

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# "I Just Google It": Folk Theories of Distributed Discovery

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*A significant minority of people do not follow news regularly, and a growing number rely on distributed discovery (especially social media and search engines) to stay informed. Here, we analyze folk theories of news consumption. On the basis of an inductive analysis of 43 in-depth interviews with infrequent users of conventional news, we identify three complementary folk theories ("news finds me," "the information is out there," and "I don't know what to believe") that consumers draw on when making sense of their information environment. We show that the notion of folk theories help unpack the different, complementary, sometimes contradictory cultural resources people rely on as they navigate digital media and public affairs, and we argue that studying those who rarely engage directly with news media but do access information via social media and search provides a critical case study of the dynamics of an environment increasingly defined by platforms.*

**Keywords:** Audience Research, News Media, Social Media, Search Engines, Journalism, Political Knowledge, Media Literacy.

doi:10.1093/joc/jqy009

For about a century, professionally-produced news has been the most important source of information about public affairs for most people. Such journalism has been called the primary sense-making practice of modernity (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). Yet growing numbers access information in other ways, and many refrain from direct engagement with news at all (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017). The 20th century was characterized by direct discovery, where audiences had direct relationships with publishers (broadcasters, newspapers, and, later, media organizations' websites), but the 21st century has seen a rapid and profound shift towards distributed discovery, where people find, access, and navigate information via a range of digital intermediaries and platform services, including social media like Facebook, search engines like Google,

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and, increasingly, messaging applications like WhatsApp (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017; Nielsen & Ganter, 2017; Thorson & Wells, 2015). Whereas the practice and meaning of activities such as reading, watching, and listening have been studied in detail, we know far less about how audiences find, access, and navigate information in distributed, digital environments (for exceptions, see Bucher, 2017; Eslami et al., 2016; Hargittai, Neuman, & Curry, 2012).

In this article, we analyze folk theories that inform how people who rarely engage directly with news media find, access, and navigate information about public affairs, especially through distributed forms of discovery like social media and search engines. Challenging sweeping generalizations about a single “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006) supposedly underpinned by technologies that lower the barriers to entry for expression, sharing, and engagement, and users who feel connected, empowered, and literate as they use these tools, we unpack different combinations of cultural tools—folk theories—that inform how people navigate digital media and distributed environments. Drawing on earlier work on folk theories of science (e.g., Carruthers & Smith, 1996; Medin & Atran, 1999), digital media technology (e.g., Eslami et al., 2016), and journalism (Nielsen, 2016; Palmer, 2017), we define folk theories as the culturally available symbolic resources that people use to make sense of their own media and information practices, and use this theoretical approach to examine how ordinary people navigate digital media and information about public affairs in an environment increasingly shaped by digital intermediaries and platform services (Cohen, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). Based on inductive analysis of in-depth interviews with 43 working- and middle-class individuals in the United Kingdom who rarely engage with conventional news, we identified three complementary and sometimes contradictory folk theories that people draw on as they interpret, perceive, and understand their own reliance on distributed means of discovery. The three theories are “news finds me” (Theory 1), “the information is out there” (Theory 2), and “I don’t know what to believe” (Theory 3). Most interviewees articulated versions of the first two folk theories, often anchored around the use of services provided by platform companies like Facebook (Theory 1) and Google (Theory 2). Many also articulated versions of Theory 3, anchored in experiences of being overwhelmed by conflicting information combined with low levels of media literacy, little trust in news, and limited faith in the political process, introducing a tension between the optimistic assumption that information is easily available with a pessimistic assumption that it is hard to make sense of.

Analysis of folk theories like these provides important insight, not narrowly into what people do with media, but into what it means. As audience research and media anthropology suggest, doing what seems to be the same thing with the same technology means different things to different people in different settings (e.g., Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010; Miller, Costa, Haynes, Nicolescu, & Sinanan, 2016). Studying people who rarely engage directly with news media but do find and access information via social media and search engines provides a critical case study of the dynamics of a media environment increasingly defined by distributed discovery,

where news media no longer dominate distribution of content, but still play a central role in producing much of the information people come across via digital intermediaries and platform services. Our combination of a theoretical approach that conceptualizes cultures as potentially diverse, plural, and variable and an inductive, empirical approach that builds from a less privileged group of media users than the communities of early adopters, fans, and enthusiastically-engaged heavy users that some have focused on (e.g., Jenkins, 2006) leads us to question the notion that engagement with digital media is based on and informed by a single culture. We argue instead that people draw on different and only partially overlapping cultural toolkits and folk theories—like the ones we analyze here.

In the article below, we begin by first positioning our project in relation to existing research on news use in a changing media environment, and define and operationalize the concept of folk theories. Second, we explain our inductive research design and data. Third, we present evidence of what the three folk theories identified sound like from the perspectives of those who draw on them. In the conclusion, we discuss the broader implications of our analysis: how people navigate the changing media environment is important not only for journalism and political communication research, but also for communication research as a whole, from environmental to health communication to public relations, all of which must contend with the rise of distributed discovery. Theoretically, our analysis of folk theories of distributed discovery enables inductive, empirical work that challenges more sweeping generalizations about the cultural underpinnings of digital media use and opens new research questions.

