The Kennedy assassination is nearly synonymous with the notion of conspiracy theory. For those who make it their business to theorize about the events of and subsequent to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the details matter most: Was his brain stolen, or his body swapped, before the autopsy? Was Lee Harvey Oswald a CIA operative? Was the man who killed him a mafia hit man? What about the smoke that appeared on the grassy knoll—could it have been from a rifle, or was it simply from a passing vehicle? The official narrative states that Oswald was the lone assassin of President Kennedy, coming at the behest of the famously fraught investigation propagated by the Warren Commission. Many people do not believe it could be so simple, however—conspiracy theorists latch on to details that seem like evidence of a cover-up (the trajectory of the bullet, Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination while in the hands of police, etc.), and proceed to suggest that Oswald was a Russian agent (or alternatively, a CIA agent) who had to be taken out, for example (Aaronovitch, 2010, p. 129). Countless conflicting unofficial and official narrative explanations of the event exist. These narratives can sway one another. For example, Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* (which promoted the idea that the CIA, FBI, and the military were involved in covering up the assassination) influenced public opinion to such an extent that legislative action ensued. *The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Act of 1992* mandated that all records relating to the assassination be consolidated at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and made available to the public. The records that could not be declassified immediately—for security and privacy reasons—were to be held in a protected collection at NARA for 25 years, maximum (S.3006 - 102nd Congress, 1992). Almost all of this protected collection was released by or soon after October 26, 2017, leaving roughly one percent of the collection classified.

Some user groups of online government archival databases are more conspiratorially minded[1] than others. Such user groups think about and interact with government documents in a unique way—with what I call *suspicion of mediated information*—which should be thought about by archivists, particularly those working

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1 By "conspiratorially minded," I mean they are inclined to suspect conspiracies, not that they are inclined to perpetrate them.

with collections of high conspiratorial value. The concept of archival silences (established by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and taken up by Michelle Caswell, Simon Fowler, David Thomas, Valerie Johnson, and others), coupled with Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell's notions of *imagined records* and *impossible archival imaginaries,* provides a conceptual framework for this project by making it possible to talk about the productivity of silences in archives. My case study of the JFKFiles subreddit (/r/JFKFiles) illustrates how users can react to these silences with *suspicion of mediated information,* often filling them with imagined records. In the 2017 document release of the JFK Assassination Collection, poor scan quality and lack of adequate searchability function as silences, alongside and within one another, contributing to users' *suspicion of mediated information*. Users direct this suspicion towards the originating institutions (FBI, CIA, etc.), NARA, its archivists, or the government in general—anyone who could have possibly interfered with or manipulated the information. The community also attempts to band together to problem solve. /r/JFKFiles is grappling with the same kinds of problems that archival scholars and practicing archivists are facing in regards to digitization—archivists can learn from this group of users just as the user group could learn from archivists.

II. Literature Review: Scholarship on Conspiracy Theories

Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming (2014), who have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of "folk sociology," argue that conspiracy theorizing is, in some sense of the word*, reasonable*. But there is a disconnect between this mode of sense-making and the heavily mediated socio-political-technological contemporary world. This disconnect fosters anxiety and makes conspiracy theorizing seem to be an even more viable way to explain the mysteries of modern life and its layered mediations. In their words, Jane and Fleming argue that:

> . . . we live in an age in which the vast bulk of knowledge can only be accessed in mediated forms which rely on the testimony of various specialists. Contemporary approaches to epistemology, however, remain anchored in the intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment. These demand first-hand inquiry, independent thinking, and a skepticism about information

> passed down by authorities and experts. As such, we may find ourselves attempting to use epistemological schema radically unsuited to a world whose staggering material complexity involves an unprecedented degree of specialization and knowledge mediation. (p. 54)

Although not cited, this notion strongly evokes Michael Buckland's notion of contemporary society as a *document society* (in contrast to the oft-invoked "information society"), in which humans rely on increasingly mediated forms information, often in the form of documents (Buckland, 2017, p. 11). If conspiracy theorizing could be considered a result of the disconnect between Enlightenment attitudes and increasingly mediated information resources, then examining a community of conspiracy theorists in terms of how they relate to information institutions and the resources they provide access could shed some light on how this epistemological disconnect manifests in practice.

In this literature review, I address the history of conspiracy theory scholarship, the difficulty of defining "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory," and the gap between scholarship on conspiracy theory and information studies/ archival studies, concluding with a brief discussion of how this paper will attempt to bridge that gap.

Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, is a seminal text in the study of conspiracy theory. In Hofstadter's (2008) view, conspiracy theorists see conspiracies as motivating most significant historical events, and the "paranoid style" as a particular mode of perception and expression (p. 8). Hofstadter discusses his theory in relation to secret societies (the Masons and Illuminati), conservative politics contemporary to his time, religion, and nativism. To him, "What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts . . . but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events" (p. 37). Karl Popper (1974) took a somewhat similar, if rather more extreme, view of conspiracy theories in his work. Totalitarianism, Popper argues, grew out of conspiracy theories rooted in racist, nativist, and/or generally bigoted ideologies. His "conspiracy theory of society," suggests that conspiracy

theorizing was a manifestation of exactly the *opposite* of the aim of the social sciences—to discover truth (pp. 94–96).

