Classified or Coverup?
The effect of redactions on conspiracy theory beliefs

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Forthcoming, *Journal of Experimental Political Science*

Abstract

Conspiracy theories are prevalent among the public. Governments frequently release official documents attempting to explain events that inspired these beliefs. However, these documents are often heavily redacted, a practice that lay epistemic theory suggests might be interpreted as evidence *for* a conspiracy. To investigate this possibility, we tested the effect of redactions on beliefs in a well-known conspiracy theory. Results from two preregistered experiments indicate that conspiracy beliefs were *higher* when people were exposed to seemingly redacted documents compared to those who read unredacted documents that were otherwise identical. In addition, unredacted documents consistently lowered conspiracy beliefs relative to controls while redacted documents had reduced or null effects, suggesting that lay epistemic interpretations of the redactions undermined the effect of information in the documents. Our findings, which do not vary by conspiracy predispositions, suggest policymakers should be more transparent when releasing documents to refute misinformation.

Conspiracy theories — the belief that covert, powerful forces are responsible for unexplained phenomena — are a widespread feature of politics, in part because they often focus on the government, especially in the U.S. (e.g., Hofstadter 2012; Uscinski, Parent, and Torres N.d.). These theories, which typically (though not always) lack strong evidentiary support, can have a range of pernicious consequences such as undermining trust in political institutions (e.g., Einstein and Glick 2014) and decreasing political efficacy and participation (e.g., Jolley and Douglas 2014b).

The most prominent conspiracy theories often seek to explain unexpected events. These beliefs frequently enjoy widespread acceptance among the public and tend not to dissipate even after official investigations are conducted (Bowman and Rugg 2013; Oliver and Wood 2014). For instance, many Americans reject the conclusions of the Warren Commission about the cause of John F. Kennedy's assassination and the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission about the causes of the September 11 terrorist attacks (Bowman and Rugg 2013; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel 2007).

Though previous research has identified several factors that may make people more likely to perceive conspiracies (e.g., Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Uscinski and Atkinson N.d.; Oliver and Wood 2014), little is known about how to reduce belief in conspiracy theories about events that are not supported by convincing evidence. Many of these efforts may be ineffective or even counterproductive (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010, 2012).

In particular, while government disclosure of information may be intended to reduce misperceptions about the events that inspire conspiracy theories, lay epistemic theory (e.g., Kruglanski 1990) suggests that common bureaucratic practices may undermine the effects of these efforts among citizens (Harrison and Thomas 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Specifically, the presence of redactions — which are often heavily used in documents released by the government, especially in recent years (e.g., Bridis and Gillum 2014; Kravets 2014; Bridis 2015) — may make readers more likely to interpret documents as *evidence* of a conspiracy or coverup and reduce or eliminate any conspiracy-reducing effect. For instance, the 9/11 commission report was intended to reduce misperceptions about the terrorist attacks, but the redaction of 28 pages pertaining to alleged ties between the Saudi government and the hijackers continues to fuel conspiracy theories (Clift 2015; Dilanian 2015).[1] Redactions have also been prominently featured in recent debates over conspiracy theories about the Sandy Hook massacre (Altimari 2014), the disappearance of flight MH370 (O'Neill 2014), the crash (apparently due to a surface-to-air missile) of flight MH17 (Associated Press 2015), and the Kennedy assassination (Shenon 2015).

We take a novel approach to the topic of conspiracy beliefs. To our knowledge, this study is the first to test how people react to corrective information about a conspiracy

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[1] Of course, governments may sometimes use redactions to prevent disclosure of damaging information in cases like this (e.g., Serwer 2014). However, we focus below on cases in which there is no credible evidence of misconduct.

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theory depending on the format in which it is provided[2] and to analyze how those reactions vary depending on people's predispositions toward conspiracy theories. It is also the first to test the effect of redactions on belief in conspiracy theories, which we test using a new design in which we vary whether black boxes are inserted between words or sentences in a series of documents. These boxes appeared to be genuine but did not actually obscure any text, allowing us to hold the textual information given to respondents constant.

We test two hypotheses. First, we predicted that individuals given seemingly redacted documents would be more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory than those given otherwise identical documents in which the redactions are omitted. As described below, we expect that respondents will infer from the redactions that the government must have something to hide and will therefore be more willing to question the official account and to endorse a conspiracy theory instead. We also predicted that the difference in conspiracy beliefs between the redacted and unredacted conditions would be greater among individuals with high conspiracy predispositions than those with low predispositions. Finally, we estimated how exposure to redacted or unredacted documents changed beliefs relative to controls — a research question of interest.[3]

Consistent with our first hypothesis, participants in an initial study and a replication who read seemingly redacted documents were more likely to believe in a conspiracy than those who read otherwise identical unredacted documents. We did not find support for our second hypothesis — the effects of exposure to redactions did not differ by predispositions toward conspiracy belief in either study. Finally, participants who read unredacted documents had significantly lower conspiracy theory beliefs than controls, but this effect was diminished if redactions were included. The presence of redactions thus appears to undermine the information effect observed in the unredacted condition, preventing evidence in the documents from reducing conspiracy beliefs as effectively. As we show below, this result does not appear to be attributable to a lack of respondent attention or engagement or the absence of a specific rationale for the redactions.

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[2]Previous experimental studies have, for instance, tested corrective information about conspiracy theories (e.g., Swami et al. 2013; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013; Jolley and Douglas 2014a) or the mindset with which people consider them (e.g., Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild 2010; Banas and Miller 2013).

[3]As we discuss below, the stimulus in the redaction condition differs from controls in *two* respects — the information in the documents *and* the presence of redactions. The comparison between these conditions thus measures the *joint* effect of *both* factors.

Theory

We proposed two hypotheses that were preregistered before data from our first study had been fully collected or analyzed.[4] Our first hypothesis predicted that participants assigned to read redacted documents would believe in conspiracy theories more than those assigned to read otherwise identical unredacted documents (H1).[5] It has been proposed that selective governmental disclosures such as redacted documents may be construed as "deliberate attempts to suppress information and mislead the public" (Harrison and Thomas 1997, 120, 123). A plausible mechanism for this response comes from previous research on lay epistemics, which suggests that people try to explain what they observe by generating and evaluating subjective "if-then" hypotheses about the causes of events (Kruglanski 1989, 1990; Kruglanski et al. 2009). Members of the public who observe a redacted document may thus make the inference "If a document is redacted, then the government must have something to hide," which would cause them to attribute redactions to the presence of a coverup or conspiracy. Conspiracy perceptions should thus be higher in the redacted documents condition than in the unredacted condition even if the information in the documents is otherwise identical.

We also expected that participants with high predispositions toward conspiracy belief would be especially likely to interpret redactions as evidence of a potential government coverup or secret plot (Oliver and Wood 2014; see also, e.g., Goertzel 1994 and Swami et al. 2011). Redactions are especially consistent with the epistemology of conspiracy theories, which often attributes observed behavior to hidden patterns of wrongdoing, and thus likely to be perceived as suspicious by these individuals (e.g., Barkun 2013). Our second hypothesis therefore predicted a greater difference in conspiracy beliefs between the redacted and unredacted document conditions among respondents with high conspiracy predispositions than among those with low conspiracy predispositions (H2).

However, we did not propose a hypothesis about the effect of exposure to redacted or unredacted government documents relative to the control group. The evidence in the unredacted documents might either reduce misperceptions or increase them relative to controls — previous research has found differing effects of corrective information exposure (see, e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010, 2012; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013). The situation is even more uncertain for respondents in the redacted documents condition, who differ in two ways from controls — they see the evidence presented in the documents (which is identical to the unredacted condition) but also see redactions that might seem to suggest

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[4]The preregistration for Study 1 is available at `http://egap.org/registration/668`.

[5]We focused on direct exposure to redactions rather than media accounts so that we could estimate the effects of redactions without having to also account for differences in how people interpret news stories. As we discuss in the conclusion, however, the effects of coverage of redactions is an important topic for future research.

the presence of a coverup or conspiracy. The comparison between the redacted condition and controls thus does not identify the causal effect of the redactions alone (the focus of our first hypothesis) but instead the *joint* effect of exposure to corrective information *and* redactions. As a result, the effect of exposure to the documents relative to controls was instead designated as a research question of interest.