### **News media, distributed discovery, and folk theories**

While professionally-produced journalism remains an important source of information about public affairs, the “direct” ways in which people traditionally accessed these sources—turning on a specific television channel, picking up a specific newspaper, or going to a specific website or app—have rapidly been supplanted by distributed discovery, where people find and access news via digital intermediaries and platform services such as search engines, social media, and, increasingly, messaging applications (Newman et al., 2017). Significant minorities even say they rarely engage with news at all, varying from 3–10% of the adult population in one recent survey (Newman et al., 2017). For media organizations, this development represents a move from an environment in which they controlled both content and channels (broadcast, print, websites/apps) to one in which they control only their content and rely increasingly on others’ channels (Bell & Owen, 2017; Nielsen & Ganter, 2017). For media users, this change expands opportunities to find and access information. In many countries, more people now report getting online news via search engines or social media than by going directly to news media websites and apps. One recent study (Newman et al., 2017) found that two-thirds of respondents—especially younger media users and those with low interest in news—identified

forms of distributed discovery as the main way they accessed news online. As people grow accustomed to so-called ambient news (Hermida, 2010) and are incidentally exposed to news on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017) or via other forms of online discovery (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015), these practices increasingly define people's information environments.

We focus in this article on how people think about the ways in which they find, access, and navigate information about public affairs via distributed forms of discovery. Behavioral data, direct observation, and survey research can tell us much about what people do (and think they do), but much less about what it means to them. We structure our analysis around the notion of folk theories, implicit ways of thinking about the world that guide our behaviors, a concept developed originally in the study of science and later used in research on technology and journalism (Carruthers & Smith, 1996; Medin & Atran, 1999). Folk theories can be either shared or contentious; more or less explicit; and they can be purely speculative or based on personal experience and/or second-hand sources (Rip, 2006). Like scientific theories, folk theories offer generalized notions, distinct from fact and practice, which purport to capture patterns durable enough that no single experience or piece of evidence will typically falsify them decisively. Like scientific theories, folk theories sometimes complement each other, sometimes exist in tension with each other, and sometimes contradict each other. Because we are interested specifically in how people understand the role of distributed discovery in how they find, access, and navigate information about public affairs, and because we are of the view that folk theories are rooted in action, practice, and lived experience, we do not aim to map more abstract ideas about how search engines or social media work (what has been termed "algorithmic imaginaries" [Bucher, 2017] or "technological imaginaries" [Suchman, 2014]). The folk theories we focus on are popular beliefs, not tied to professionalized or organizational discourse (though they may draw on such material); therefore, they also differ from what has been called "algorithmic ideologies" (Mager, 2012). We build here on work in human-computer interaction (e.g., Eslami et al., 2016) and science and technology studies (e.g., Mager, 2017), but our intention is to place folk theories of distributed discovery at the center of communication research as a field: to study specific technologies and means of access in combination with how people experience these phenomena.

With our definition of folk theories of distributed discovery as the culturally-available symbolic resources that people use to make sense of their own media and information practices, we position our approach in a broader understanding of culture and practice. Both terms are, to say the least, contested in the social sciences and humanities. The specific approach we draw on here is Ann Swidler's (1986, 2001) notion of culture as a toolkit that provides a relatively wide repertoire of "strategies for action" people can deploy to navigate everyday life in ways that are best attuned to their individual circumstances. These strategies of action—or, as we will show below, strategies of inaction—guide different forms of practical engagement with public information. This is a central point we adopt from Swidler's work:

the explanatory power of specific folk theories narrowly and of cultural factors more broadly lie not in defining the ends of actions, but in providing toolkits of symbolic resources from which people construct strategies for action. Folk theories of distributed discovery are thus understandings of the media environment that, in turn, shape engagement with the media environment. They provide a reminder of how we can only understand how people use media if we understand how they *understand* media: what folk theories they hold and act on. In contrast to notions of a unitary culture underpinning digital media use (participatory or otherwise), folk theories offer a conceptual starting point for open-ended inquiry that captures how different, complementary, and sometimes somewhat contradictory cultural tools—anchored in everyday lived experiences—shape how people use digital media and how they make sense of distributed discovery.

Our empirical focus below is thus on the folk theories that inform how people find, access, and navigate information in an increasingly distributed media environment. We use the notion of folk theories to analyze specific ways in which people navigate what José van Dijck (2013) has called “platformed sociality.” These broad, society-wide cultural assumptions about the digital media environment share some commonalities, including the centrality of platform services. But a “lack of fixity” (Cohen, 2012, p. 17), which varies in ways tied to the everyday practices of individuals and communities, makes it all the more important to supplement characterizations of the culture of digital media at the societal level with more fine-grained analysis at what sociologists call the “middle range.” The same digital media environment will mean different things to different people who draw on different folk theories to inform their everyday practices. Inspired by Swidler’s idea of culture as a toolkit, and an inductive approach based on in-depth interviews, we anchored our study in the lived experiences of people’s use of many different sources of information (formal and informal, interpersonal and mediated, analogue and digital) rather than applying an artificial separation between specific media (news media, social media, search engines), which scholars often treat in isolation.

## Research design

The folk theories referenced above and explicated below were identified through analysis of in-depth interviews with a strategic sample: individuals who said they rarely engaged with conventional news sources (but nonetheless often made clear they did not necessarily feel uninformed despite avoiding news). By focusing on people who opt not to use the types of sources that dominated most 20th century media environments, these “news avoiders” offer a critical case study of distributed discovery in action. Because our sample differs from the general public, we do not make claims about the generalizability of the folk theories identified—a point we return to in our discussion—but, by focusing on people whose news habits and routines are unusual by definition, the role played by technology platforms in the contemporary information discovery was drawn in sharp relief. We were better able to

hear these folk theories articulated by those who espouse them: an important advantage of our inductive research design. Everyone will have folk theories they rely on: what they are is an empirical question.

Our inquiry was guided by both an interest in how sense-making occurs among people who rarely consume conventional sources of news and a desire to capture the perspectives of such individuals in their own words to better understand what sources of information they viewed as important in their lives. We therefore identified the three folk theories presented below through an iterative process of investigator triangulation, where the authors discussed interviews as they were completed, read and coded transcripts separately before discussing them jointly, and then re-read the material with an eye toward nascent theories and emergent themes.