Jovan Byford (2015) takes a similar viewpoint of conspiracy theories, arguing that the term itself is "evaluative," and necessarily pejorative because of the ideological and political severity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, he claims that the characteristics of conspiracy theorizing tend to remain stable over time, showing that the rhetoric and perspective of contemporary conspiracy theorists is not meaningfully different from those writing in the previous two centuries (p. 5). He goes on to characterize conspiracy theorize as consisting ". . . of a warped explanatory logic that is not amenable to rational debate. This is why conspiracy theories cannot be eradicated either through the creation of a more transparent government, or through any conventional means of persuasion . . ." (p. 155). Byford here presents quite a narrow definition of what conspiracy theories are and how they function in society. Rob Brotherton (2017) similarly defines a "prototypical conspiracy theory" as "an unanswered question; it assumes nothing is as it seems; it portrays the conspirators as preternaturally competent; and as unusually evil; it is founded on anomaly hunting; and it is ultimately irrefutable" (p. 11). If we define conspiracy theories as Byford and Brotherton do—in terms of their irrefutability, among other cultural characteristics—how can we discuss those phenomena that may not be so prototypical, or do *not* contain Byford's particular kind of "warped explanatory logic"? How do we spot a *real* conspiracy theory, rather than something that might be related to the phenomenon, displaying the same or similar characteristics? Besides, is it indeed true that improving government transparency makes absolutely *no* impact on conspiracy theorists?

Hofstadter, Popper, and Byford all treat the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing as a *prima facie* problem. Scholars such as Lance deHaven-Smith question this stance, asking whether or not this treatment of conspiracy theorizing as all-bad could be damaging in and of itself. Certainly, politicians and others holding seats of power have often used the pejorative nature of the label "conspiracy theorist" to their advantage, by branding critics as such (deHaven-Smith, 2013, p. 9). DeHaven-Smith argues that using the label as a general put-down for individuals and groups of people who are suspicious of government

damages democracy, by solidifying the notion that elected officials never collude (p. 10). DeHaven-Smith devises an important point—that not all conspiracy theories should be labeled as such or considered on equal footing. The term "conspiracy theory" lumps many different kinds of suspicion and paranoia together, quickly becoming unwieldy.

Matthew R. X. Dentith discusses this very problem from a philosophical standpoint, designating the opposing viewpoints outlined above the *generalist* versus the *particularist.* The generalists—Hofstadter, Popper, and Byford—consider conspiracy theorizing in general to be irrational, believing that conspiracy theories can be assessed as a broad category of phenomena. On the other hand, particularists—namely deHaven-Smith)—argue that conspiracy theories are varied, diverse, and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. To conduct such analysis, however, it is necessary to have a more general definition of the phenomenon, so that each case might be considered without the pejorative cultural connotations.

At its broadest and most basic, a conspiracy involves a group of people planning something in secret. Dentith (2014) defines a conspiracy along these lines as having three conditions: "1. The Conspirators Condition—There exists (or existed) some set of agents with a plan. 2. The Secrecy Condition—Steps have been taken by the agents to minimize public awareness of what they are up to, and 3. The Goal Condition—Some end is or was desired by the agents" (p. 23). According to these conditions, anything from a surprise party, to the assassination of a politician, to the plotting of several governments towards a new world order could be considered a conspiracy, as long as all three conditions are satisfied. Dentith goes on to define conspiracy *theory* as "any explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause" (p. 30). This is a perfectly general definition, and is indeed devoid of the functional and cultural characteristics associated with conspiracy theories and theorists, as outlined briefly by Byford and Brotherton. It allows, however, for conspiracy theorists to be discussed in terms of their myriad actions and beliefs, not simply their political, historical or cultural function. It is possible, therefore, to talk about conspiracy theorizing as a phenomenon in and of itself, rather than defining it according to common, if not universal, cultural characteristics.

Quite a few scholars working on conspiracy theories discuss the relevance of information *problems* in the study of conspiracy theories, but they often fail to cite any kind of information studies literature. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009), for example, argue that belief in conspiracy theories is caused by a "crippled epistemology" on the part of the conspiracy theorist, which is a result of "a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational resources" (p. 204). In addition to the disturbingly ableist terminological choice, this generalist perspective lacks epistemological nuance. What determines the relevance of an informational resource? Who has access to which resources? What role does epistemology play in such questions of access and relevance? Information scientists have wrestled with and written about these questions for decades—and yet Sunstein and Vermeule cite none of this literature.

Fran Mason's (2002) exploration of Fredric Jameson's notion that conspiracy theorizing is the "poor person's cognitive mapping" is another perspective that skirts the purview of information studies. Breaking down the phrase, Mason acknowledges the strangeness of the use of the colloquialism "poor person's," given that Jameson was a Marxist (p. 45), and defines "cognitive mapping," as such: "a means by which the individual subject can locate and structure perception of social and class relations in a world where the local no longer drives social, political, and cultural structures or allows the individual subject to make sense of his or her environment" (p. 41). Conspiracy theorizing, therefore, is a particular kind of postmodern cognitive mapping that produces a map of another world—a parallel world perhaps—constructed of misunderstandings of relationships (p. 40); or, indeed, "maps neither conspiracy nor society but provides a map of itself and the subjectivity that created it" (p. 53).

The hegemony implied in the term "poor person's" references access to knowledge and information, in addition to class and status. Mason (2002) points out that Jameson is necessarily making a distinction between legitimate knowledge and illegitimate knowledge, or knowledge that is "real" and knowledge that is "ideological" (p. 44). Indeed, within conspiracy theorist culture, knowledge functions as a unique kind of object:

> “knowledge” of the conspiracy seemingly gives the subject a position of independence and authenticity outside the domain of the conspiracy and its world of ignorance, control, and inauthenticity . . . . The conspiracist ‘subject-outside-history’ sees him- or herself as free of the information systems controlled by the conspiracy, government, or secret society and sees subjects inside history and society as constructs of “alien” information systems in which thoughts, values, and beliefs do not originate with the subject.” (p. 50)

Here, “information systems” is not used in the information-science technical sense; rather, Mason’s notion of an information system seems to refer to official stories or narratives, which take on many forms: media articles, collections of government documents, books, etc. From the conspiracy theorist’s perspective, people who believe the official story become a part of it, and thus are folded into the supposed conspiracy itself, if involuntarily. Indeed, Mason posits that conspiracy theorists don’t view their theories “. . . as narratives, but as histories . . .” (p. 44) returning us to the idea that many people who might be quickly labeled as “conspiracy theorists” do not view themselves as such, but rather think of themselves as researchers and investigators. The emphasis on individuality, the valorization of knowledge possession/ production, and the official/unofficial and legitimate/illegitimate dualities again recalls the disconnect between Enlightenment sense-making and the modern world discussed by Jane and Fleming. Mason points out the immensity of the difference in epistemology between those who are inside the system (sheeple, so to speak), and those who exist out of it (conspiracy theorists). The conspiracy theorist has a kind of meta-viewpoint, which informs all of their information seeking habits and patterns.