Finally, it is important to clarify how these hypotheses are tested. The most appropriate test of the redaction effect holds respondent information constant. We isolate this effect by comparing conspiracy beliefs among respondents given the same information in the redacted and unredacted conditions. Likewise, we isolate the effect of information by comparing conspiracy beliefs between the unredacted documents condition and controls. Third, we estimate the net effect of redacted documents relative to controls. However, we emphasize that the comparison between the redacted and control conditions estimates the *joint* effect of *two* treatments: the information in the documents *and* the redactions. As we show, the response generated by redactions can reduce or eliminate the conspiracy-reducing effect of information.

Study 1

Subject matter

We examine beliefs about the crash of TWA Flight 800, which exploded soon after takeoff from Kennedy International Airport on July 17, 1996, killing all 230 people on board. While official accounts concluded that the accident resulted from the ignition of a flammable fuel/air mixture in the fuel tank (National Transportation Safety Board 2000), conspiracy theorists claim it was the result of an accidental U.S. Navy missile strike that is being covered up (e.g., Purdy 1997). This claim, which grew out of testimony by eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen streaks of light before the crash, has fueled a persistent conspiracy narrative that was featured in a recent documentary (Genzlinger 2013). As with many such beliefs, these theories seek to explain a shocking or unexpected event as a result of secret actions based on seeming inconsistencies between the official explanation and various details and eyewitness accounts.

We chose to study beliefs about Flight 800 for several reasons. First, conspiracy theories about its explosion are generally non-partisan. As a result, treatment effects are less likely to differ between political groups than other prominent conspiracy theories (see, e.g., Oliver and Wood 2014). In addition, we wanted a topic that is old enough for a settled conspiracy theory to be established (unlike the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370) without being antiquated (such as the J.F.K. assassination). Third, Flight 800 conspiracies are widely known and seemingly plausible (e.g., Bowman and Rugg 2013)

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but not so famous that respondents have relatively fixed beliefs (as they might be on, say, Kennedy). Finally, the topic was relevant to Flight 370 conspiracy theories that were circulating when our data was collected (e.g., Frizell 2014; Sanchez 2014; The Week 2014).

Participants, design, and procedure

Participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing website, completed the study on the Qualtrics online survey platform from April 30–May 7, 2014.[6] Of the 2524 participants (the maximum allowed by the study budget), 48% were male; 80% were white; the median age group was 30–39; and half had at least a bachelor's degree. Politically, 41% identified as Democrats, 18% as Republicans, and 42% as independents or something else. (See Table A1 in the appendix for more information on respondent demographics and Table A4 for further details on the procedures used in both studies.)

After providing informed consent, participants completed a series of demographic and attitudinal questions, including evaluating two statements that have been shown to correlate with conspiracy beliefs (Oliver and Wood 2014): "Much of what happens in the world today is decided by a small and secretive group of individuals" and "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil." (six-point scale: strongly disagree=1, strongly agree=6). Participants with an average answer above three were categorized as having high conspiracy predispositions in a median split; others were categorized as having low predispositions.[7] After finishing these questions, participants completed a word search task to clear working memory.

All participants were then instructed to read a paragraph describing both the official story of the TWA Flight 800 explosion and the conspiracy theory in a balanced manner, which is a common practice in news coverage of factual disputes (e.g., Cunningham 2003; Fritz, Keefer, and Nyhan 2004). The article was accompanied by a picture of the reconstructed plane to make the experiment more vivid (see appendix for text and image).

Both treatment groups were then asked to read three government documents that provided evidence supporting the official account of the crash:

- A transcript of radio correspondence at the time of the crash (Tauss N.d.);

- A summary of radar evidence from the official report (National Transportation Safety Board 2000);

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[6]While Mechanical Turk participants are not representative of the U.S. population, they are more diverse in many respects than undergraduate samples and have been shown to provide valid experimental results in a number of disciplines (e.g., Horton, Rand, and Zeckhauser 2011; Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012).

[7]Results are identical if we instead use a continuous measure of average predispositions on these questions, which was the preregistered measure; we present a dichotomous variable for expositional clarity (results available upon request).

- The report's conclusion that the crash was the result of an explosion in the fuel tank (National Transportation Safety Board 2000).

The documents given to the two redacted and unredacted treatment groups included the same visible text, but the redacted documents were manipulated by adding black boxes over blank space, creating the appearance that information was being withheld (see appendix). Controls were instead asked to read three recipes, a realistic real world task (reading the news and then a cookbook) which ensured that respondents in all conditions were exposed to documents of approximately equal length and density before the outcome measures.

After the experimental manipulation, we asked respondents to evaluate the likelihood of a series of statements about the causes of the incident and the validity of the government investigation on a six-point scale:

- A mechanical failure caused the explosion of TWA Flight 800.

- The U.S. government was involved in the explosion of TWA Flight 800.

- TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile fired by the U.S. military.

- The government thoroughly investigated the crash of Flight 800 and determined its true cause.

- The government is covering up the true cause of the explosion of TWA Flight 800 from the public.

The direction of these items, which serve as our dependent variables and were based in part on past polling (Bowman and Rugg 2013), varied between the official explanation of the explosion and conspiracy theories about its causes. Answers were coded so that higher values represented greater conspiracy belief. We also created a composite belief measure using the mean response after recoding.[8]

Results

Redaction effects

To assess the results of the experiment, we first compared the average conspiracy belief measure between redacted and unredacted conditions. As noted above, this comparison

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[8]A sixth outcome measure asked about the "ignition of flammable fuel/air vapors in the fuel tank," which is part of the official account. However, conspiracy beliefs for this item were much higher than other outcome measures for controls, who did not appear to recognize the connection to the "electrical malfunction" described in the introductory article. Due to this confusion, we omit the item (a deviation from our preregistration), though our estimates of the effect of redactions versus unredacted documents are identical if it is included (available upon request).

holds the information provided to respondents constant and is therefore the clearest test of the effect of redactions on conspiracy beliefs. Confirming our hypothesis, respondents exposed to redacted documents (mean=2.52, 95% CI: 2.43–2.61) reported stronger conspiracy beliefs than those who saw unredacted documents (mean=2.32, 95% CI: 2.24–2.41; $t = 3.16$, $p < .01$) — an increase of 0.15 standard deviations on the average belief measure.[9] We also estimated the effect of exposure to corrective information by comparing respondents who saw unredacted documents with the control group. Results indicated that providing corrective information in unredacted form decreased average conspiracy beliefs relative to controls (mean=2.60, 95% CI: 2.51–2.68; $t = -4.47$, $p < .01$). However, the joint effect of the redactions (which led to *higher* conspiracy beliefs than among people who saw otherwise identical unredacted documents) and the information in the documents (which led to *lower* levels of belief among people who saw unredacted documents versus controls) was null — redacted documents did not have a significant effect versus controls ($t = -1.22$, $p < .23$), suggesting that redactions offset or undermined the effects of the corrective information. (We discuss our interpretation of this effect below.)

Table 1 evaluates these findings more systematically by providing regression results for each of the dependent variables and the composite belief measure. The coefficient estimates for the redacted and unredacted document conditions represent effects relative to the control group, which is the omitted category in the regression. The direct effect of the redaction among respondents exposed to the government documents is computed as the difference between the redacted and unredacted coefficient estimates and presented below those results. As predicted, participants receiving redacted documents reported significantly higher levels of conspiracy beliefs than those receiving unredacted documents for all dependent variables ($p < .05$ except for beliefs that the government investigation determined the true cause of the crash, which was $p < .052$). In addition, the redacted treatment only reduced conspiracy beliefs relative to the control condition for one dependent variable at the $p < .05$ level (belief that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by missiles). In contrast, almost all dependent variables recorded significant differences between the unredacted and control treatments at the $p < 0.05$ level except for beliefs that the government investigation determined the true cause of the crash ($p < .06$). Although the conditions displayed identical text, reading the redacted documents had little to no effect versus controls, whereas reading the unredacted documents decreased conspiracy belief significantly. Again, redactions appear to have offset the effects of the information that are observed when we compare the unredacted condition with controls directly.[10]

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[9]As described above, each outcome measure was recorded on a 1–6 scale with higher values indicating greater conspiracy beliefs. These responses were then averaged. Overall, the mean was 2.48 with a standard deviation of 1.26.