Before describing the data collection process and how these conversations were structured, we first offer some information about how we identified and recruited participants for the study given the atypical nature of the population. The number of “news avoiders” in the world varies depending on how the term is defined. One prominent survey defined news avoiders as those who say they have used no news in the last month, a category that contains approximately 7% of adults online in both the United States and United Kingdom (Newman et al., 2017). Given the imprecision of self-reported data on news use (Prior, 2009), the actual number may well be higher. Another study estimated that nearly half of Americans could be categorized as news avoiders (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010). For comparability with other cross-national quantitative data, we relied on the Newman et al. (2017) screener question, recruiting individuals who said they accessed news less frequently than once a month.<sup>1</sup> To identify study participants, we partnered with Kantar, a large, multinational market research firm with access to specialized online panels of difficult-to-reach populations. With Kantar’s assistance and our screener survey, we were able to arrange 43 interviews, conducted predominantly in study participants’ homes ( $N = 33$ ) or public locales ( $N = 3$ ). A small number were conducted via telephone ( $N = 7$ ). More details about the sample are provided in a supplementary online appendix.<sup>2</sup> Study participants who completed interviews were provided £40 compensation. The interviews were conducted by the first author between November 2016 and March 2017 and lasted approximately one hour on average.

Our research was carried out in the United Kingdom, a country characterized by higher levels of socioeconomic inequality and cultural diversity than many other Western European countries, a political system dominated by two major parties and limited levels of trust and electoral turnout, and a media system that combines high Internet use with a tradition of strong private sector and public service media. This location offers a balanced context to study folk theories of distributed discovery, in contrast to the more egalitarian, homogenous Nordic countries or more polarized, low-trust environments like Greece or the United States. Our core interest is in how people navigate distributed discovery and our approach, based on the concept of folk theories and an inductive research design involving in-depth interviews, is



widely applicable, but how much our empirical findings resonate beyond high-income democracies is a question for further research.

Interviews were conducted in the greater Leeds and Manchester communities—post-industrial cities with diverse socioeconomic populations—as well as areas in the outer ring of Oxford that were deemed economically deprived by government statistics. We recruited from relatively disadvantaged communities for both practical and theory-driven reasons. Past research has shown positive correlations between news use and income and education (e.g., [Ksiazek et al., 2010](#)), so targeting these areas increased our chances of identifying news avoiders. Additionally, prior research has often focused on more privileged media users. For example, [Woodstock's \(2014\)](#) study of “news resisters” examined relatively well-educated individuals who explained their aversion to news in terms of crystallized political attitudes. We sought to ensure that over half our sample consisted of working-class individuals with fewer social and economic resources in order to elicit perspectives that might better generalize across class.<sup>3</sup>

Interview protocols were semi-structured, with questions covering participants' social and family lives, workplace interactions, views about the most important problem facing their communities and the country generally, and attitudes toward journalists and journalism. Conversations were approached in an open-ended fashion, beginning with a focus on the individual in question, their daily habits and routines, primary concerns, and only then—generally driven by the interviewee—gradually turning to the role of social media, search engines, and the like in how they find and access information. This structure ensured that interviews were anchored in everyday practice and lived experience rather than more abstract speculation about how media technologies might work.

At the end of face-to-face interviews, participants completed a brief survey on a tablet to collect additional demographic information. These data indicate that participants varied in terms of their income and educational background, but most could be characterized as lower middle-class: the median and modal response when asked to report household income was between £20,000 to £24,999 per year, and only 39% reported having received a Bachelor's degree. Both figures are slightly below the national average. Interviewees were also mostly female ( $N = 36$ ), a gender gap reflected elsewhere ([Newman et al., 2017](#); [Poindexter & Heider, 2001](#)).

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes in NVivo software using the iterative method noted above. In the next section, we present results of this analysis and the three complementary folk theories identified. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout. In offering these theories, where possible we have chosen to offer quotations in context, erring on the side of including interview excerpts in full, with sometimes stray thoughts, errant tangents, and other layers of information embedded. This stylistic choice in the presentation of our data may be distracting to some readers, who will note many additional themes and insights to be mined from these rich conversations, much of which we are unable to address in this article. The advantage is that it retains a greater fidelity to how

people speak, and thus enables the reader to hear what these folk theories sound like in the voices of the people who helped us identify them.

### **Folk theories of distributed discovery**

Our interviews demonstrated that many people who rarely engage directly with news do not necessarily feel uninformed about or disconnected from the wider world. Although study participants reported little or no direct engagement with news media, virtually all described frequently using some other combination of media, including television, video-on-demand, smartphones, social media, search, and messaging apps. Interpersonal and social communication offline also helped many maintain some sense of “public connection” (Couldry et al., 2010) without relying on news. But various forms of distributed discovery, especially enabled by social media and search engines, were central. Through our analysis, we identified three complementary folk theories that most study participants regularly drew on to navigate their information environment. The three we focus on in this article are not the only folk theories we heard articulated, but they were the most frequent ones, and we will argue they are particularly important for understanding how people navigate an increasingly distributed media environment. Theory 1 we call “news finds me,” Theory 2 “the information is out there,” and Theory 3 “I don’t know what to believe.” The first and second were widely shared among our study participants. The third was articulated by many but not all. We analyze each in turn.

#### **Folk Theory 1: “News finds me”**

Most of our interviewees articulated the folk theory we call “news finds me,” a phrase coined in an earlier study of social media use by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) to describe the view that people do not need to access news directly because they will be exposed to sufficient information through their peers and social networks. This idea, that news is everywhere and ambient (Hermida, 2010) and that it will inevitably and incidentally reach users as they are doing other things on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), is nearly ubiquitous amongst our interviewees. Cameron, for example, a musician and video game enthusiast, put it succinctly when he suggested that “news should come looking for me, I shouldn’t go looking for it.” This folk theory relies in part on people’s confidence in their social networks of friends and family, but also frequently and explicitly on their lived experience of the ways in which social media, especially Facebook, enable news to find them.

