Is my mobile phone listening to me? Conspiratorial thinking, digital literacies, and everyday encounters with surveillance

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Abstract

Despite denials from tech executives, fact-checks from journalists and explanations from security experts, the "conspiracy theory" that internet companies listen to people's conversations via the microphones in their mobile phones persists. This paper explores the ways people make sense of their everyday encounters with digital surveillance, and how they engage with or resist conspiratorial thinking in the context of the *actual* conspiracies implicated in the exploitative business models of tech companies. It examines how people talk about their lived experiences of being monitored, and how they work together with others to construct improvised epistemologies to explain them. The data come from a corpus of online discussions on digital surveillance from Reddit, YouTube and Quora. The analysis suggests while the theories that grow out of personal stories of digital surveillance may not be technologically accurate, they still constitute a kind of emerging digital literacy, a collective effort to make sense of and take a stance against the intrusive practices of tech companies. Such talk also serves a social function, providing people with ways to collectively narrativize

their feelings of dwindling autonomy and to work together to formulate strategies to cope with complex technological and economic forces influencing contemporary communication.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; digital literacies; mobile phones: surveillance

Introduction

> (1) No joke, no lie the other day I was talking about pizza and fast food in with some friends and minutes later a pizza ad appeared on my IG feed I didn't search nothing related to pizza on my phone I swear we were just talking and some domino's pizza ad appeared that shit was really weird! (YouTube)

> (2) My girlfriend and I were making homemade General Tso's chicken, and the best way to make it is by double-frying, but I don't own a fry basket. So we had a whole conversation about the pros and cons of going to buy one. Didn't do any googling, just a verbal conversation. Next day, my Facebook had promoted ads for a deep fry kit on Amazon. (Reddit)

Stories like these of mobile phones supposedly eavesdropping on their owners are widespread on social media and have also been reported by more mainstream media outlets such as *Fox News* (Komando 2019) and the *Huffington Post* (Bond 2019). According to a survey of 1,006 U.S. adults conducted by *Consumer Reports* in 2019, nearly half of Americans who own a smartphone believe their phone is recording their conversations (Fowler 2019). The belief is so prevalent, in fact, that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg had to explicitly deny what he called “this conspiracy theory that gets passed around that we

listen to what's going on on your microphone and use that for ads" during his testimony to the US Senate in April of 2018 (Transcript 2018). Facebook has even issued a written statement on its website dismissing the claims ("Facebook does not use…" 2016).

The protestations of Facebook and other social media sites have been joined by a steady stream of experts who, via media interviews and columns, assure people that it is extremely unlikely that people are being spied on in this way. In one of the few academic treatments of the issue, computer security specialists Jacob Kröger and Philip Raschke (2019: 114) state:

> So far, despite significant research efforts, no evidence has been found to confirm the widespread suspicion that firms are secretly eavesdropping on smartphone users to inform ads.

At the same time, however, they do not rule out the theory entirely, adding (114):

> To the best of our knowledge, however, the opposite has not been proven either. While some threat scenarios can be ruled out based on existing security measures and considerations regarding an attack's visibility, cost and technical feasibility, there are still many security vulnerabilities and a fundamental lack of transparency that potentially leave room for more sophisticated attacks to be successful and remain undetected.

Despite the denials of tech executives and the reassurances of experts, and perhaps because of the shadow of a doubt that still remains, the belief that companies are listening to us through

our phones has proven remarkably resilient. As Ben Gilbert (2019), writing for *BusinessInsider*, remarks:

> It crosses generations, race, gender, and income brackets. Your conspiracy-minded uncle and members of Congress and your favorite morning news anchor are on the same page for this one. Everyone, it seems, believes that Facebook and Instagram are listening in on them. And no matter how hard they try to tamp down that belief, it persists.

But does this belief constitute a "conspiracy theory" as Mark Zuckerberg has labelled it? Conspiracy theory scholars (see e.g. Dentith 2016) say that three conditions need to be met for something to be labelled a conspiracy theory: The *conspirators condition* (some people are working together to do this), the s*ecrecy condition* (they're not being honest about it) and the *goal condition* (they're doing it for a reason, such as world domination, or, in this case, to sell people pizzas and deep fry kits). In this regard, these stories certainly qualify. More important, though, is that the *discursive practices* engaged in by people who relate these experiences also conform to those often associated with "conspiracy theorists," such as the circulation and collaborative reworking of compelling stories (Raab et al. 2013), the dismissal of randomness and chance as possible explanations for phenomena (Willman 2002), and the deployment of sometimes tangential facts to support the theory (Dentith and Keeley 2019).