[10]These results and those in Table 3 below are unchanged if we control for the respondent demographic characteristics described above (available upon request).

Table 1: Redaction effects on TWA Flight 800 conspiracy beliefs

|	Mech. failure	Govt. involved	Shot down	Thorough investigation	Govt. coverup	Average beliefs
Redacted documents	0.00	-0.12+	-0.17*	0.00	-0.08	-0.08
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)
Unredacted documents	-0.16*	-0.38**	-0.40**	-0.13+	-0.35**	-0.27**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)
Control mean	2.51**	2.65**	2.50**	2.57**	2.79**	2.60**
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Redaction effect (H1):						
Redacted − unredacted	0.16*	0.26**	0.23**	0.13+	0.27**	0.19**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)
N	2521	2521	2519	2511	2509	2490

$+ p < 0.10$, $* p < 0.05$, $** p < 0.01$. OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

To illustrate the magnitude of these effects using a more intuitive outcome measure, Figure 1 presents differences in a binary indicator of conspiracy belief between conditions. We identify as conspiracy adherents those respondents who were above the midpoint of our six-point scale of average conspiracy beliefs, indicating that on average they thought that the claims that the government was involved in the crash, the flight was shot down by a missile, and the government is covering up the true cause of the crash were more likely than unlikely and were doubtful about the official explanation. We find that the proportion of conspiracy adherents was six percentage points higher in the redaction condition (24%, 95% CI: 21–27%) than the unredacted condition (18%, 95% CI: 16–21%) — a relative increase in prevalence of 31% ($p < .01$). Conspiracy adherence was significantly less common among respondents in the unredacted condition than the control group (26%, 95% CI: 23–29%; $p < .01$), but the redacted condition was again not significantly different from controls. These results suggest that the presence of redactions has meaningful effects on the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs and is not limited to small effects on levels of disbelief among skeptics.

The null effect of the redacted condition relative to controls does not appear to be the result of respondents dismissing or ignoring the stimulus.[11] As we demonstrate in Table A2 in the appendix, respondents spent almost exactly as long reading the redacted documents (m=285 seconds) as the unredacted documents (m=287 seconds; $t = -.23$, $p < .82$)

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[11]The analysis in this paragraph was conducted in response to comments after the study was completed; it was not preregistered.

Figure 1: TWA Flight 800 conspiracy adherence by condition
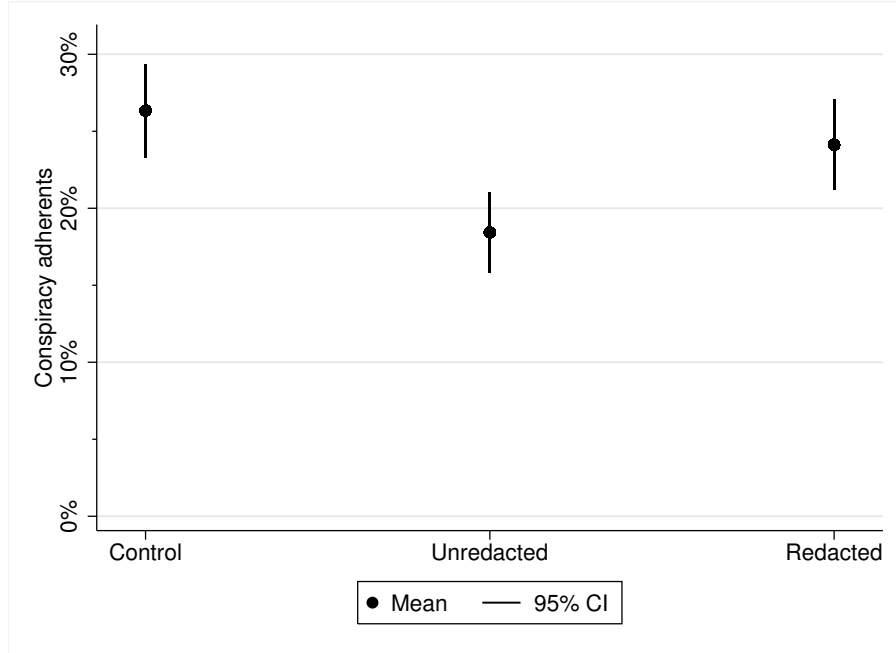
and the average response times for the outcome variables were almost identical (m=7.47 seconds for redacted versus 7.36 seconds for unredacted, $t = .56$, $p < .58$).[12] In addition, respondents in the redacted condition were *more* likely to mention the content of the study in a general open text question asking if they had any comments on the survey than those in the unredacted condition — 3.2% of those in the redacted condition included the words "TWA," "800," "plane," "crash," or "flight" compared with only 1.4% in the unredacted condition ($t = 2.48$, $p < .05$). The evidence we observe is thus inconsistent with the interpretation that redacted documents had no effect on conspiracy beliefs relative to controls due to a lack of respondent attention or engagement. The effects of the redactions seem instead to have offset the reduction in conspiracy beliefs observed in the unredacted condition. (This issue is discussed further in the conclusion.)

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[12]Due to extreme outliers (a few respondents who left surveys open for very long periods), response times were trimmed to the 99th percentile of the distribution by question.

Table 2: Redaction effects on conspiracy belief by respondent predispositions

	Mech. failure	Govt. involved	Shot down	Thorough investigation	Govt. coverup	Average beliefs
Redacted documents	0.07	-0.09	-0.14	-0.06	-0.14	-0.07
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Unredacted documents	-0.15+	-0.44**	-0.45**	-0.31**	-0.44**	-0.35**
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.07)
High conspiracy predisp.	0.44**	0.84**	0.81**	0.44**	0.85**	0.67**
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.08)
Redacted × high consp.	-0.14	-0.06	-0.04	0.14	0.16	0.01
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.12)
Unredacted × high consp.	-0.01	0.11	0.11	0.37**	0.19	0.15
	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.12)
Control mean	2.29**	2.24**	2.10**	2.35**	2.37**	2.27**
	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Difference in redaction effects (H2):						
Redacted × high consp. −	-0.13	-0.16	-0.14	-0.23+	-0.03	-0.15
unredacted × high consp.	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.12)
N	2517	2517	2515	2508	2508	2487

$+ p < 0.10$, $^{*} p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$. OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

Differences by conspiracy predispositions

Table 2 presents OLS results for the redacted and unredacted conditions and their interaction with the high conspiracy predisposition indicator for each dependent variable.[13] Again, the coefficients for the redacted and unredacted conditions and their associated interaction terms are estimated relative to controls; the key term for testing the second hypothesis is the auxiliary quantity reported below the main coefficient estimates, which represents the difference in the redaction effect (relative to the unredacted condition) between the low and high conspiracy predisposition groups.[14]

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[13]As noted above, results are identical (and available upon request) if we instead use a continuous measure of average conspiracy predispositions, which was the preregistered specification; we present a dichotomous variable here for expositional clarity.

[14]The quantity reported (the difference between the redacted × high predisposition and unredacted × high predisposition interaction terms) is in this sense a difference-in-differences estimate. See the appendix for a derivation of how this quantity is the estimand of interest for testing H2.

Contrary to our hypothesis, the redaction effect did not consistently differ between groups (except for one marginally significant effect in the opposite direction from expectations). Instead, we found that individuals who are predisposed to believe conspiracy theories were more likely to believe in a Flight 800 conspiracy regardless of the available information (the difference between redacted and unredacted was not significant), whereas respondents who lacked these predispositions had higher conspiracy beliefs in the redacted condition than in the unredacted condition ($p < .01$ for average beliefs).