For many interviewees, paying active attention to the news was unimportant, because such information was “in the air” as an ambient part of daily life. Libby, a hospital administrative staffer, said most people she knew “kind of absorb” news from the radio or the Internet. “Most people are, kind of, aware of things that are happening,” Libby said. This “daily feed of news,” as Libby described it, was something that was absorbed rather than sought out through active information-seeking. This notion of ambient news was especially prevalent when participants described



experiences with and expectations of incidental exposure to news on social media platforms. As Caitlin explained, “It’s Facebook. It’s always Facebook. I think that’s how people communicate and find out things nowadays, rather than watching the news. I think cause watching the news is, well, it’s quite ... it takes a lot of your time. And I don’t think a lot of people have got that much time nowadays. So Facebook’s an easy way to keep up with it.” Andrea: “Facebook gives you a lot of knowledge, if you know what I mean; I really like it.” Or, in another example, Kali said she relied on Facebook posts that “just pop up” from news sources like “the *Daily Mail*, *The Birmingham Evening Mail*, the kind of stories that would be appropriate to my local area.” Even though our interviewees rarely, if ever, engaged directly with news media and professionally-produced journalism, they still encountered it via social media.

While broadly seen as compelling and convenient, many were uncertain about the algorithms and other factors driving their exposure to news and information on social media. Interviewees often speculated about their indirect role in shaping the environment of information they encountered. Kali, for example, said she thought her exposure to news stories was related to her past browsing behaviors: “I assume that’s based on searches that I’ve done and cookies that have been on my site: that that’s been picked up.” Isabella described a morning routine in which she would “go to the toilet” and take along her phone “so I have five minutes before the kids wake up,” during which time she would regularly scroll across news stories. She offered, “I think what happens on Facebook is, one thing gets shared and then everyone thinks they’re a little bit of a politician, so they all start sharing it and having their opinions.” She pointed to a “couple of friends on there from years ago, and they’ve got really strong views,” along with others who “just share things that are the big news that day.”

Like many study participants, Caleb said he primarily used social media for purposes other than following the news: mainly for “silly videos,” socializing with friends, and “purely to post the things that are good in my life.” But in using the platform, he did “sometimes look at bits of news that come on,” and offered an example of how the platform could often lead to exposure not only to news, but to political information he might not otherwise encounter.

Yeah, not something I read, not something I like click on and read, but I have a very good friend of mine who I know from my youth, who’s very—what’s the word?—he puts ... I’m trying to think of the word. He’s very ... the big issues in the world, he likes to put on, like, the global warming, he’s very big on that. He shares it. He don’t obviously send it to a specific person, he shares it for everyone to see. So big issues, solutions as well. He, like ... I wouldn’t say activist at all, but if you looked at his profile, you’d think he was. But all he does is share, like, issues of the world and solutions and people that have invented new things.... I get a lot of stuff from him.

Many participants, like Caleb, were not altogether opposed to being exposed to such information in their social media feeds, but they described primarily using these platforms for other purposes: namely, keeping connected to people they knew off-line. The “news finds me” folk theory thus clearly involves not only the idea that news is “ambient,” but also that social media use is accompanied by incidental exposure to news that one comes across while doing other things, driven in part by platform functionalities and in part by the people one is connected to. As Evelyn put it, “Nowadays it’s word of mouth. People tell you, people see [it] online, and before you know it everybody knows.” She added, “My mum would say don’t you ever watch the news, do you not know what’s going on? I say, I read it on Facebook.”

The “news finds me” folk theory is often, but not always, anchored in a lived experience of using social media. Sometimes people give examples of offline interpersonal and social communication keeping them informed: “If I needed to know something, then somebody would probably knock at my door and tell me,” Emily said after considering whether she felt like she had all the information she needed despite avoiding the news itself. But when asked to recount recent news stories study participants had come across, many identified stories they had come across on various forms of social media rather than any specific articles or news sources. Interviewees offered a range of different examples, including the messaging application Snapchat, platforms like Twitter, and aggregators like Apple News. (One study participant, Kailey, recalled reading a recent news story that she came across inadvertently on her phone: “when you scroll left it just shows you news!”) For most, however, when they talked about how news find them online, they were talking primarily about Facebook. Adam, for example, when asked about his morning routine, described how he would “check social media before I crawl out of bed. ... I think everybody kind of does that, especially the younger generation.” Andrea agreed: “I see, like, the news feeds on a daily basis on Facebook.” Or Ryan: “I pick up a few things from Facebook. Yes, Facebook, people link into news stories, and stuff, around Facebook. You hear the odd thing written down, someone will say, this is what’s going on, so you have a quick read of it, and that’s it.” Jessica described getting local neighborhood information from “one of the local police officers, he’s got an account on Facebook that he posts up in the community group for the area. Just a kind of weekly update.” (When asked how frequently she acquired information from the community group, she said, “I don’t always read the posts. Just kind of flick through, to see the funny videos of cats and dogs.”)

Part of the reason many of our interviewees felt both informed and connected without engaging directly with news media was that they made a distinction between the “big stories” that “everyone” was talking about (and therefore were worth knowing about) and other news content, which they felt they could afford to ignore. So despite minimal news use, many felt informed enough through the ambient news they would be, often incidentally, exposed to via social media and their support networks of friends and family. As Annabelle explained, “When there are big issues going on, like, obviously, like the Trump thing, stuff like that, you can’t

really ignore it, do you know what I mean?” Sarah said when there was a “big story” that was “all over social media” it meant it was “just everywhere ... everywhere you looked.”