At the same time, Zuckerberg and others labelling these beliefs a "conspiracy theory" is also a discursive practice deserving critique — a way of positioning as "paranoid" (Harper, 2008) those who are asking what might be considered reasonable questions about the surveillance

practices of tech companies. Calling something a conspiracy theory is a way of asserting epistemic superiority over people by essentially accusing them of "epistemic viciousness" (Cassem 2016; see also Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus, Chapter 4 in this volume). Ultimately, understanding why some narratives "are deemed to be scientific and others conspiracy theories," argues Charles Briggs (2005:275) requires that we focus on "how the ideological construction of their production, circulation, and reception shapes identities and social groups and orders them hierarchically."

In this chapter, what I am most concerned with is not so much whether this theory is true, but how it functions as part of the constellation of *social practices* that constitute people's everyday use of digital media. My interest is in how people use narratives like these to make sense of and discursively negotiate their *experiences* with an information economy in which their mundane interactions with and through technologies are constantly collected, processed and fed back to them in the form of "personalized" services and advertising.

Technology, surveillance and conspiratorial thinking

There has always been a relationship between new technologies and conspiratorial thinking, from the moon landing to GMO foods (Uscinski 2020). Part of the reason for this is what Sunstein and Vermule (2008:1) have called "crippled epistemologies" -- the states of chronically incomplete knowledge associated with most people's use of technologies that almost inevitably give rise to confusion or suspicion. For the majority of the population, the technological processes that govern so many of their daily activities are hidden within "black boxes" (Pasquale 2015) that are all but impossible to penetrate. Compounding the sense of distance people have from technological knowledge is the ambivalent status our societies

confer on computer engineers and tech entrepreneurs themselves, who are simultaneously valorized as visionary and "disruptive" and demonized for their excess power (Quill 2016).

What is perhaps unique about *digital* technologies is the way they are not just the subject of conspiracy theories, but also engines in their spread. Part of this has to do with the architectures of digital networks and the algorithms which control them that often amplify content that is apt to elicit emotional responses from readers, as conspiratorial narratives often do (Jones and Hafner 2021, Varis 2019). Part of it also has to do with larger changes in the information ecology brought on by digital media, including increased hypersubjectivity and distrust of authority.

Finally, the underlying economic model of the internet, based as it is on ubiquitous surveillance and micro-targeted advertising (Zuboff 2019) can, as in other contexts of mass surveillance, produce feelings of anxiety, fear and suspicion (Ellis et al. 2013). Melley (2000) draws a direct line from the increase in conspiratorial narratives in European and American media and popular culture after World War II to the increased prominence of surveillance in everyday life during and after the Cold War, arguing that conspiracy theories are often attempts to respond to the perceived threats to privacy and autonomy associated with mass surveillance. Harper (2008:2, emphasis mine) similarly argues that "the rise of surveillance *sets the conditions* for the development of conspiracy theories which, in turn, leads to paranoia about surveillance."

Importantly, it is not just the *knowledge* of being watched that is seen to lay the groundwork for conspiratorial thinking, but the *feelings* of anxiety and uncertainty it produces. Koslela (2002) for example, notes how feelings of ambivalence and disorientation are associated with

the proliferation of surveillance cameras on city streets, and Ellis and his colleagues (2013) describe the feelings of agitation people experience when responding to pop-up windows online which constantly inform them that they are being tracked. The ubiquity and complexity of contemporary practices of surveillance, they argue (720), have facilitated both "its normalization and its incomprehensibility, its discursive formulation and its inexpressibility, its somatic registration and its dissociation" from the body.