Study 2

One possible concern about Study 1 is that no reason was provided for the presence of redactions, which might make respondents more suspicious and inclined to believe conspiracy theories. We therefore conducted a second study to verify that our findings were robust to the inclusion of a substantively plausible rationale for withholding information (protecting aviation safety and national security). As we show in the appendix, which describes the design and results in more detail, conspiracy beliefs were again higher in the redacted than in the unredacted condition despite the inclusion of a realistic rationale, though in this case both treatments reduced conspiracy beliefs relative to controls.[15]

Discussion

Confirming our first hypothesis, people who read redacted documents about the TWA Flight 800 accident were more likely to believe conspiracy theories than those who read otherwise identical unredacted documents in two studies. In addition, while participants who read unredacted documents were significantly less likely to believe in the conspiracy theory than controls, redacted documents (which represent the joint effect of redactions and information) reduced or eliminated the effect of exposure to the information in the documents relative to controls — a result that does not seem to be attributable to a lack of respondent attention or engagement. These findings confirm the expectation from lay epistemic theory that redactions are often seen as evidence that government has something to hide and can thereby contribute to conspiracy beliefs. However, the effect of redactions on conspiracy beliefs did not differ based on people's conspiracy predispositions, contradicting our second hypothesis.

Our study suggests several directions for future research. First, our design used artificial redactions that did not withhold any information. We believe this approach best

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[15]The preregistration for Study 2, which is virtually identical to the preregistration for Study 1, is available at `http://egap.org/registration/1260`.

isolates the effect of redactions alone and is likely to be a lower bound of real world effects. However, future research should evaluate the external validity of our findings by testing if the results strengthen (as we expect) when redactions obscure text that is present in an unredacted condition, which is the situation observed in the real world. Second, scholars might wish to examine the effect of redactions in media accounts;[16] to test alternate conspiracy belief and/or predisposition measures (e.g., Darwin, Neave, and Holmes 2011; Swami et al. 2011; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013); and to consider other possible moderators such as trust in government. Third, researchers should investigate whether these effects vary depending on the type of document or the frequency or position of redactions within it. Fourth, scholars might consider varying the rationale provided for redactions to test if those that seem less justified or proportional to the volume or importance of the information withheld are especially likely to increase conspiracy beliefs. Finally, though establishing the mechanism for a causal effect is very difficult (Bullock, Green, and Ha 2010), it would be worthwhile to further investigate the process by which people react to redactions, which could provide additional insight into why their effect relative to controls was reduced or eliminated.

Despite these limitations, our study makes a valuable contribution to both the study of conspiracy theories and the practice of government. Even the appearance of having something to hide can seemingly cause suspicions about government intentions and doubts in official accounts to grow. These findings suggest that governments should seek greater transparency when releasing documents to dispel conspiracy beliefs.

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[16]Our expectation is that the response we observed would likely intensify if people were instead exposed to media accounts that focus specifically on the presence of redactions.

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Classified or Coverup?
The effect of redactions on conspiracy theory beliefs

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Appendix

Stimulus materials and question wording

Conspiracy predispositions

To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.

- Strongly disagree [1]

- Moderately disagree [2]

- Slightly disagree [3]

- Slightly agree [4]

- Moderately agree [5]

- Strongly agree [6]

To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Much of what happens in the world today is decided by a small and secretive group of individuals.

- Strongly disagree [1]

- Moderately disagree [2]

- Slightly disagree [3]

- Slightly agree [4]

- Moderately agree [5]

- Strongly agree [6]

Introductory article

In 1996, TWA Flight 800 exploded minutes after takeoff from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport on a flight bound for Paris, falling to the water and killing all 230 passengers on board. Some have suggested that the explosion was the result of the plane being hit by a surface-to-air missile accidentally fired by the U.S. Navy during a missile test. Both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Transportation Safety Board conducted separate investigations and found that the plane exploded due to an electrical malfunction. Government officials argue that official documents from their investigation provide thorough evidence in support of this explanation, but others still claim that radar analysis and eyewitness testimony suggest a government coverup.

The remains of TWA Flight 800 inside a hangar in 1996.

Experimental stimuli

Control condition

We would now like you to read three excerpts from a vintage cookbook from the 1930s that show how food tastes and preparation have changed over the years. The first is a series of three recipes for pastries and pastry dishes. Please read the document carefully.
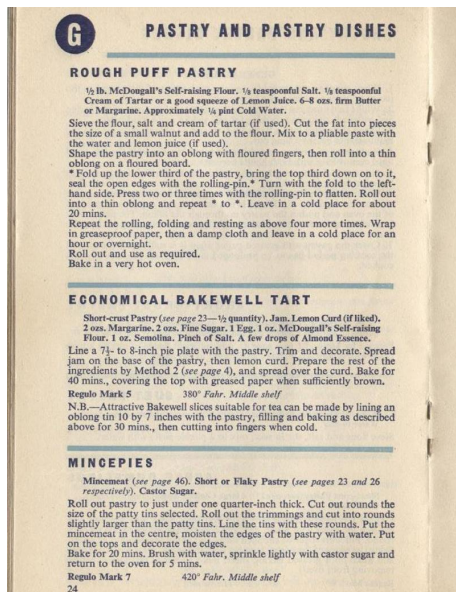
The second document consists of three more recipes for pastries and pastry dishes. The recipe book was published in England. Please read the document carefully.

PASTRY AND PASTRY DISHES (G)

LEMON MERINGUE PIE

Short-crust Pastry, using 6 ozs. McDougall's Self-raising Flour, etc. (*see page 23*).
Filling
2 small Lemons. 1½ ozs. Cornflour. ½ pint Boiling Water. 5 ozs. Castor Sugar. 2 Eggs.

Line an 8-inch sandwich tin with the pastry. Bake as directed on *page 28*.

To Prepare the Filling
Blend the cornflour with a little cold water, pour on the boiling water, add the lemon juice and grated rind of the lemons. Stir and boil for 3 mins. Add 3 ozs. of the sugar and the beaten yolks of eggs, pour into the prepared pastry case. Whisk up the whites of eggs very stiffly, fold in the remaining sugar. Pile the meringue on the top so that the lemon filling is completely covered and the meringue touches the pastry around the edges; dredge with castor sugar. Put the pie into a very moderate oven for 25–30 mins. to set the meringue.

Regulo Mark 6 *for the pastry*   400° Fahr. *Middle shelf*
Regulo Mark 2 *for the meringue*   310° Fahr. *Middle shelf*

CHEESE PASTRY

¼ lb. McDougall's Self-raising Flour. 2 ozs. Butter or Margarine. 2 ozs. Grated Cheese. 1 yolk of Egg. About 1 tablespoonful Cold Water. Salt and Pepper. Cayenne (if liked).

Sift the flour and salt into a basin and rub in the fat. Add the cheese and other seasonings. Mix to a stiff paste with the yolk of egg and water and turn out on a floured board. Roll out to about a quarter of an inch thick and cut into narrow strips or biscuits and bake for about 10–15 mins.

Cheese Straws
The strips should be 3 inches long and about a quarter of an inch square. Cut rings from the trimmings of pastry through which the cheese straws are placed before serving.

Regulo Mark 3   330° Fahr. *Above the middle of the oven*

QUICK CRUST

6 ozs. McDougall's Self-raising Flour. ⅛ teaspoonful Salt. Good shake of Pepper or a heaped teaspoonful Sugar. 1 oz. Margarine. 6 tablespoonfuls Milk.

Prepare by Method 1 (*see page 4*). Roll out to the size and shape of the pie-dish, place over the hot fruit, etc. Press pastry on the edge of the dish, decorate and bake for 15 mins.

Regulo Mark 7   420° Fahr. *Middle shelf*

25

Cakes

COFFEE BUTTER ICING

4 oz. Butter. 6 oz. sieved Icing Sugar. 2 teaspoonfuls Coffee Essence.

Cream the butter and sugar together until soft and then add the Essence. Use as directed.

COFFEE GLACÉ ICING

4 oz. Icing Sugar. About 1 tablespoonful hot Water. About 1 teaspoonful of Coffee Essence.