When “big stories” generated attention, it could prompt even the most committed news avoiders to tune in, at least temporarily (cf., [Strömbäck, 2017](#)). In this way, distributed discovery could lead to direct engagement. Jessica, a young mother caring for a child with a rare disease, said in instances in which “there was some major storyline going around, that everyone was talking about,” she was likely to give in and “see what the news is saying about it.” Jane echoed others, saying that stories that are “the most popular thing talked about at the time” inevitably found their way to her. “I wouldn’t watch the news, but it would be all over Facebook, which is why I can’t miss it. If it’s on Facebook, then that means everyone’s talking about it, isn’t it? If it’s on Twitter, it means everyone’s talking about it. It was sort of thrust at me.” Jodie agreed, “I guess big stuff, you’re always going to hear about [it], yeah?” As Caleb explained, there was almost no avoiding major news stories, such as the election of Donald Trump, “because it was so big, I had to hear about it, you know.” Other examples of such “big stories” frequently mentioned included “Brexit,” the British referendum on leaving the European Union (EU).

In short, many participants felt confident they could remain sufficiently informed through relying on their social networks. The “news finds me” folk theory provides a basic operating assumption that information about public affairs will announce itself to people as they go about their daily lives, sometimes through off-line interpersonal conversations, but more frequently, easily, and conveniently as part of their routine use of social media for other purposes: it further assumes that this level of exposure is generally sufficient for their needs. As Brianna, a social worker with a young daughter, reflected on her experience: “I don’t actively seek it out, but I know about it.”

### **Folk Theory 2: “The information is out there”**

Whereas Theory 1, “news finds me,” is primarily about how a combination of ambient news, incidental exposure, and sufficiently robust social networks means people believe that news will eventually come to them even without directly seeking it out, Theory 2, “the information is out there,” includes a potentially more active role for the individual involved. The central components are the beliefs that if one should want to seek out more information about an issue, (a) this information would in fact be available (whether from social media or other sources) and (b) it would be easy to find (primarily through Google search). Like Folk Theory 1, this confidence that information is everywhere—at your fingertips via your personal computer or in your pocket via your smartphone—was prevalent among a clear majority of study participants. They often expressed, as Annabelle did, “I feel like it’s all out there. It’s all out there.” As Jodie reflected, “It’s all there, isn’t it?” saying she felt she had enough information about the things she cared about in her community. “Whether you decide to take an active interest in it is another thing.”

Just as the folk theory that “news-will-find-me” is, in large part, anchored in folk generalizations from the experience of using Facebook, the belief that “the information is out there” is largely anchored in generalizations from the experience of using the Google search engine. One of the most frequently repeated lines in our interviews was the phrase, “I just Google it.” The ease of accessing information online meant that many viewed it as a preferred fallback option for acquiring news, should all the news they desire not find them. Brianna, for example, compared using online search to “an encyclopedia, books, and things like that,” but “so much easier.” She said, “So, that’s probably my first call. It would depend on what I was looking for and how serious, or how deep I want to go,” but generally her first instinct would be a search engine: “Google, yeah! Yeah, you can Google everything.” Many saw it as a more useful and valued source of information than other people in their lives, as illustrated by this exchange with Hollie, a student in her early 20s, who realized with some shock how little she understood about Brexit after being asked to read an article about EU negotiations.

Hollie: I feel like now I’ve read that article about the whole EU, I feel like stuff’s happening that I need to know about.

Interviewer: Are there specific people you would talk to [in order] to learn more about it?

Hollie: No, not really.

I’ll just go on the Internet.

A belief that the information was “out there” meant that many attributed their lack of knowledge of and attention to news to personal taste, rather than reasons stemming from the information environment itself, other structural factors (e.g., social inequality), or the supply of available news they might encounter or even be able to find. Most of our interviewees tended to individualize problems they encountered in finding, accessing, and navigating information about public affairs. When asked directly if she felt the information was “out there” and whether she was just not personally taking the time to find it, Gracie replied, “Probably. Like there must be ... the Internet is so incredibly vast. There must be information on there somewhere.” This confidence was widespread, and is an important example of how folk theories, like scientific theories, rely in part on generalization from limited data and experience: a lot of the world’s information finds you via Facebook, so maybe that is everything you need; or you can find a lot of information via Google, so maybe everything you need is searchable. Jodie, for example, said, “I think I could probably access it if I wanted to. I think it’s there. The fact that I choose not to access a lot of it is down to me, really, I think, more than anybody else.” Or Ava: “I could probably access it, but I choose not to.”

Some saw accessing information through Internet searches as a smarter way of navigating the uncertain reliability of sources of information they encountered in the course of their day-to-day lives. People talked about this in ways that may, in many cases, reflect their folk theories of distributed discovery more than their actual behavior; saying “I just Google it” is very different from, in fact, routinely Googling

things. But, as we have argued from the outset, these theories are important in themselves, whether people act on them or not: they can be strategies for both action and inaction. As Brianna says: "I could find it if I wanted to." In another case, Robert explains, "There's a lot of people that expect information to come to them, and they expect the news to tell them, or some other means, for it to pop up on their phone and conveniently tell them." Unlike them, Robert says, "When I was uncertain about who to vote for, I sought the information, made my decision."

For many of those interviewed, "Google" became a shorthand for this "vast" expanse of information: a helpful tool for extracting just the precise information needed from the Internet's repository of endless knowledge. As Cameron put it, "Google is your friend. Pretty much. You just start on that." The (unprompted) references to the search engine were a constant refrain: "If I needed to find anything out, you can look online and Google, you can see what the headlines are if you want to" (Megan); "I Google it. Yeah, it's the best way. I just Google it basically" (Carleigh); "Probably just Google, start there, see what it led me to maybe" (Brianna).