The final chapter of Stacy Wood’s (2016) dissertation, “Making Secret(s), The Infrastructure of Classified Information,” addresses one conspiracy theorist community, ufologists, and the possibly forged Majestic-12, or MJ-12 documents that purport to be documentary evidence of the 1947 extraterrestrial incident in Roswell, New Mexico. Addressing conspiracy theorists’ relationship to evidence, Wood argues, “The enactment of conspiracy theory culture revolves around an almost fever like excitement around the accumulation and presentation of

evidence, and typically an attempted adherence to the aesthetics and style of argumentation of widely accepted rhetorical standards" (p. 138). In such a way, evidence takes on a particular kind of significance within conspiracy theorist communities. Searching for it, finding it, and presenting it as a method of convincing skeptics all figure prominently in many conspiracy theorists' agendas. Wood also addresses, directly, the relationship that many conspiracy theorists have with classified information-as-evidence: "Classified information is a sanctioned break in the provision of evidence, leaving space for alternative narrative building and the development of new evidential paradigms that stem from new data or no data" (p. 144). I similarly argue in this paper that silences, particularly in government archives, affect how archival user groups prone to exhibit *suspicion of mediated information*, and/or other kinds of conspiratorial thinking, receive declassified information.

Wood's dissertation is some of the only work that touches on conspiracy theory scholarship from an evidence-centered archival/information studies perspective. Many scholars who study epistemology as it relates to conspiracy theorizing fail to engage with information studies issues, despite their applicability: Jane and Fleming touch on something akin to Buckland's document society; Sunstein and Vermeule come close to discussing what constitutes access and relevance; and Mason, through Jameson, tackles the notion of the legitimacy of certain kinds of knowledge. Beyond the stated thesis of this article, my goal is to bring conspiracy theory scholarship and information studies scholarship into conversation with one another, so that they might inform archival praxis and theory.

As this literature review has shown, conspiracy theories/ists are complex, both rhetorically and epistemologically. So as to concentrate on the epistemological aspects of conspiracy theorizing, and to attempt to avoid the rhetorical pitfalls pointed out by deHaven-Smith (2013), I will be using "conspiracy theorist" and "conspiracy theory" sparingly[2]—instead, referring to *suspicion of mediated information*. Here, I use "suspicion" as a step below paranoia; something we are all

2 When I do discuss conspiracy theories directly, I will be using Dentith's definition of a conspiracy theory, which will allow for discussion of conspiracy theories free enough from cultural and political associations so that each theory might be considered individually, on a case-by-case basis.

capable of feeling in the day-to-day. Coupled with "mediated" and "information," however, the term evolves. "Mediated information" refers to any form of information (particularly information-as-thing, which denotes objects, like data and documents, that have the quality of being informative [Buckland, 1991]) perceived to have been interfered with, duplicated, copied, or at all otherwise changed from its original form. Mediation as referring to *perception* of interference is significant —for, it could be argued that all information is mediated and that original forms do not exist.

I will also be drawing on Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman's (2008) model of paranoia, which they define as "acts of interpretation gone awry" (p. 109). Freeman and Freeman argue that paranoia exists in a kind of pyramid, with negative feelings about oneself and others being the foundation (Fig. 1). I disagree with Freeman and Freeman that conspiracy theories belong only at the very top of the pyramid—in the implied *most paranoid* section (or indeed, that low self-esteem always results in paranoid thinking). Rather, I believe that conspiracy theories can be thought to exist on a spectrum parallel to and informed by the paranoia hierarchy. This is exploratory work, and thus the spectrum of conspiracy theory is in very early stages; for the purposes of this paper, *suspicion of mediated information* exists towards the bottom of the pyramid; reasonable in its own way, but also a potential building block to other forms of paranoia and conspiracy theorizing. Introducing and deploying the concept of *suspicion of mediated information* will foreground epistemology in my analysis of how archival silences and imagined records function in the JFK assassination collection.

III. Thinking Through the Framework of Silences

All archives contain both available records *and* archival silences. Silences can manifest as gaps within a collection, barriers to access, redactions, classified documents, etc. Particularly within collections of conspiratorial significance, like the JFK assassination collection, such silences can engender *suspicion of mediated information* among user groups and individual users. That is, even the documents that *are* available become subjects of suspicion. Within collections of conspiratorial significance, therefore, archival silences take on a particular

weight, as they can affect the ways in which users perceive extant, especially recently declassified, documents. This section will first look at silences as they relate to history-making, and subsequently as they relate to archives, in particular, government archives.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1997) introduced a framework for thinking about silences in his seminal *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Silences, he argued, enter history-making at four critical points: ". . . the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)" (p. 26). These four silences could be said to exist on different levels of mediation, the fourth silence being the most highly mediated—original documents having been mediated by the archivist, the archival institution, and further synthesized by the historian. Silences corresponding with levels of mediation in such a way is not inexorable and depends on the collection. Indeed, Trouillot emphasizes that the framework itself is not all-inclusive, and should not be mapped onto all means of historical production uncritically; instead, the four silences ". . . help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed —or redressed—in the same manner . . . any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly" (p. 26). This recalls the particularist approach to conspiracy theories, that it is often more productive to address a specific conspiracy theory (or, in some instances, a group of conspiracy theories) in terms of its unique characteristics, rather than the as a general group of phenomena.