Put the icing sugar into a small saucepan, add the water and coffee essence and warm gently, stirring meanwhile with a small wooden spoon. Then pour on to the top of the cake. (The icing must be fairly stiff otherwise the top will not be properly covered.)

ECCLES CAKES

½ lb. Short Pastry. ½ teaspoonful Mixed Spice. 3 oz. Sugar. 1 oz. Finely Chopped Peel (if liked). ⅓ lb. Currants. Few Drops Water.

Make the pastry as directed and roll out to a quarter of an inch. Cut into rounds with a saucer. Put the currants, sugar and spice into a basin and just moisten with water and mix well. Turn the pastry rounds over and damp all round the edges. Put a large tablespoonful of the mixture on to each round and gather the edges together over the top. Join well and turn them over, then press or roll slightly until the currants just begin to shew. Make two little cuts in the top and place them on a greased tin, and bake in a hot oven for twenty minutes.

Note.—These are often made of Flaky or Puff Pastry and brushed over with beaten egg before cooking. Or made of short pastry they may be brushed with water and dredged with castor sugar. This quantity makes six cakes.

" Regulo " Mark 7.   Other Cookers—420° Fahr. Middle Shelf.

GINGER SNAPS

4 oz. McDougall's Self-raising Flour. 4 oz. Golden Syrup. 4 oz. Sugar. 4 oz. Butter. Juice of ½ Lemon. ¼ oz. Ground Ginger.

Put the butter and sugar, lemon juice and syrup into a saucepan and melt them slowly. Sift the flour and ginger together and add to the ingredients in the pan, warm gently but do not cook. Remove from the heat and put teaspoonfuls of the mixture on to well-greased baking sheets three inches apart. (About five will go on an ordinary baking sheet.) Put into a moderately hot oven and cook until they are nicely browned. Leave for a moment before removing them from the tin, then quickly take them off, turn them over, and loosely roll them round the handle of a wooden spoon. This process must be done rather quickly as they soon begin to crisp. Refill the tin with more mixture and proceed as directed.

" Regulo " Mark 4.   Other Cookers—380° Fahr. Middle Shelf.

31

Unredacted/redacted manipulation

[Shown in both conditions in Study 1 and Study 2]
We would now like you to read three excerpts from the documents released by the government during its investigation of TWA Flight 800. The first is a transcript of a conversation between an air traffic controller, the Flight 800 pilot, and another pilot in the crash vicinity. Please read the document carefully.

[Shown in Study 2 redaction condition only]
(Note: The documents you are going to read were redacted by the government, which stated that the redactions were necessary to avoid revealing details of airline procedures and military operations that would threaten aviation safety and national security.)

[all stimuli below are identical in Study 1 and Study 2]

[Unredacted]

8:30:14 p.m., Boston Air Route Traffic Control Center: TWA eight hundred, climb and maintain one five thousand [15,000 feet].
8:30:17, TWA Flight 800: TWA's eight hundred heavy, climb and maintain one five thousand, leaving one three thousand
8:31:12: [TWA Flight 800 explodes at an altitude of 13,800 feet, based on post-crash analysis.]
8:31:50, Eastwind Airlines Flight 507: We just saw an explosion out here on Stinger Bee five oh seven.
8:31:51: [Infrared sensor aboard US satellite detects large heat source in the vicinity of Flight 800 crash.]
8:31:57, Boston: Stinger Bee five oh seven, I'm sorry. I missed it. Ah, you're on eighteen. Did you say something else?
8:32:00: [TWA Flight 800 hits water, based on post-crash analysis.]
8:32:01, Eastwind 507: We just saw an explosion up ahead of us here something [like] about sixteen thousand feet or something like that. It just went down—to the water.
8:32:56, Boston: TWA eight hundred, [call] Center.
8:33:04, Boston: TWA eight hundred, Center.
8:33:09, Boston: TWA eight hundred, if you hear Center ident[ify].
8:33:17, Boston: Stinger Bee, ah, five zero seven, you reported an explosion, is that correct, sir?
8:33:21, Eastwind 507: Yes sir, about, ah, five miles at my eleven o'clock here.
8:33:48, Eastwind 507: [unintelligible] Stinger Bee, ah [unintelligible] Boston, we are directly over the site where that airplane or whatever it was just exploded and went into the water. [Then, from a second operator...] [unintelligible] eighteen, ah, nineteen miles on the two thirty-six radial [unintelligible] Hampton.
8:34:01, Boston: Roger that. Thank you very much, sir, we're investigating that right now. TWA eight hundred, Center. TWA eight zero zero, if you hear Center, ident.
8:35:36, Boston: TWA eight hundred, Center.
8:35:43, Eastwind 507: I think that was him.
8:35:45, Boston: I think so.
8:35:48, Eastwind 507: God bless him.
8:36:57, Boston: Stinger Bee five oh seven, thanks for that report, ah, New York on one three three point zero five [133.05 MHz]. Good day, sir.
8:37:05, Eastwind 507: Thirty-three oh five, so long Stinger five oh seven. Anything we can do for you before we go?
8:37:11, Boston: Well, I just want to confirm that, ah, that you saw the, ah, splash in the water approximately, ah, twenty [20 miles] southwest of Hampton, is that right?
8:37:20, Eastwind 507: Ah, yes sir. It, it blew up in the air, and then we saw two fireballs go down to the, to the water and there was a big [unintelligible] smoke form, ah, coming up from that. Also, ah, there seemed to be a light. I, I thought it was a landing light [unintelligible] it was coming right at us at, about, I don't know, about fifteen thousand feet or something like that, and I pushed my landing lights, ah, you know, so I saw him, and then it blew.
8:37:40, Boston: Roger that, sir, ah, that was a seven forty-seven out there you had a visual on that. Anything else in the area when it happened?
8:37:47, Eastwind 507: I didn't see anything. He seemed to be alone. I thought he had a landing light on. Maybe it was a fire, I don't know.
8:37:52, Boston: Stinger Bee five oh seven, ah, roger that. Anything else comes to your mind, ah, you can use your other radio, come back to this frequency and tell me about it.
8:37:59, Eastwind 507: That's all I can think of at this time.

[Redacted]

8:30:14 p.m., Boston Air Route Traffic Control Center: TWA eight hundred, climb and maintain one five thousand [15,000 feet].

██

8:30:17, TWA Flight 800: TWA's eight hundred heavy, climb and maintain one five thousand, leaving one three thousand ████████

8:31:12: [TWA Flight 800 explodes at an altitude of 13,800 feet, based on post-crash analysis.]

8:31:50, Eastwind Airlines Flight 507: We just saw an explosion out here on Stinger Bee five oh seven.

8:31:51: [Infrared sensor aboard US satellite ████████████████████████████████ detects large heat source in the vicinity of Flight 800 crash.]

8:31:57, Boston: Stinger Bee five oh seven, I'm sorry. I missed it. Ah, you're on eighteen. ████████████████████

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8:33:17, Boston: Stinger Bee, ah, five zero seven, you reported an explosion, ██████████████████████████████████

████████████████████████████ is that correct, sir?

8:33:21, Eastwind 507: Yes sir, about, ah, five miles at my eleven o'clock here.

8:33:48, Eastwind 507: [unintelligible] Stinger Bee, ah [unintelligible] Boston, we are directly over the site where that airplane or whatever it was just exploded and went into the water. [Then, from a second operator...] [unintelligible] ███████ eighteen, ah, nineteen miles on the two thirty-six radial [unintelligible] Hampton.

8:34:01, Boston: Roger that. Thank you very much, sir, we're investigating that right now. ████████████

██ TWA eight hundred, Center. TWA eight zero zero, if you hear Center, ident.

8:35:36, Boston: TWA eight hundred, Center. ████████████████████████████████████

8:35:43, Eastwind 507: I think that was him. ██

8:35:45, Boston: I think so. ████████████████████████████████

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8:36:57, Boston: Stinger Bee five oh seven, thanks for that report, ah, New York on one three three point zero five [133.05 MHz]. Good day, sir.