The folk theory that "the information is out there" and that one can find it with minimal effort and Google's help was often, but not always, intertwined with expressions of a lack of trust in established news media, a much broader concern beyond the scope of this article, but one we return to in our discussion below. Many said they liked to seek out information using their own Internet searches because they worried about naively accepting the news that found them incidentally, or sources of information they did not have a direct relationship with. As Nicole explained, "Unless it's a hard-hitting fact—this is the fact, and there's no deviant from that fact—news stories, I sometimes just find that they're a waste of time." Or, to put it another way, as Alicia said when asked to elaborate on her Google-first strategy for information seeking, "You can look in newspapers and stuff, but you don't always get the right answer. One newspaper says one thing, and one says another. Can't always rely on 'em." In other words, Folk Theories 1 and 2 complemented each other in important ways: each form of distributed discovery had its advantages and disadvantages. Folk Theory 1 made it easy to stay sufficiently informed; Folk Theory 2 was a guard against falling for information that might announce itself, but was of dubious reliability. Robert felt similarly about the difficulty of obtaining the "full" story from any single source: "You probably have to go out of your way to buy a very politically correct newspaper and read the full story or watch when the BBC or whoever else [have] David Cameron or whoever talking for 45 minutes. You probably need to watch the full thing rather than just read what someone wrote on Twitter."

Often, participants said they looked to Google because they sought official sources of information from government agencies and saw these as more trustworthy than individual news articles. Isabella, when asked if she felt she knew where to look for information about a new government program for childcare subsidies, she said she would look for official sources rather than news stories about the program,

"Yeah, I'd probably just Google it, and then there would be some sort of form to fill in, or some sort of ... there would be information on there where to get it." Hollie offered a similar view in an exchange about information concerning Brexit.

Interviewer: If you were to go seek out more information, how would you go about it?

Hollie: Google it.

Interviewer: You would just Google?

Hollie: Yes.

Interviewer: What would you Google specifically?

Hollie: "Brexit," and see what comes up.... "The latest on Brexit," that's what I would Google. Or, like, "What will the British pound be worth?" "What changes are going to happen to the economy?" That's what I'd Google, probably.

Interviewer: Are there specific sources that you would be more trusting of, that came up on Google?

Hollie: Articles from independent researchers ... not, like, news.

Interviewer: Why not news?

Hollie: Because I just feel like you just don't know, look how people are saying it's fake, it's just fake, isn't it?

This low trust in news sources was implicit in many participants' explanations for why they preferred to avoid news in favor of "official" sources they found online. "I think it's very manipulative," Olivia insisted. "I think you find discrepancies in it. I think it's misleading. So then why would you even want to start watching something that is misleading you anyways?"

The folk theory that "the information is out there" and that a wide range of sources can be found via search engines, primarily Google, provides an important complement to the "news finds me" folk theory. It contains the basic assumption that, should the information people come across via online and offline social networks for some reason not suffice for a specific purpose, the necessary information is (a) available online and (b) easy to find. As Adam put it, "I think it's there and it's readily available. I think it's just a case of bothering to access it."

### **Folk Theory 3: "I don't know what to believe"**

The vast majority of our interviewees articulated versions of the "news finds me" and "the information is out there" folk theories identified above, often combined with a very skeptical attitude towards established news media and a sense of being relatively informed about at least the things that mattered to them. But there was considerable variation in whether people felt confident that they could make sense of the news that finds them via social media or that they find via search. Some were certain of their individual abilities; Megan, for instance, said "If I do need to find anything out, then yeah, I can quite easily find it out." Others trusted that their immediate networks would be able to help them interpret information. "I do know that there would be help available through either my bosses or my friend who's in a similar job," Rosemary said. "I do think I could probably go to them for advice or



any information they know about.” But many interviewees also articulated a third folk theory that complicated their views toward distributed discovery, the theory we call “I don’t know what to believe,” anchored in part in interconnected feelings of being overloaded with information, possessing limited media literacy or trust, and having little knowledge of or faith in the political process.

At a basic level, many interviewees saw the vast expanse of information that found them (via social media) or that they found (via search) as overwhelming: a “black hole of information,” as Jane called it. She went on to explain, “I don’t try to make sense of what’s going on, to be honest. I mean, I know knowledge is power, but ...” She went on to explain that if she looked for more information, she often found herself deluged by stories, much of it negative, which she found “scary.” The problem for her was not access to information, but making sense of it without it overwhelming her. In another case, when contemplating what might result from a search for information, Gracie said she imagined, “It would probably end up being very heavily statistics and numbers and things. And that blows my mind as well.” She went on to explain that part of her hesitation about trying to stay better informed involved a fear that to do so required far too much energy and attention. She wished for an option that might simplify and condense the information and make it more easily digestible. “If I didn’t have to go and search through the whole of Google to find the unbiased news, and it was just there, readily available,” she said she might consider taking an interest in news. “But I just can’t be bothered to search through the whole of the Internet to find the information on things.”

Many others felt a similar paralysis when contemplating what it actually might mean to “just Google it.” Take, for example, Isabella, a working-class support worker with two kids. She said, for example, she “hadn’t even tried” to look for information about Brexit because, although she “wanted to educate” herself on it “because I’m quite passionate about it being a free country, about everybody getting along and all different cultures,” she struggled to know what believe.

I don’t know where is a reliable source, because so many things ... things go round on Facebook, and things go ... so you might Google them and then you’ll get something out, or the news is telling you one thing, the papers are telling you the other, and then certain things go round on Facebook, and you don’t know what the real [story is].

In a powerful illustration of the tensions between the complementary folk theories of “news finds me,” “the information is out there,” and “I don’t know what to believe,” Isabella continued:

How do I know they’re not lying to me? Or how do I know which one’s the truth? So actually, I don’t think ... I don’t know, you hear certain things, and you see certain things. Obviously, it depends. I find a lot out on Facebook, but I think it’s probably a load of rubbish, because it depends on their opinions. So it depends ... I’ve got a certain ... someone on my Facebook, and they are a ... totally think the government lies to us, and they’ve got all these conspiracy theories, and I think ...