Recall, too, that Mason (2002) asserts conspiracy theorists do *not* think of their theories as theories, or narratives, but rather as *histories* (p. 44). Chronology, the primary organizing principle of history, has been critiqued continuously in the twentieth century; but Marine Hughes-Warrington (2013) suggests that chronology is only limiting if we see at as singular. Hughes-Warrington contends that histories and revisions to histories must be thought of as simultaneous, rather than sequential. She argues that histories can be stopped, redirected, reversed—

indeed, history can go in several directions at once, and is “many things at the same time” (p. 119). Furthermore, framing history in terms of the reasonableness or rationality of its writers does not always affect how such histories are received or put to use in different contexts: history-making is always an ethical activity. Indeed, she states, “Professional training does not mean that audiences will listen respectfully, and reasonableness does not always silence those of ill will. There is never a definitive word in history making; there is only the tumult, dynamism and troubles of a textual world in which the unrelenting, merciless demands of decision making rest with us” (p. 120). But the “demands of decision making,” rest not only with the historian, but also with the archivist—whose territory is not the fourth of Trouillot’s silences (the making of history), but rather the second (the making of archives), third (the making of narratives) silences, and sometimes even the first (the making of sources), as we will see.

Silences can enter the archive when records are destroyed, never created, kept secret, forged, appraised or de-accessioned out of a collection. In the words of David Thomas, Valerie Johnson, and Simon Fowler (2017): “. . . it has become accepted that archival silences are a proper subject for enquiry and to view the absence of records as positive statements, rather than passive gaps” (xx). Importantly, too, we know that archives are not complete, preserved, static portraits of history. Sue McKemmish (2016) suggests that records are physically stable, but their potential to be pluralized, or, brought into new contexts, shifts over time and is interminable.

Scholars and legislators alike have suggested that the declassification of the Kennedy records may be the only way to “restore the people’s trust” in the American government (President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Act, 1992**)**. Not only does this attitude ignore marginalized groups of Americans who have never trusted their government nor felt protected by it, but it also oversimplifies and fails to recognize the power of conspiratorial (and other) narratives to pluralize official records and their silences. Recall that, according to Byford, declassification almost never has a significant impact on the patterns of conspiratorial thought, even when it might challenge some accepted narratives. In the article “Records and their imaginaries,” Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell (2016)

argue that the declassification of the JFK assassination collection will not quell conspiracy theorizing, citing the power of mistrust in government and the enduring influence of Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Caswell and Gilliland introduce the concepts of imagined records and impossible archival imaginaries. Imagined records "can function societally in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or their aspirational nature" (p. 53); impossible archival imaginaries are "archivally impossible in the sense that they will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense unless they are drawn into some kind of co-constitutive relationship with actualized records" (p. 60). Due in part to the long-term silence of their 25-year classification, the JFK records have already been imagined, and these imagined records pluralized, in myriad ways prior to declassification. In such a way, doppelganger counterparts to the declassified records exist and are mapped before they are ever released. Their existence is imbued with a particular significance, and it seems almost natural that users would react to the declassified collection—different from its archival imaginary, often in a disappointing way—with *suspicion of mediated information.*

As Wood argues, classification constitutes a major source of silence in government archives. Government secrecy has the potential to constrain knowledge production, and to create and maintain deep power imbalances (Aftergood, 2009). Simon Fowler argues that unchecked classification "damages the institution of the archive. Archivists and users need to be vigilant to ensure that as many documents as possible are available for public access. The worst Silence of the Archive is secrecy" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 29). Although, arguably, classification is not the absolute worst kind of archival silence, Fowler's point—that secrecy upends the way that archives function—remains salient. The principle of "More Product, Less Process," also known as MPLP (Greene & Meissner, 2005), has a similar thesis and has had an enormous impact on archival praxis as a whole. Greene and Meissner suggest that, to combat the problem of enormous unprocessed collection backlogs, archivists need to sacrifice some degree of quality to process and make collections accessible more quickly.

However, declassifying documents too quickly poses privacy issues, while digitizing documents too quickly can pose problems of legibility and searchability. Furthermore,

declassifying large caches of documents at once has aroused suspicion in some online conspiracy theorist communities. For example, a thread in the subreddit /r/conspiracy discussing a cache of declassified CIA documents about telepathy and clairvoyance, consisted of some users calling into question the size of the cache of documents. One user wrote, “Oh great, a 90,000 page disinformation campaign to keep people focused on magical nonsense instead of what’s real.” Another responded, “But, what if it’s both? Holding a grain of truth, and only now just released to indeed distract the masses from a bigger thing.” Declassification, which may initially seem to be the *opposite* of archival silence, is turned on its head by this particular research community’s *suspicion of mediated information*; the suspicion here being that the government (and the archivist-mediators that did the declassifying) is using declassification of a particularly interesting or weird collection as a tool to distract or detract from a different—more important, and more conspiratorial—event or subject.

Declassification thus itself poses a challenge to conspiracy theorist communities, as they try to make sense of the practice in the context of what they tend to see as threatening and subversive motives on the part of the declassifying institution. Indeed, Kalev Leetaru (2008) suggests that it is much more valuable to consider the number of times poorly scanned documents show up in a collection, rather than putting too much emphasis on “anecdotal discovery” of one example. This does not take into account the way that conspiracy theorist user groups work. A single anecdotal discovery of a poorly scanned document can be a significant occurrence for a community of conspiracy researchers like those on the JFKFiles subreddit. Considering the epistemological differences between user groups matters: one group may react with no surprise at an anecdotal discovery of a poorly scanned document; a more conspiratorially minded group may see it as suspicious. Declassifying institutions and their archivists should familiarize themselves with the audience of a given collection, in order to assess whether or not that audience may be prone to suspicion. Decisions about *how* to declassify can be informed by such familiarity with a user community.