8:37:05, Eastwind 507: Thirty-three oh five, so long Stinger five oh seven. Anything we can do for you before we go?

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████████████████████████████████ and then we saw two fireballs go down to the, to the water and there was a big [unintelligible] smoke form, ah, coming up from that. Also, ah, there seemed to be a light. I, I thought it was a landing light [unintelligible] it was coming right at us at, about, ██ I don't know, about fifteen thousand feet or something like that, and I pushed my landing lights, ah, you know, so I saw him, and then it blew.

8:37:40, Boston: Roger that, sir, ah, that was a seven forty-seven out there you had a visual on that. Anything else in the area when it happened?

██

8:37:47, Eastwind 507: I didn't see anything. He seemed to be alone. I thought he had a landing light on. Maybe it was a fire, I don't know.

████████████████████████████████

8:37:52, Boston: Stinger Bee five oh seven, ah, roger that. Anything else comes to your mind, ah, you can use your other radio, come back to this frequency and tell me about it.

8:37:59, Eastwind 507: That's all I can think of at this time.

The second document is an excerpt from the radar evidence summarized in the official aircraft accident report regarding the inflight breakup of TWA Flight 800 over the Atlantic Ocean. The report was conducted by the National Transportation Survey Board. Please read the document carefully.

Examination of the radar data showed the following vehicle and/or object tracks within 10 nm of TWA flight 800 just before the accident (see figure 25):

- A U.S. Navy P-3 antisubmarine airplane was less than 3 nm south-southwest of TWA flight 800 at an altitude of about 20,000 feet msl, moving to the southwest at more than 250 knots ground speed)

- USAir (now USAirways) flight 217 was about 3 nm south-southwest of TWA flight 800, descending through an altitude of about 21,700 feet msl and moving northward.

- TWA flight 900 was about 9 nm west of TWA flight 800 at an altitude of about 19,000 feet msl, moving to the east northeast.

- An unidentified (primary radar) track was recorded less than 3 nm south-southeast of TWA flight 800, moving southwest about 30 knots ground speed, consistent with the speed of a boat.

- An unidentified (primary radar) track was recorded about 5 nm west of TWA flight 800 moving east-southeast about 15 knots ground speed, consistent with the speed of a boat.

- An unidentified (primary radar) track was recorded about 5 nm west-northwest of TWA flight 800, moving to the south-southwest about 12 knots ground speed, consistent with the speed of a boat.

- An unidentified (primary radar) track was recorded about 6 nm northwest of TWA flight 800, moving to the southeast about 20 knots ground speed consistent with the speed of a boat.

The radar data also showed several isolated primary returns not associated with any track. (As previously noted, primary radar returns are often recorded from surfaces other than airplane surfaces.)

The Safety Board's examination of all of the available radar data revealed no sequence of primary or secondary radar returns that intersected TWA flight 800s position at any time, nor did it reveal any radar returns consistent with a missile or other projectile traveling toward the accident airplane. No secondary radar returns were received from TWA flight 800 after 2031:12; however, after 2031:12, numerous new primary radar returns appeared near the accident airplane's last recorded radar position, some of which were visible for up to 20 minutes after the last secondary radar return was received from the accident airplane. The primary radar returns that appeared near the accident airplane after 2031:12 were recorded largely in two areas of dense concentration, located about 1 to 1 1/2 miles east-northeast and 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 miles northeast of the last secondary radar return, respectively

The final document is an excerpt from the conclusions of the official aircraft accident report regarding the inflight breakup of TWA Flight 800 over the Atlantic Ocean. The report was conducted by the National Transportation Survey Board. Please read the document carefully.

3.1 Findings

1. The flight crew was properly certificated and qualified and had received the training and off-duty time prescribed by Federal regulations. No evidence indicated any preexisting medical or behavioral conditions that might have adversely affected the flight crew's performance during the accident flight.

2. The airplane was certificated, equipped, and dispatched in accordance with Federal regulations and approved TWA procedures.

3. At the time of the accident, there were light winds and scattered clouds in the area, but there were no significant meteorological conditions that might have disrupted the flight.

4. The in-flight breakup of TWA flight 800 was not initiated by a preexisting condition resulting in a structural failure and decompression.

5. The in-flight breakup of TWA flight 800 was not initiated by a bomb or a missile strike.

6. The fuel/air vapor in the ullage of TWA flight 800's center wing fuel tank was flammable at the time of the accident.

7. A fuel/air explosion in the center wing fuel tank of TWA flight 800 would have been capable of generating sufficient internal pressure to break apart the tank.

8. The witness observations of a streak of light were not related to a missile, and the streak of light reported by most of these witnesses was burning fuel from the accident airplane in crippled flight during some portion of the postexplosion preimpact breakup sequence. The witnesses' observations of one or more fireballs were of the airplane's burning wreckage falling toward the ocean.

9. The TWA flight 800 in-flight breakup was initiated by a fuel/air explosion in the center wing fuel tank.

10. Boeing's design practice that permits parts less than 3 inches long in any direction to be electrically unbonded may not provide adequate protection against potential ignition hazards created by static electricity generated by lightning or other high-energy discharges. Conclusions 307 Aircraft Accident Report

3.2 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the TWA flight 800 accident was an explosion of the center wing fuel tank (CWT), resulting from ignition of the flammable fuel/air mixture in the tank. The source of ignition energy for the explosion could not be determined with certainty, but, of the sources evaluated by the investigation, the most likely was a short circuit outside of the CWT that allowed excessive voltage to enter it through electrical wiring associated with the fuel quantity indication system. Contributing factors to the accident were the design and certification concept that fuel tank explosions could be prevented solely by precluding all ignition sources and the design and certification of the Boeing 747 with heat sources located beneath the CWT with no means to reduce the heat transferred into the CWT or to render the fuel vapor in the tank nonflammable.

Dependent variables

We would now like to ask you for your beliefs about TWA Flight 800. For each of the statements below and on the following pages, please indicate how likely or unlikely you think it is that the statement is true.

A mechanical failure caused the explosion of TWA Flight 800.

- Very unlikely [6]

- Somewhat unlikely [5]

- Slightly unlikely [4]

- Slightly likely [3]

- Somewhat likely [2]

- Very likely [1]

The U.S. government was involved in the explosion of TWA Flight 800.

- Very unlikely [1]

- Somewhat unlikely [2]

- Slightly unlikely [3]

- Slightly likely [4]

- Somewhat likely [5]

- Very likely [6]

TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile fired by the U.S. military.

- Very unlikely [1]

- Somewhat unlikely [2]

- Slightly unlikely [3]

- Slightly likely [4]

- Somewhat likely [5]

- Very likely [6]

The government thoroughly investigated the crash of Flight 800 and determined its true cause.

- Very unlikely [6]

- Somewhat unlikely [5]

- Slightly unlikely [4]

- Slightly likely [3]

- Somewhat likely [2]

- Very likely [1]

The government is covering up the true cause of the explosion of TWA Flight 800 from the public.

- Very unlikely [1]

- Somewhat unlikely [2]

- Slightly unlikely [3]

- Slightly likely [4]

- Somewhat likely [5]

- Very likely [6]

Testing H2 as a difference-in-differences estimate

As noted in the main text, our second hypothesis predicted that the difference in conspiracy beliefs between the redacted and unredacted conditions would be greater among individuals with high conspiracy predispositions than those with low predispositions.