I'll read it, and think, 'oh, well, yeah, that's quite reasonable why he's like that,' but then I'll read somebody else's, and they have an opinion on immigrants, and then I just don't know who to really [believe].

While some participants, as noted above, remained confident in their ability to parse trustworthy information from inaccurate sources online, many others echoed the concerns expressed by Isabella above, viewing such media and information literacy as a skill they simply lacked altogether. Olivia, for instance, said she did not know where she would look for trustworthy information.

Olivia: No. I don't practice it so I wouldn't know. I'd just go on the Internet and just Google it if I was interested in finding what different countries had to say about it, world news and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Do you feel like when you Googled it and the results came back, would you know how to navigate the results?

Olivia: No. I'd need to learn that skill if I was going to get into the news. I'd need to ... if I was going to actually like *do* something about this, I don't know, I'd have to learn the skills. There's a lot of conflicting things.

The "I don't know what to believe" folk theory is, in parts, about the sheer amount of alternative sources of information people come across, low trust, and how some of these sources actively challenge or counter each other. One interviewee, Hollie, explained, "You never know what actually could be going on. I don't know." With at least "two sides of the story," she said, "the news could put up something, and then somebody could forward it on Facebook or Twitter, and they'd be like, 'no, this is not what's happened.'" She continued, "Yes, but what else I was reading on Donald Trump was how he was saying that certain newsses [sic] are fake. And when you read stuff like that, you think, if he's saying it, and he's the President of the U.S. now, you just never know what's going on."

Others felt a similar uncertainty about how to assess which sources might be most reliable. Nicole, for example, said, "I don't think that the sources that I would go to would have an equally honest answer," so she would have difficulty knowing what to trust. "You could probably read the same, or similar story, two days later, and there would be different facts, maybe the same figures, but slightly different facts, altered variations of this story, maybe another quote from somebody else." Or, as Olivia put it, "By the time you've actually looked into it and figured from different sources and the Internet and other stuff and people, by the time you've figured it out, the issue is gone. Gone three years ago." Several described relying on others close to them when possible, such as partners or parents, for guidance. Robert: "That is one that's best on what other people say. Everybody says, 'Don't listen to what they're saying, don't be saying what they're saying.'" At the same time, he added, "As far as word of mouth, I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea which newspaper is the most correct or which newspaper works solely or facts or quotes. No idea. I wouldn't even know how to find out apart from typing it into Google."

Not all study participants were troubled by their lack of understanding of news and political affairs. Many described only fleeting moments of regret about their limited engagement with public information, which quickly passed as their attention shifted to other matters. Brenna, for example, who was previously quoted saying she would “just go on the Internet” to look up anything she was curious about, later said, “I probably should have watched more to do with the debates and the elections, because for a good month that is all everybody and anybody who I spoke to was talking about.... Because I weren’t listening, I used to say ‘Oh well, what does that mean?’ He [her partner] was like, ‘Well if you’d listened to it ...’ But because I’m not really bothered, I kind of zoned in and out.” One illustration of how hard it can be to make sense of the news when one engages from this vantage point is the fact that a large number of our interviewees were unsure how to place themselves on an ideological scale. Several asked for clarification of the terms “left” and “right” when filling out the tablet computer survey, and 50% selected “don’t know” when responding to this question. Nearly two-thirds said they did not identify with or lean toward any established political party. Kali, who above described encountering news stories and political affairs through discussion on her social media feed, offered a similar recollection of her decision not to vote in the referendum on leaving the EU. She said, “I didn’t vote, because I didn’t ... I knew kind of little reasons why I wanted to stay in, but I didn’t know enough about it, I don’t think, to vote.”

When faced with feelings of confusion about political and civic affairs, many study participants said they preferred to retreat from participating in public life altogether—a desire to focus inward on things “close to home” instead—a sentiment previously highlighted by Eliasoph (1998) in her study of political apathy. After repeated frustrating experiences of not being able to make sense of news when encountered, “news finds me” and “the information is out there” folk theories can become rather less empowering than they are either on their own or when combined with greater confidence and/or higher levels of media literacy and political knowledge. Jane, for example, who offered that she preferred to “just Google” news happening in the world, said she also felt unsure how to interpret the opinionated information she discovered—so much so she concluded it was best to tune it out altogether:

But then that’s what it is, isn’t it? It’s just one person’s opinion of it, and I don’t know that person. So it’s difficult for me to make a correct judgment, so I’d rather just make no judgment and just not know. I guess ignorance is ... I’m being like one of those ignorance-is-bliss people, but I reckon it’s difficult the other way because I think I care too much. I don’t think that there’s much I can do to change things so I just don’t bother listening or reading or anything in the first place.

The “I don’t know what to believe” folk theory is articulated by many, but not all, of our interviewees. Some are confident in their ability to navigate the information they come across via social media and search engines. But most feel that they

are not particularly media literate, don't trust news media, and are unfamiliar with how political processes work. They approach much of what they come across with a skepticism that can be paralyzing. News finding you and the information being out there is not all that empowering if, as Amelia put it, "I really don't, I don't understand it," again individualizing the problem and blaming her own experienced inability to make sense of things rather than questioning why it was so hard to do so.