The JFK assassination can be considered what Hughes-Warrington (2013) has called an historical “bright-spot” (p. 119)

—it is, and always will be, highly contested and continually analyzed and re-analyzed. In general, the system of classification and declassification found in U.S. government archives disrupts the taken-for-granted dominance of chronology in history-making—new information contained in declassified documents almost seems to necessitate revision. For my case study, it initially *seems* as though declassification should put into motion a revision of the manifold imagined histories around the assassination. But because of the proliferation of archival silences, and the ease with which imagined records fill such silences, the burden of truth, proof, and trust is put on the materials and the archivists who arrange them and make them available. Although the amateur JFK assassination researchers of /r/JFKFiles can access documents immediately, many levels of mediation still exist in the online environment. Indeed, each of Trouillot's four silences exists on a different level of mediation—more and more silences do indeed enter history making as primary sources are mediated further and further. The *suspicion of mediated information* that arises from the peculiar mix of entrenched impossible archival imaginaries and inevitable archival silences blooms easily in this collection, even at the first two levels of silence. As we will see, any aspect of the collection that proves challenging or acts as a barrier to access may function as an archival silence.

IV. Method

This project is a case study that explores how members of a specific community of users on a small subreddit (a forum section of the bookmarking site "reddit.com") interact with, use, and collaborate around NARA's 2017 record release. Although documents continue to be released in batches, I will be concentrating on NARA's October-November 2017 release of 31,334 digitized documents that were previously classified in full or in part, and the accompanying discussion on the subreddit. The subreddit—titled "JFK Files"—consists of about six thousand Reddit users. I quote directly from the subreddit, but I do not include usernames, and I have changed key words to keep users as anonymous as possible. The data from the subreddit were collected in October and November 2017.

V. Data and Discussion

I will focus on two digitization problems faced by JFKfiles users: difficulty reading the documents (legibility) and difficulty searching the documents (searchability). These digitization problems constitute archival silences at the moment of fact assembly/ the making of archives. Both creating new digital documents through scanning, and arranging these documents in an online database are a kind of fact assembly, although one could argue for document scanning as a kind of fact creation. With each of of Trouillot's four existing on a different level of mediation, it follows that, reacting to the silences in the online collection, the /r/JFKFiles user group exhibits *suspicion of mediated information*.

Poor scanning is a silence that, like Trouillot predicted, does not fit neatly into his framework. It functions both at the moment of fact creation/ source-making and the moment of fact assembly/ archive-making. The digitized document is a new and separate entity from its paper counterpart, which itself may be a copy of a copy of the original document. From that perspective, the illegibility of scanned documents seems to constitute the first kind of silence, at the moment of fact creation/source-making. However, is not the purpose of scanning a document and re-making it in digital form to create a collection of such digitized documents, to be made available online? The silence of poor scanning exists somewhere in between the first and second of Trouillot's silences.

Discussions of illegible documents are frequent in the JFKFiles subreddit. One commenter presented figures 2 and 3 as an example of a heavily redacted document, stating, "nice way of redacting a document without actually redacting it: make it illegible. On the official NARA website, the most important documents (marked 'Formerly Withheld In Full') are mostly totally illegible. All of them are just awful photocopies. Deliberate?" In this instance, the commenter draws a connection between the import of the document and its lack of legibility. The silence of illegibility becomes suspicious when coupled with metadata that indicates that the document in question *used* to be classified in full, especially when this pairing occurs with multiple documents, as the commenter here implies. Perceived importance, coupled with a perceived pattern, turns into

suspicion of mediated information here: the commenter openly suggests that this silence of illegibility was intentional, rather than a result of the size of the collection or lack of adequate staff (which other commenters do argue could be the reason behind poor scanning).

Other users, in different threads, make similar arguments. A user posted Figure 4, commenting: “Why scan so many film negatives after they were indecipherably photocopied into uselessness?” Another user responded, “They’re pretending to be transparent, while actually releasing worthless information. Useful information has been turned into something useless.” To the quoted users’ minds, it is quite possible that the archivists and the agencies that created the documents conspired to make them unreadable, but not officially redacted. As predicted by Gilliland and Caswell, declassification by itself—as a generalized action—did nothing to stop suspicion directed towards NARA or the originating agencies. The silence of illegibility as it manifests in a particular document thus plays a part in fostering both *suspicion of mediated information* and the continuation of an imagined JFK assassination archive. As long as silences exist within the JFK assassination collection—as they always must—imagined JFK assassination records will live on, *through* the triggering of suspicion of mediated information in conspiratorially minded users. *Suspicion of mediated information* casts doubt on the originating institutions, NARA, the archivists and/or other personnel involved with the collection, their motivations, and their actions and choices made when scanning and arranging the collection.

These users, as we have seen, rest some of their suspicions on what Leetaru (2008) would call “anecdotal discovery” of something that appears anomalous. Freeman and Freeman (2008) highlight the importance of what they call “anomalous experiences,” which they argue can, for some people, trigger paranoia—anomalous experiences are “odd and unsettling feelings” that result when we “don’t understand what’s happening to us” (p. 90). Experiencing anomaly, even if it is not a direct “anomalous experience,” can be emotional. Rob Brotherton presents the umbrella man, a well-known part of the JFK conspiracy theory canon, as an emblematic anomalous detail. The umbrella man is a figure, visible in a few frames of the Zapruder film, who held a black umbrella open and aloft as

President Kennedy's motorcade passed. Once he was noticed, theories proliferated about what he was doing there: many speculated that he could be the second shooter, and there was a gun hidden in his umbrella. Years later, the umbrella man himself testified before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, and it was found that he was in fact protesting Kennedy's father's support of Neville Chamberlain, who tacitly supported Hitler (Chamberlain was known for carrying a black umbrella). Errol Morris's (2011) short film about the umbrella man puts forth the notion that any detail of an event can appear anomalous—even suspicious—when scrutinized deeply. With so many JFK assassination records having already been imagined, even just one poorly scanned document may take on a similarly anomalous sheen, triggering suspicion.