Part of this disorientation comes from the fact that digital surveillance in many ways disrupts our conventional understandings of language and communication, visibility, and embodiment. Crary (1999) argues that new technological forms of communication always have the effect of restructuring our understanding of what it means to perceive and be perceived by others. In the case of digital surveillance, however, while we experience "being watched" (or, in this case, "listened to") as an embodied sensation, there is no 'body' that we can easily locate that is doing the watching or listening, and the incorporeality and facelessness of the surveillor can help to create the conditions for fantasies and conspiratorial thinking (Ellis et al., 2013).

Digital literacies and discursive practices

The theoretical framework I adopt to examine this phenomenon comes from the study of *digital literacies* (Jones and Hafner 2021). Although "conspiracy theorizing" is not normally thought of as a form of "literacy" (but more often as a "failure" of literacy), the digital literacies framework I am using regards any discursive practice that grows up around the use of digital media and helps people to claim membership in a particular community of users a *literacy practice*. Experts (computer engineers, tech executives, etc.) of course, have their

own specialized discursive practices that they use to talk about technology and claim identities as "experts". But "ordinary people" also have their own sets of genres, styles and stances that they use when talking about technology which, while not always accurately reflecting the way these technologies actually work, do reflect their experiences with technologies and serve as tools for collaborative problem solving with other similarly "ordinary" users.

This view of literacies as part of wider social practices and social identities comes from the work of New Literacy Studies scholars such as Brian Street (1984) and James Gee (2011), for whom the social value of mastering particular discursive practices is not just to more efficiently exchange information, but, more importantly, to show oneself as a particular kind of person with a particular way of looking at the world. Discursive practices (such as being able to produce certain kinds of texts) both reflect these identities and worldviews and contribute to sustaining them. In this way, "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991) are also inevitably "communities of knowing" or what Hass (1992) calls "epistemic communities" -- communities in which people work together not just to create knowledge, but to perpetuate particular "ways of knowing" (see also Latour and Woolgar 1986).

In recent years there has been increasing interest in online epistemic communities where non-experts work together to construct knowledge about issues of common interest such as technology, medicine, and parenting (see e.g. Akrich 2010, Détienne, et al. 2012). One common thread of many of these studies has been a focus on the strategies participants in such communities use to claim "lay expertise", sometimes by appropriating discursive practices of experts (such as citing academic articles), but, more often by contrasting their own forms of expertise with those of experts through more "everyday" discursive practices,

the most important being the telling of personal stories (see e.g. Jaworska 2018, Ogad 2005). Personal stories shared through digital networks can be effective vehicles for the exchange of knowledge and advice, but also serve important interpersonal functions, allowing people who exchange them to think of themselves as sharing common experiences. This sense of common ground achieved through sharing stories is further facilitated by the affordances of digital media, which create opportunities not just for the exchange of individual stories, but for the iterative co-construction of shared 'storyworlds' (Page et al. 2013: 192).

This notion that epistemic communities are held together by shared discursive practices that help to shape their processes of joint sensemaking has also been applied to the online spread of misinformation. Inwood and Zappavigna (2021, see also Inwood and Zappavigna, Chapter 11 in this volume), for instance, have examined the ways rumours and hoaxes are collaboratively constructed through shared textual practices which create what Zappavigna (2011) calls "ambient affiliation" among people who engage in them.

This insight highlights a dimension of epistemic communities which is less prominent in the literature on epistemic communities -- the *affective* nature of knowledge construction and circulation. In the realm of politics, for instance, Papacharissi (2014:5). has noted how collaborative storytelling through digital social networks gives rise to what she calls "affective publics" — groups of people who are bound by common *emotional orientations towards knowledge* (see also Lee, Chapter 10 this volume). Varis and Blommaert (2018) have also argued that collaborative processes of sharing and reworking discursive artefacts such as internet memes produces among users feelings of "conviviality", leading to the formation of what they call "light communities", groups which temporarily but enthusiastically coalesce around particular discursive objects online such as memes, online challenges and conspiracy theories.

Another dimension of digital literacies which is often overlooked, but seems particularly relevant to the case at hand, is their *embodied* nature. We are often so focused on the "virtual" dimensions of digital media that we neglect their material qualities and the fact that using them is always enacted through embodied practices and experienced through embodied sensations. Some scholars of digital literacies (see e.g. Jones 2020a, Wohlwend and Lewis 2011) have begun to explore the embodied nature of practices such as online gaming and the sharing of photos and videos over social media. An aspect of embodiment that requires further investigation, however, is its role in individual and collective epistemic processes, how people use their bodies and embodied experiences to *understand* digital technologies.