## Conclusion

News media have long been the most important source of information about public affairs for most people in most countries but, increasingly, people engage less—and less directly—with news. Instead, they rely on various forms of distributed discovery via digital intermediaries and platform services, including social media and search engines. This article draws on in-depth interviews with "news avoiders" to identify three complementary folk theories people rely on as they find, access, and navigate information in this changing media environment. We name them "news finds me" (Folk Theory 1), "the information is out there" (Folk Theory 2), and "I don't know what to believe" (Folk Theory 3). These folk theories suggest that ordinary people have their own ways of thinking about news and information, with considerable affinity with scientific theories of ambient news, incidental exposure, and the like. They also show how a growing number of people seem comfortable living their lives and connecting with the world despite their very limited direct engagement with the kinds of professionally-produced journalism long regarded as our primary sense-making practice (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). The people we interviewed generally did not feel news media made all that much sense to them, and instead embraced other ways of sense-making, anchored around lived experiences using products and services offered by specific companies and often articulated with explicit reference to the perceived affordances of specific platforms ("I saw it on Facebook" and "I just Google it"). Specific cultural assumptions about social media and search engines have become central to how people think about their information environment.

Most of our interviewees articulated versions of Theories 1 and 2 and many articulated versions of Theory 3, although a minority were more confident about their ability to navigate information. This variation is a powerful reminder of how different folk theories in combination can ascribe very different meanings to the seemingly same media practices. "News finds me" (Theory 1) and "the information is out there" (Theory 2) combined present a fundamentally confident and optimistic picture where people feel empowered because they believe they can count on most of their day-to-day information needs being filled via social media and are able to find anything else they want via search. But for the many who combine Theories 1 and 2 with "I don't know what to believe" (Theory 3), the situation is more complex and even contradictory. These people believe they come across a lot of information

via social media and expect they can find much more via search, but even if they have some confidence in the platforms via which they encounter information (Hargittai et al., 2012), they can feel paralyzed as they struggle to make sense of it, due to feelings of information overload, limited media literacy, low trust, and little political knowledge. Our interviewees often had confidence in social media and in search engines, but not always in themselves. They face an abundance of information, but find much of it unintelligible. They are connected, but they do not feel like participants in public life.

We have identified the three folk theories on the basis of a bottom-up, inductive analysis of interview data from the United Kingdom with respondents who infrequently engage directly with news. These folk theories are social facts, but they may not be factually accurate. Not all news will, in fact, find people, and not all information is, in fact, out there. But these folk theories are real in their consequences if people act upon the assumptions they provide. They guide action and, in some cases, inaction, as with Folk Theory 3. These particular folk theories, and the different combinations (1 + 2 versus 1 + 2 + 3) are examples of the kind of important variations in how different people draw on specific cultural resources to understand and describe the ways in which they navigate a changing media environment, providing an analysis anchored in the everyday practices of particular people that goes beyond and supplements more general portraits of the culture of digital media (Cohen, 2012; van Dijk, 2013), as well as analysis of more abstract “imaginaries” (Bucher, 2017) and ideologies (Mager, 2012). The different, complementary, and sometimes contradictory folk theories identified here are not only substantially important for understanding how people find and access information about public affairs in an increasingly distributed media environment. Our empirical results, enabled by a theoretical approach based on the idea of folk theories and cultural tools (both in the plural), also challenge sweeping generalizations about a supposedly unitary culture (in the singular) underpinning digital media use, participatory or otherwise.

We believe our theoretical framework—focused on folk theories—and our research design—with interviews that attend to everyday life and the lived experience of finding, accessing, and navigating information (rather than an explicit focus on technology or a narrow focus on one form of accessing information, whether via news media, social media, or search)—are highly portable and applicable in many other settings. Everyone relies on folk theories when they navigate the media environment and access information about public affairs, these folk theories have real consequences, and they can be analyzed empirically. We hope future research will build on this approach so we can begin to more systematically explore variation in how different people in different contexts think about increasingly important forms of distributed discovery, and why. We hope future work will disentangle the relationship between folk theories. Does a digital life immersed in “news finds me” and “the information is out there” attitudes contribute over time to feelings of “I don’t know what to believe”? Theoretically, we are skeptical of attempts to identify a single, unitary culture of digital media use, and would expect to find some widely-

shared folk theories combined in different ways with additional, culturally-specific theories and tools used for making sense of digital media.

Two additional areas seem particular ripe for future research: in-country and between-country variation. In terms of in-country variation, our research suggests that trust and class may be key factors influencing what folk theories people rely on. An affluent, university-educated frequent news user with high trust in institutions is likely to have a very different view from many of our interviewees. In terms of between-country variation, both levels of Internet access and wider social context of trust are likely to inform folk theories. Someone in rural India versus someone in an egalitarian, highly-connected, high-trust context like Finland will likely experience and assess distributed discovery in somewhat different ways.

Communications research has long focused not only on what people do with media, but also on what it means for them. The study of folk theories of distributed discovery in this way connects with emerging areas of research in human-computer interactions and in science and technology studies that explore new ways of finding, accessing, and navigating public information, but also builds on a long tradition of audience research. We hope we have shown the continued promise of this tradition here in capturing how people understand their own media practices, and in turn have used these concepts to expand conventional understanding of media use. Our focus here has been on information about public affairs, perhaps most pressingly relevant for scholars of journalism and political communication. But more broadly, scholars in almost any area of communication research—from environmental to health communication to public relations—must contend with the declining importance of direct discovery and the rise of distributed discovery through social media, search engines, messaging applications, and other products and services offered by digital intermediaries and platform companies. Understanding how different people in different contexts find, access, and navigate information in this environment is one of the central challenges we face as a field.

## Funding

This work was supported by a grant from Google UK as part of the Digital News Initiative (CTR00220).

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material are available at *Journal of Communication* online.

## Notes

- 1 The question read, “Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online).” Those who responded “Never” or “Less than once a month” were generally deemed eligible for the study.



- 2 Because age is strongly correlated with news use, we limited the study to those 18–45 years old.
- 3 Social class was measured by occupation. See the supplementary online appendix for more detail.

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