Users of the JFK Files subreddit also frequently discuss how to search the files. As of October 2018, NARA has not yet provided a searchable database of the 2017 documents, nor have they indicated any plans to do so. Confusingly, they *do* provide a searchable database for other parts of the JFK assassination collection, most of which is not digitized. The newly released digitized documents are presented in an online spreadsheet-style database, made up of item-level descriptive metadata, visible in Figure 5.[3] Documents can be sorted according to any metadata category, ascending or descending. When a user clicks on the metadata category they want to sort by, the spreadsheet automatically sorts the entries in ascending order, so that blank or ambiguous entries will come up first. Not only does this arguably make the experience of exploring the collection confusing, it presents users exploring the collection *immediately* with anomalous entries. Indeed, the way that the user who pointed to Figures 2 and 3 discovered the pattern of illegibility in previously classified documents could easily have been by sorting by the metadata category "Formerly Withheld" (whose values are "in full" and "in part"). The way the collection is arranged, therefore, is itself an archival silence, squarely on the second level, that of fact assembly/ archives-making. This silence hinders usability, highlights other silences and anomalous details (in this example, illegibility), and ultimately cultivates

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3 I am using Jeffrey Pomerantz's (2015) definition of metadata as a "statement made about a potentially informative object.".

users' *suspicion of mediated information*.

In the JFKfiles subreddit, the users have turned their *suspicion of mediated information* into something productive—in attempting to gain control over the documents in the collection, some users in fact begin to mediate information themselves. /r/JFKFiles users often discuss how to make the documents text-searchable. One user created a text-searchable database using Optical Character Recognition (OCR). The user admits it "gets a lot wrong, but should help navigate the archive."[4] Admitting to an imperfect system, the user who created the tool effectively removes responsibility from himself as a mediator. Any suspicious documents found on his website (AssassinationFiles.net) are a result of either the poor legibility of the documents or the imperfection of OCR as a tool. Rather than recommending it as an alternative to the database accessible on NARA's website, this user presents AssassinationFiles.net as a tool to be used alongside or in conjunction with NARA's database. Another user similarly combined the tools provided by NARA with his own by downloading the metadata database and then changing some of the values, in order to increase subject-searchability. The users in this subreddit appropriate the tools they find useful from NARA, and discard those that are not useful. Their suspicion towards the institution becomes productive for their own goals.

In a different, earlier, thread, another user proposed that, because of the difficulties in OCR-ing the documents, post-OCR transcription would be preferable for accuracy's sake: "There's really no substitute for a good old-fashioned combing through the whole thing, proofreading what the OCR did and fixing it . . . It's an enormous undertaking but it either has to be done the right way or not at all." Such a project would harness collective intelligence from *within* the /r/JFKFiles community, keeping the mediation internal and thus making it more trustworthy than outside, unseen mediation. Illegibility seems to be outside of the control of this community, but they act as though searchability might be something they can understand and potentially control.

In the words of David Aaronovitch (2010), "Conspiracy

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4 "AssassinationFiles.net - OCR/Full-Text Search of 2017 Declassified Files. r/JFKFiles." Reddit. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/JFKFiles/comments/7ipz6y/assassinationfilesnet_ocrfulltext_search_of_2017/

theory may be one way of reclaiming power and disclaiming responsibility" (p. 169). In part because the silence of poor searchability exists on the second silence level of fact assembly/ archive-making, users are able to usurp control over the documents to some extent, appropriating the tools made available by NARA for their own use. The silence of illegibility, however, existing as it does somewhere in between the first and second levels of silence, is more difficult for users to gain control over. In both instances, *suspicion of mediated information* in and of itself constitutes a kind of control, as it is a subversion of the accepted narrative and the powerful institutions from which it originates.

VI. Conclusion

Suspicion of mediated information, as we have seen, is one kind of user reaction to an encounter, especially an anomalous one, with an archival silence(s). It is made significantly more likely by the notoriety, over-analysis, and conspiracy-theory-laden historical narratives of the JFK assassination and its aftermath. Silences, like records themselves, are pluralized and take on different meanings in different contexts. Every archives creates silences, but the silences in the JFK Assassination Collection are of a particular ilk, immersed as they are in a history of secrecy and conspiracy theory. Digitizing documents and making them available online increases access, but also creates more layers of control and mediation. Each layer of mediation—copying documents, scanning documents, and arranging them online—engenders one or more of Trouillot's silences. With the addition of *suspicion of mediated information*, such silences can in turn be pluralized into imagined records imbued with conspiratorial significance. Indeed, when a collection has been classified for so long and so many impossible archival imaginaries inform its existence, every impediment to usability and understanding *functions as a silence,* and may seem to users like a thinly veiled strategy for maintaining secrecy while feigning openness. The unique reasoning and research style of conspiratorially minded researchers, characterized by trust in their own community and skepticism towards and suspicion of institutions, is significant and should be considered critically by archivists and archival scholars alike.

Collections of such conspiratorial significance as the JFK assassination collection are rare, but other collections exist with some measure (those having to do with UFO sightings, for example). As we have seen, conspiratorially significant collections have implacable impossible archival imaginaries associated with them, and these inform how silences are received by users, often stimulating *suspicion of mediated information*. Although I would not necessarily advise that archivists attempt to minimize silences (for how exactly would one do that, when they are inevitable?), I do encourage working towards awareness of how a collection might be received, decontextualized, and recontextualized according to a user's suspicion. I encourage archivists to seek out communities like /r/JFKFiles that are relevant to their collections: the needs such communities discuss and creative solutions they devise could be informative as archivists consider how to improve online collections. This could be a first step towards more frequent communication between users and archivists online, which could also assuage some of the suspicion directed towards archivists as individuals, if not the institutions for which they work. *Suspicion of mediated information* is only the bottom of the nascent pyramid/continuum of conspiracy theories, so understanding how it relates to information-gathering practices can potentially shed light on the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing as a whole.