Tables 2 and A2 estimate the following model:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{redacted} + \beta_2 * \text{unredacted} + \beta_3 * \text{highconspiracy}$$
$$+ \beta_4 * \text{redactedXhighconspiracy} + \beta_5 * \text{unredactedXhighconspiracy}$$
$$(1)$$

We wish to calculate the following difference-in-differences estimate, which represents the difference in redaction effects (relative to the baseline condition, which is the excluded category in the model above) between low- and high-predisposition participants:

> (Effect of redacted text on high-conspiracy subjects - effect of unredacted text on high-conspiracy subjects) - (Effect of redacted text on low-conspiracy subjects - effect of unredacted text on low-conspiracy subjects)

This quantity of interest can be reduced to what is reported in the auxiliary row in the tables as follows:

$$= \left(\underbrace{(\beta_1 + \beta_4)}_{\text{Redacted/HC}} - \underbrace{(\beta_2 + \beta_5)}_{\text{Unredacted/HC}} \right) - (\underbrace{\beta_1}_{\text{Redacted/LC}} - \underbrace{\beta_2}_{\text{Unredacted/LC}})$$
$$= (\beta_1 - \beta_2) + (\beta_4 - \beta_5) - (\beta_1 - \beta_2)$$
$$= \beta_4 - \beta_5$$

$$(2)$$

Table A1: Respondent characteristics

(a) Study 1

	Control	Unredacted	Redacted	Total
Age				
18-29	48%	46%	45%	46%
30-39	27%	28%	26%	27%
40-59	21%	22%	26%	23%
60+	4%	3%	3%	3%
Gender				
Female	49%	50%	56%	52%
Male	51%	50%	44%	48%
Education				
High school or less	10%	10%	9%	10%
Some college/associate degree	41%	40%	41%	41%
Bachelor's degree	37%	36%	36%	36%
Graduate degree	12%	14%	14%	14%
Race				
Nonwhite	21%	19%	21%	20%
White	79%	81%	79%	80%
Party				
Democrat	39%	38%	45%	41%
Republican	19%	19%	14%	18%
Independent/something else	42%	43%	41%	42%
N	835	852	837	2524

(b) Study 2

	Control	Unredacted	Redacted	Total
Age				
18-29	46%	44%	44%	44%
30-39	30%	30%	32%	31%
40-59	21%	23%	20%	21%
60+	4%	3%	4%	4%
Gender				
Female	52%	50%	55%	52%
Male	48%	50%	45%	48%
Education				
High school or less	9%	9%	11%	10%
Some college/associate degree	38%	38%	39%	39%
Bachelor's degree	39%	39%	37%	38%
Graduate degree	14%	13%	13%	14%
Race				
Nonwhite	16%	22%	20%	20%
White	84%	78%	80%	80%
Party				
Democrat	43%	42%	44%	43%
Republican	18%	19%	18%	18%
Independent/something else	39%	39%	37%	38%
N	835	839	841	2515

Table A2: Response timing by condition

(a) Study 1

	Stimulus (seconds)	Mech. failure	Govt. involved	Shot down	Thorough investigation	Govt. coverup	Average beliefs
Redacted	105.15**	-2.37**	-0.06	0.27	-0.07	-0.04	-0.40*
	(8.16)	(0.59)	(0.23)	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.22)	(0.20)
Unredacted	107.28**	-2.07**	-0.31	-0.25	0.04	-0.13	-0.52*
	(8.31)	(0.61)	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.25)	(0.21)	(0.20)
Control mean	179.68**	15.39**	6.19**	5.28**	7.12**	5.58**	7.87**
	(4.97)	(0.43)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.15)	(0.14)
Redacted − unredacted	-2.14	-0.31	0.26	0.52*	-0.11	0.10	0.11
	(9.29)	(0.58)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.26)	(0.21)	(0.20)
N	2493	2512	2512	2509	2501	2500	2478

(b) Study 2

	Stimulus (seconds)	Mech. failure	Govt. involved	Shot down	Thorough investigation	Govt. coverup	Average beliefs
Redacted	112.82**	-1.15+	-0.21	-0.26	-0.31+	-0.18	-0.46*
	(7.72)	(0.66)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.20)	(0.19)
Unredacted	104.53**	-1.87**	-0.27	-0.23	-0.07	-0.32	-0.55**
	(7.65)	(0.59)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.23)	(0.19)	(0.18)
Control mean	179.66**	14.35**	5.78**	4.88**	6.59**	5.26**	7.39**
	(4.68)	(0.42)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.13)
Redacted − unredacted	8.29	0.72	0.05	-0.03	-0.24	0.14	0.10
	(8.62)	(0.66)	(0.18)	(0.24)	(0.22)	(0.18)	(0.19)
N	2493	2511	2507	2511	2507	2502	2486

$+ p < 0.10$, $* p < 0.05$, $** p < 0.01$. OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Response times trimmed to the 99th percentile of the distribution by question due to extreme outliers. Timing for outcome variables only considered for non-missing responses.

Study 2: Participants, design, and procedure

To address the concern that no reason was given for the redactions in Study 1, the instructions provided to respondents in the redaction condition in Study 2 were modified to include a realistic rationale (e.g., Landay and Doyle 2014; Jansen 2015):

> (Note: The documents you are going to read were redacted by the government, which stated that the redactions were necessary to avoid revealing details of airline procedures and military operations that would threaten aviation safety and national security.)

This rationale is substantively plausible given the content of the stimulus documents, which include, for instance, information on correspondence between commercial aircraft and air traffic control (which could be thought to contain sensitive information on airline procedures) and radar data that describes the position of an antisubmarine airplane (further details on its status or procedures could be thought to be classified).

After completing the survey, respondents were debriefed that the redactions and the provided rationale were fictitious, though the documents they read were genuine. All other materials and procedures in Study 2 were identical to Study 1, including the content of the stimuli and the wording and construction of the dependent variables.

A new set of Amazon Mechanical Turk participants were recruited to complete Study 2 on the Qualtrics online survey platform.[1] The study was conducted from August 20–21, 2015.[2] By construction, the sample size was equivalent to Study 1 ($n = 2515$). The demographic characteristics (48% male, 80% white, median age group 30–39, 52% bachelor's degree or higher) and political leanings of the sample (43% identify as Democrats, 18% as

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[1]Those who had previously taken part in Study 1 were excluded by a script that checked their Mechanical Turk ID against a list of past participants.

[2]A piece of debris was identified as part of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 several weeks before the study was conducted. In this sense, the context of the studies was similar (Study 1 was conducted during the initial search for wreckage from the flight).

Republicans, 38% as independents or something else) were also virtually identical (see Table A1 above for further details).

Study 2: Results

As in Study 1, we again find strong support for our first hypothesis. Even when a rationale was provided for the presence of redactions, respondents exposed to redacted documents reported higher conspiracy beliefs (mean=2.50, 95% CI: 2.41–2.59) than those exposed to unredacted documents (mean=2.35, 95% CI: 2.27–2.44; $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$). Our research question about the effect of exposure to the documents relative to controls yields somewhat different results, however. Unlike in Study 1, average conspiracy beliefs decreased relative to controls (mean=2.64, 95% CI: 2.55–2.73) in both the unredacted and redacted conditions ($t = 4.62$, $p < .01$ and $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$, respectively).[3] In other words, the presence of redactions partially offset but did not eliminate the misperception-reducing effect of exposure to the information in the documents.[4] The treatment effects for Study 2 are analyzed more systematically in Table A3, which follows the structure of Table 1 above. The key quantity for each dependent variable is the difference in effects between the redacted and unredacted conditions, which is presented in a row at the bottom at the table. This quantity is positive and significant at the $p < .05$ level for the average belief measure as well as three of the five dependent variables in the scale, indicating that conspiracy beliefs were higher overall on average and for a majority of the individual outcome measures when redactions were present.[5] Moreover, a preregistered timing analysis mirroring the exploratory findings from Study 1 above again provides no evidence that respondents in the redaction condition differed in how long they spent longer reading the

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[3]As described above, the comparison between the redacted condition and the controls estimates the the *joint* effect of exposure to corrective information *and* redactions.

[4]Note: We again find no difference in redaction effects by conspiracy predispositions and thus omit discussion of those results here to conserve space (see Table A4 below).

[5]The differences we observe in conspiracy adherence mirror Figure 1 above. Overall, 29% of respondents in the control condition had an average response above the outcome measures' midpoint (95% CI: 26–32%) compared with 24% of those in the redacted condition (95% CI: 21–26%) and 20% in the unredacted condition (95% CI: 17–23%).

