of us. In conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that, while veritistic value primarily concerns the truthfulness of beliefs, epistemic value encompasses a broader evaluation of the entire epistemic system, including the methods and processes by which beliefs are formed and justified.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Melina Tsapos http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6779-9732

References

Angere, Staffan, and Erik J. Olsson. 2017. "Publish Late, Publish Rarely!: Network Density and Group Performance in Scientific Communication." In *Scientific Collaboration and Collective Knowledge* (pp. 34–62). Oxford University Press.

Burge, Tyler. 1993. "Content Preservation." *The Philosophical Review* 102 (4): 457–488. https://doi.org/10.2307/2185680.

Cassam, Qassim. 2023. "Conspiracy Theories." *Society* 60 (2): 190–199. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00816-1.

Clarke, Steve. 2024. "When Conspiracy Theorists Win." *Inquiry*: 1–24. http://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2371482.

Coady, C. A. J. 1992. *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Coady, David. 2006. "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories." In *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 115–128. Hampshire, England: Ashgate.

Coady, David. 2007. "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?" *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 4 (2): 193–204. https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.193.

Dentith, M. R. X. 2014. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137363169.

Dentith, M. R. X. 2018. "Expertise and Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology* 32 (3): 196–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1440021.

Douglas, Karen M. 2021. "Are Conspiracy Theories Harmless?" *The Spanish Journal of Psychology* 24: e13. https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2021.10.

Epley, Nicholas, and Thomas Gilovich. 2016. "The Mechanics of Motivated Reasoning." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30 (3): 133–140. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.30.3.133.

Foley, Richard. 1994. "Egoism in Epistemology." In *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*. Vol. 8, edited by F. F. Schmitt, 53–73. Rowman & Littlefield.

Gallistel, Charles R. 1990. *The Organization of Learning*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Goldman, Alvin I. 1999. *Knowledge in a Social World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Goldman, Alvin I. 2018. "Expertise." *Topoi* 37 (1): 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-016-9410-3.
Goldman, Alvin I. 2021. "How Can You Spot the Experts? An Essay in Social Epistemology." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 89:85–98. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246121000060.
Grimes, David Robert. 2016. "On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs." *PLoS One* 11 (1): e0147905.
Grimes, David Robert. 2021. "Medical Disinformation and the Unviable Nature of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories." *PLoS One* 16 (3): e0245900.
Hagen, Kurtis. 2022. "Are "Conspiracy Theories" so Unlikely to Be True? A Critique of Quassim Cassam's Concept of "Conspiracy Theories"." *Social Epistemology* 36 (3): 329–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.2009930.
Hagen, Kurtis. 2023. "Do Conspiracies Tend to Fail? Philosophical Reflections on a Poorly Supported Academic Meme." *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 20 (2): 429–448. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2021.55.
Hardwig, John. 1985. "Epistemic Dependence." *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (7): 335–349. https://doi.org/10.2307/2026523.
Harris, Keith. 2018. "What's Epistemically Wrong with Conspiracy Theorising?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84:235–257. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000619.
Harris, Keith Raymond. 2023. "Conspiracy Theories, Populism, and Epistemic Autonomy." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 9 (1): 21–36. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2021.44.
Hume, David. 1991. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by Lewis A. Selby-Bigge. 2. ed., 8. impr. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Jolley, Daniel, Mathew D. Marques, and Darel Cookson. 2022. "Shining a Spotlight on the Dangerous Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47:101363. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101363.
Keeley, Brian L. 1999. "Of Conspiracy Theories." *The Journal of Philosophy* 96 (3): 109–126. https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.
Klein, Colin, Peter Clutton, and Adam G. Dunn. 2019. "Pathways to Conspiracy: The Social and Linguistic Precursors of Involvement in Reddit's Conspiracy Theory Forum." *PLoS One* 14 (11): e0225098.
Klein, Colin, Peter Clutton, and Vince Polito. 2018. "Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9:318119.
Lackey, Jennifer. 2018. "Experts and Peer Disagreement." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, edited by Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Dani Rabinowitz, 228–245. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198798705.003.0012.
Levy, Neil. 2007. "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories." *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 4 (2): 181–192. https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.181.
Levy, Neil. 2022. "Do Your Own Research!." *Synthese* 200 (5): 1–19.

Masterton, George, and Erik J. Olsson. 2013. "Argumentation and Belief Updating in Social Networks: A Bayesian Approach." In *Trends in Belief Revision and Argumentation Dynamics*, edited by Eduardo Fermé, Dov Gabbay, and Guillermo Simari. https://lup.lub.lu.se/record/4580342.

Mill, John Stuart. 1975. *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government, the Subjugation of Women*.

Milton, John. 2005. *Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenced Printing to the Parliament of England*. New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd.

Mittendorf, Will. 2023. "Should We Be Generalists about Official Stories? A Response to Hayward." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12:36–43.

Mlodinow, Leonard. 2009. *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc.

Morris, Peter A. 1974. "Decision Analysis Expert Use." *Management Science* 20 (9): 1233–1241. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.20.9.1233.

O'Connor, Cailin, Stanford Goldberg, and Alvin Goldman. 2024. "Social Epistemology". In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2024 ed. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/epistemology-social/.

Olsson, Erik J. 2011. "A Simulation Approach to Veritistic Social Epistemology." *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 8 (2): 127–143. https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0012.

Olsson, Erik J. 2013. "A Bayesian Simulation Model of Group Deliberation and Polarization." In *Bayesian Argumentation: The Practical Side of Probability*. Vol. 362, edited by F. Zenker, 113–133. Dordrecht: Synthese Library, Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-5357-0_6.

Olsson, Erik J. 2015. "Answers to 5 Questions in Social Epistemology." In *Social Epistemology: 5 Questions*, edited by V. F. Hendricks and D. Pritchard, 145–159. Automatic Press.

Pigden, Charles. 2007. "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom." *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 4 (2): 219–232. https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.219.

Pigden, Charles. 2024. "How to Make Conspiracy Theory Research Intellectually Respectable (and What It Might be Like if it Were)." *Inquiry*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375780.

Räikkä, Juha. 2009. "On Political Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2): 185–201. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00300.x.

Trippas, Dries, David Kellen, Henrik Singmann, Gordon Pennycook, Derek J. Koehler, Jonathan A. Fugelsang, and Chad Dubé. 2018. "Characterizing Belief Bias in Syllogistic Reasoning: A Hierarchical Bayesian Meta-Analysis of ROC Data." *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 25 (6): 2141–2174. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-018-1460-7.

Tsapos, Melina. 2023. "Who Is a Conspiracy Theorist?" *Social Epistemology* 37 (4): 454–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695.

Tsapos, Melina. 2024. "Betting on Conspiracy: A Decision Theoretic Account of the Rationality of Conspiracy Theory Belief." *Erkenntnis: An International Journal of Scientific Philosophy*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-024-00785-9.

Uscinski, Joseph E., Adam M Enders, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, John Funchion, Caleb Everett, Stefan Wuchty, Kamal Premaratne, and Manohar Murthi. 2020. "Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?" *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (3).

Van der Linden, Sander. 2023. *Foolproof: Why We Fall for Misinformation and How to Build Immunity*. London: 4th Estate.

Waldron, Jeremy. 2022. "Free Speech Apart from Law." *Journal of Free Speech Law* 2:107.

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. 2012. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zollman, Kevin J. S. 2007. "The Communication Structure of Epistemic Communities." *Philosophy of Science* 74 (5): 574–587. https://doi.org/10.1086/525605.