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Appendix

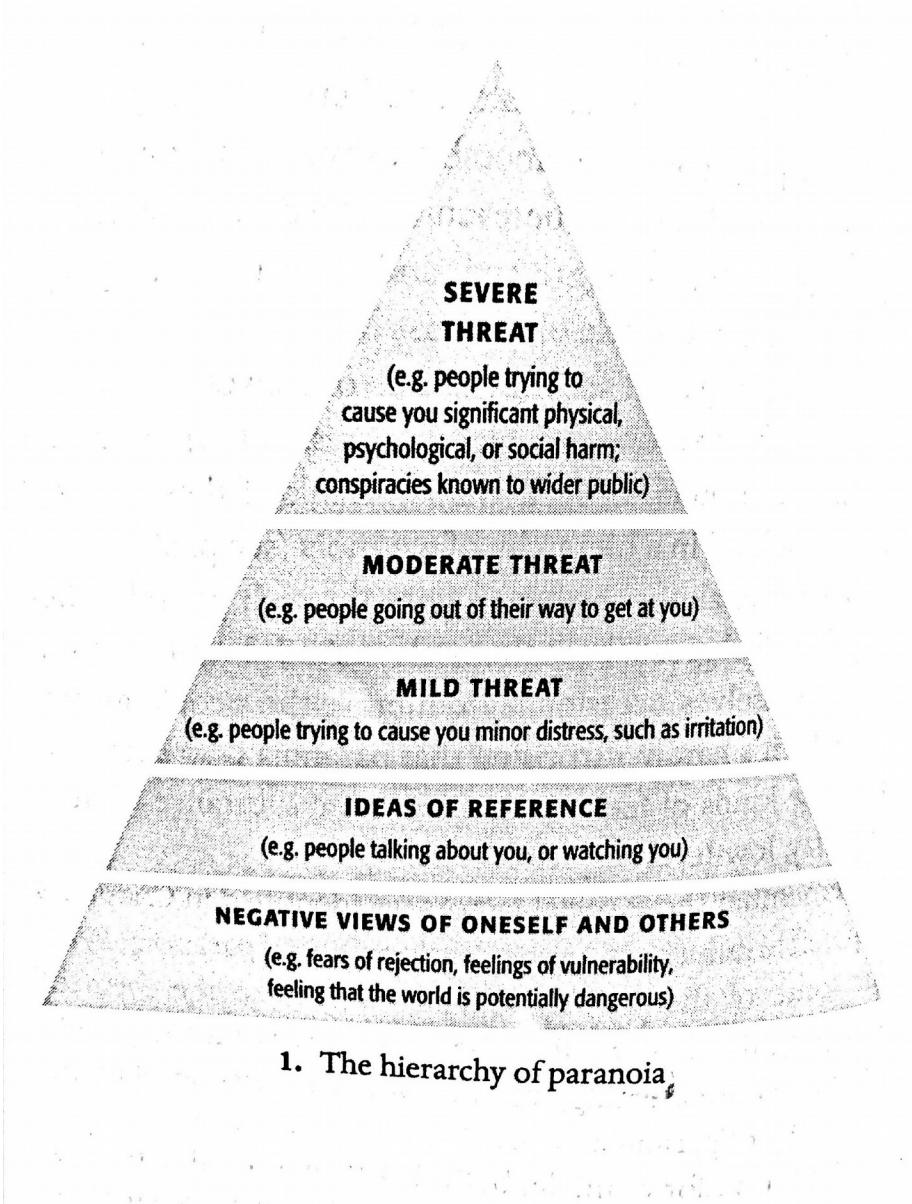

Figure 1. Daniel and Jason Freeman's Hierarchy of Paranoia (Freeman & Freeman, 2008, p. 80).