Table A3: Redaction effects on TWA Flight 800 conspiracy beliefs

	Mech. failure	Govt. involved	Shot down	Thorough investigation	Govt. coverup	Average beliefs
Redacted documents	-0.19**	-0.15*	-0.24**	0.00	-0.13+	-0.15*
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)
Unredacted documents	-0.28**	-0.32**	-0.39**	-0.10	-0.31**	-0.29**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)
Control mean	2.63**	2.70**	2.59**	2.50**	2.78**	2.64**
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Redaction effect (H1):						
Redacted − unredacted	0.09	0.16*	0.15*	0.10	0.18*	0.14*
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)
N	2513	2509	2513	2509	2504	2488

$+ p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

stimuli or answering outcome measures (see Table A2 above).[6]

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[6]Unlike in Study 1, respondents made fewer relevant comments in the redacted versus the unredacted condition. However, the difference was substantively very small (1.2% versus 2.5%; $t = 2.00$, $p < .05$). Given that only 31 respondents in either condition made such comments, the weight of the evidence based on response time data from the full sample is still consistent with the interpretation that respondent attention and engagement was equivalent between the redacted and unredacted conditions.

Table A4: Redaction effects by conspiracy predispositions (Study 2)

	Mech. failure	Govt. involved	Shot down	Thorough investigation	Govt. coverup	Average beliefs
Redacted documents	-0.25**	-0.22**	-0.26**	-0.11	-0.21*	-0.22**
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)
Unredacted documents	-0.29**	-0.31**	-0.38**	-0.09	-0.30**	-0.28**
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)
High conspiracy predisp.	0.57**	0.97**	0.91**	0.65**	0.94**	0.80**
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Redacted × high consp.	0.08	0.08	-0.02	0.20	0.10	0.09
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.12)
Unredacted × high consp.	0.03	-0.03	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.12)
Control mean	2.37**	2.25**	2.18**	2.20**	2.35**	2.27**
	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Difference in redaction effects (H2):						
Redacted × high consp. −	0.06	0.11	0.01	0.23+	0.12	0.11
unredacted × high consp.	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.12)
N	2510	2506	2510	2506	2501	2485

$+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$. OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

Table A5: Compliance with JEPS reporting standards

Item	Location
A. *Hypotheses*	
State specific objectives or hypotheses.	Page 3
B. *Subjects and context*	
Report eligibility and exclusion criteria for participants.	Pages 2–3. Mechanical Turk workers were ineligible for Study 1 if they had participated in a pretest of the study or for Study 2 if they had participated in the pretest or Study 1.
How were participants contacted for recruitment? Were incentives offered?	Page 5, appendix (respondents from Mechanical Turk were offered incentives to participate)
Report recruitment dates defining the periods of recruitment and when the experiments were conducted.	Page 5, appendix
Describe settings and locations where the data were collected.	Page 5, appendix
If there is a survey: Provide response rate and how it was calculated.	N/A; studies conducted on Mechanical Turk.
C. *Allocation method*	
Report details of the procedure used to generate the assignment sequence (e.g., randomization procedures).	Random assignment was generated by the Qualtrics software platform.
If random assignment used, report details of procedure (e.g., any restrictions, blocking).	N/A (simple random assignment)
If random assignment used, to help detect errors such as problems in the procedure used for random assignment or failure to properly account for blocking, provide a table (in text or appendix) showing baseline means and standard deviations for demographic characteristics and other pretreatment measures (if collected) by experimental group.	See Table A1 above. There is some evidence of imbalance by gender and party in Study 1 and race in Study 2, but as we note in footnote 11, our results are unchanged if we control for these factors and the other respondent characteristics listed in the table.

(continued on next page)

Item	Location
Describe blinding.	Subjects were blind to which condition they were in.

D. *Treatments*

Provide a detailed description of the interventions in each treatment condition as well as a description of the control group.	Pages 5–6, appendix
State how and when manipulations or interventions were administered.	See page 6, appendix; manipulation was random assignment by Qualtrics into experimental condition
Report the number of repetitions of the experimental task and the group rotation protocol. Report the ordering of treatments for within-subject designs. Any piggybacking of other protocols should be reported. Report any use of experienced subjects or subjects used in more than one session or treatment.	N/A
Report time span: How long did each experiment last? How many sessions were subjects expected to attend? If there were multiple sessions, how much time passed between them?	Single online session
Report total number of sessions conducted and number of subjects used in each session.	One individual session for each respondent (online)
Report whether deception was used.	No
Report treatment fidelity: Evidence on whether the treatment was delivered as intended.	Yes (online platform; no known technical errors)
Were incentives given? If so, what were they and how were they administered?	Payments to participants via Mechanical Turk platform

E. *Results*

1. Outcome measures and covariates

Provide precise definitions of all primary and secondary measures and covariates.	Appendix
Clearly state which of the outcomes and subgroup analyses were specified prior to the experiment and which were the result of exploratory analysis.	All specified prior to study except as noted in the text

Item	Location
2. CONSORT participant flow diagram	
Number of subjects initially assessed for eligibility for the study.	3,003 (Study 1), 2,816 (Study 2)
Exclusions prior to random assignment and reasons for the exclusions.	479 participants dropped out of Study 1 prior to beginning the survey (i.e., at the consent form) or were excluded due to participation in a pretest; 301 participants dropped out of Study 2 on the consent page or were excluded due to participating in Study 1 or the pretest.
Number of subjects initially assigned to each experimental group.	Study 1: 835 control, 852 unredacted, 837 redacted; Study 2: 835 control, 839 unredacted, 841 redacted
The proportion of each group that received its allocated intervention and the reasons why subjects did not receive the intended intervention.	N/A (all participants received allocated interventions as far as we know)
The number of subjects in each group that dropped out or for other reasons do not have outcome data.	See discussion of missing outcome data below
The number of subjects in each group that are included in the statistical analysis, and the reasons for any exclusions.	No other exclusions
3. Statistical analysis	
Researchers will conduct statistical analysis and report their results in the manner they deem appropriate. We recommend that this reporting include the following:	
Note whether the level of analysis differs from level of randomization and estimate appropriate standard errors.	N/A (individual-level randomization and analysis)
If there is attrition, discuss reasons for attrition and examine whether attrition is related to pretreatment variables.	No known attrition (short, single-session studies)
Report other missing data (not outcome variables):	

Item	Location
-Frequency or percentages of missing data by group.	N/A (see below for outcome data; treatment assignment observed for all respondents; no other control variables used in analysis)
-Methods for addressing missing data (e.g., listwise deletion, imputation methods).	Listwise deletion
-For each primary and secondary outcome and for each subgroup, provide summary of the number of cases deleted from each analysis and rationale for dropping the cases.	Cases dropped due to missing data by outcome measure and study: mechanical failure (S1: 3, S2: 2), government involved (S1: 3, S2: 6), shot down (S1: 5, S2: 2), thorough investigation (S1: 13, S2: 6), government coverup (S1: 15, S2: 11), average beliefs (S1: 34, S2: 27).
For survey experiments: Describe in detail any weighting procedures that are used.	No weights used
F. *Other information*	
Was the experiment reviewed and approved by an IRB?	Yes
If the experimental protocol was registered, where and how can the filing be accessed?	Pages 3, 10
What was the source of funding? What was the role of the funders in the analysis of the experiment?	Acknowledgments (Dartmouth College Office of Undergraduate Research)
Were there any restrictions or arrangements regarding what findings could be published? Are there any funding sources where conflict of interest might be an issue?	No
If a replication data set is available, provide the URL.	Replication data will be made available at the *Journal of Experimental Political Science* website after publication.

(Note: All page numbers above correspond to the non-typeset text that will be made available at `http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/redactions-conspiracy.pdf`.)

References

Jansen, Bart. 2015. "Watchdog: TSA gave expedited screening to convicted felon." *USA Today*, March 19, 2015. Downloaded September 1, 2015 from `http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/03/19/tsa-pre-check-felon/25034075/`.

Landay, Jonathan S., and Michael Doyle. 2014. "Obama officials, Senate intelligence panel spar over deletions from torture report." McClatchyDC, August 4, 2014. Downloaded September 1, 2015 from `http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/national/national-security/article24771430.html`.