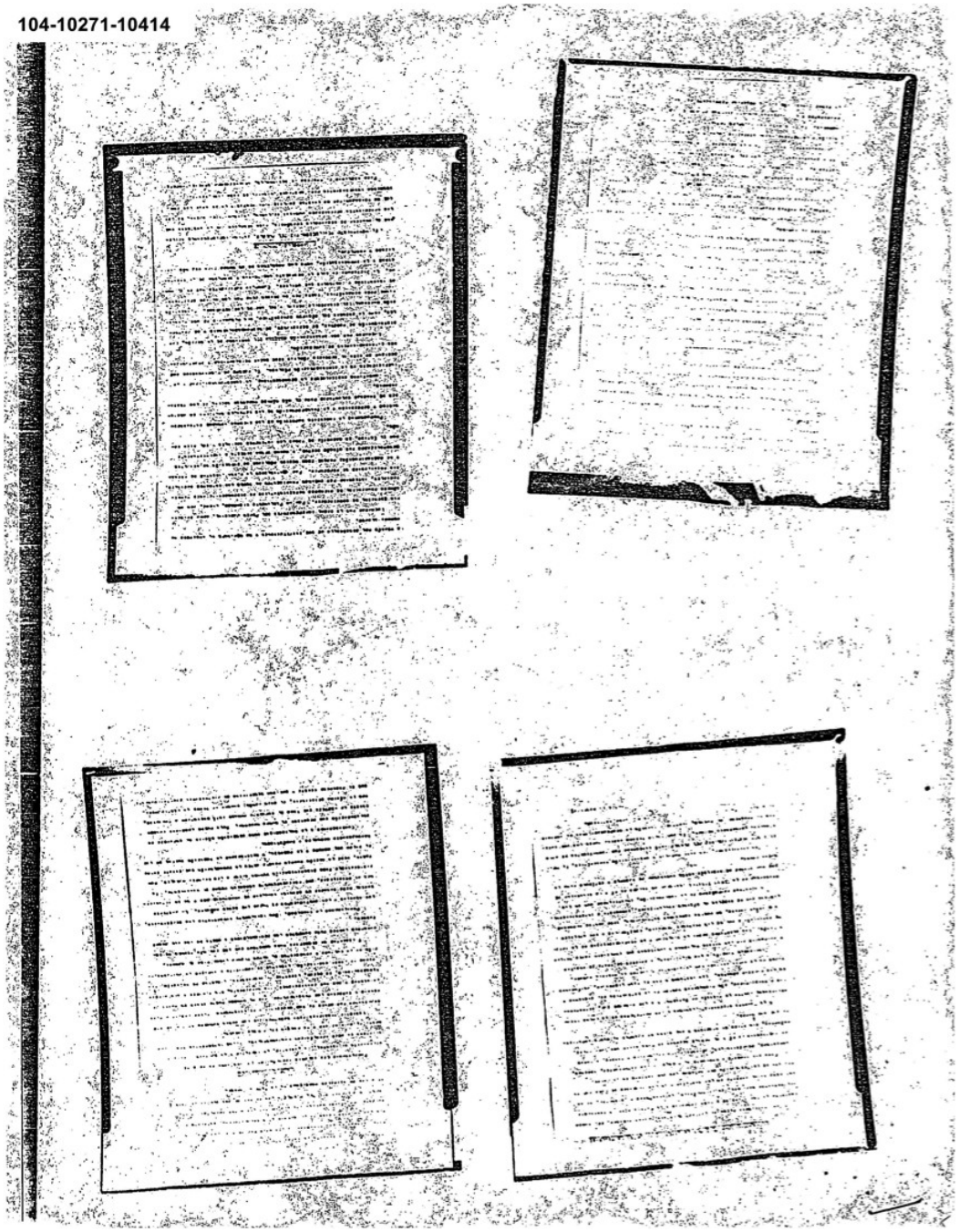

Figure 2. Document 104-10271-10414.

Figure 3. Document 104-10271-10414, detail.

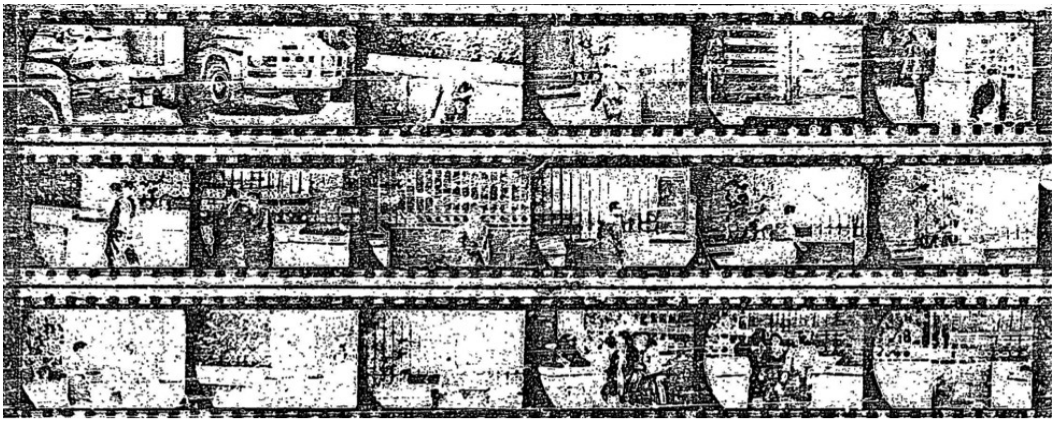

Figure 4. Film negatives; detail from document 104-10292-10007.

Row Num	Record Num	NARA Release Date	Formerly Withheld	Agency	Doc Date	Doc Type	File Num	To Name	From Name	Title	Num Pages	Originator	Record Series	Review Date
1	119-10003-10076	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	07/12/1962 [PDF]	PAPER, TEXTUAL DOCUMENT	39-141-046	CHIEF, USSS	DDP	MEMORANDUM	13	CIA	DS	11/30/2017
2	119-10003-10112	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	06/22/1962 [PDF]	PAPER, TEXTUAL DOCUMENT	39-141-046	CHIEF, USSS	DDP	MEMORANDUM	15	CIA	DS	11/30/2017
3	119-10003-10181	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	09/02/1966 [PDF]	PAPER, TEXTUAL DOCUMENT	39-141-122	DIRECTOR, INR	DDP	MEMORANDUM	2	CIA	DS	11/30/2017
4	119-10017-10228	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	09/02/1966 [PDF]	MEMORNADUM		DIR OF INTELLIGENCE & RESEARCH	DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR PLANS	RIMA ZMITROOK - LEE HARVEY OSWALD'S INTOURIST GUIDE IN MOSCOW	2	CIA	LOT 90D481:SOV FILES	11/30/2017
5	119-10017-10244	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	05/27/1964 [PDF]	MEMORANDUM	OSWALD, LEE, SOVIET DOCUMENTS	RANKIN, J. LEE	HELMS, RICHARD	DISCUSSION BETWEEN CHAIRMAN KHRUSHCHEV AND MR. DREW PEARSON RE LEE	3	CIA	LOT 90D48:SOV FILES	11/30/2017
6	119-10021-10413	12/15/2017	In Part	DOS	09/30/1963 [PDF]	MEMORANDUM	FBI	MEMBERS OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON CASTRO	CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON CUBAN SUB	REPORT FOR JULY - AUGUST ON ACTIONS TAKEN TO COMBAT CASTRO-COMMUNIST S	23	DOS	INR FILES	11/30/2017

Figure 5. Screenshot of the NARA 2017 JFK Files website, captured November 2017.