Data and methods

The aim of this study is to explore the ways people cope with the experience of ubiquitous surveillance that is an inevitable part of digital media use nowadays by focusing on how they debate the theory that tech companies are listening to them through their mobile phones. The data come from online discussions of the question: 'Is my phone listening to me?' gathered by typing this question into the search engines of Reddit (an online discussion forum), Quora (a peer-based question and answer website) and YouTube. The Reddit search returned 16 threads in 6 subreddits with a total of 1293 comments (Table 1). The Quora search found 8 related questions with a total of 84 answers (Table 2). For YouTube, I downloaded the viewer comments from the 5 most popular videos on this topic, yielding a total of 8555 comments

Table 1: Reddit data

<insert Table 1 here>

Table 2: Quora data

<insert Table 2 here>

Tabe 3: YouTube data

<insert Table 3 here>

The data were uploaded to Max QDA (VERBI Software, 2020), a qualitative analysis software that enables the coding of data, complex lexical searches, and various ways of detecting thematic and discursive patterns. The data were coded iteratively for themes and discursive patterns, with special attention paid to forms of argumentation and discursive strategies associated with different stances towards the theory and those who believe it. Contributions to these discussions fell into two main categories: those from contributors who argued the affirmative — that they believed that their phones were listening to them (believers), and those who did not (skeptics). While the number of believers outnumbered skeptics by more than two to one, the role of the skeptics proved to be important in influencing how believers formulated their arguments (often in response to those offered by skeptics) and marshalled their evidence, and so, in the analysis presented below, I will first address the strategies used by skeptics to argue against the theory.

Skeptics

The difference between believers and skeptics in the data is not just what they believe, but also the discursive practices they use to make their arguments and enact their stances towards the topic and towards those with differing opinions. While believers tend to speak in narratives (see below), skeptics and debunkers tend to produce arguments that are more *analytical*, deploying "logical reasons" why phones "can't be listening" based on their understanding of the current capabilities of technological systems or the economic or legal constraints on the industry. As one skeptic puts it:

> (3) Although there are many ways our privacy is invaded, I'm skeptical if they would actually go this far. It's way too computationally demanding to save everything your phone's mic hears, translate it to text, and revolve ads around it. There are much more efficient and effective ways to determine what you're interested in, such as search history or visited posts. (Reddit)

This example illustrates a common strategy of skeptics, the display of technical knowledge as a way of both countering the more experiential arguments of believers and of presenting themselves as "savvy" and "epistemically virtuous". These performances of expertise are also occasionally accompanied by more explicit assertions about posters' credentials or "insider" knowledge, as in excerpts 4 and 5:

> (4) As someone who buys media on behalf of very large brands, no this is not a thing yet. Trust me, we'd buy it if it were but I've never once had any company-

> including Facebook-pitch us their voice recognition data and yes, we'd be the ones to know. Source: media buyer (Reddit)
>
> (5) And sorry mate, I think with my 15 years experience in IT and internet marketing I do actually know a lot more than 90% of these YouTube commentators that have no idea but still believe Facebook is delivering them ads based on voice conversations (YouTube)

Typically, skeptics also offer a range of alternative explanations either having to do with other forms of surveillance tech companies engage in or with cognitive biases allegedly distorting believers' interpretations. Often these explanations are delivered in a didactic tone, with skeptics positioning themselves as "teachers" and believers as "learners", as in excerpt 6:

> (6) A lot of people don't know their cookies can be tracked across different devices (they can use your Google login, Facebook login etc to tag the computer as belonging to you even if it's a non-google or Facebook site). So if you or your wife looks up something on a desktop computer, the cookies from that search session can eventually be linked back to your phone. (Reddit)

Some skeptics even try to appeal to believers by aligning with their suspicions and adopting their discursive practices. In excerpt 6 below, for example the poster adopts the same narrative strategy believers use, telling of his own experience of thinking he was being "spied" as a way of demonstrating how it is possible to overcome such suspicions through careful reflection and reasoning:

(7) Exactly. This is how internet ads work. You usually don't notice the ads but then you need/want something and you start noticing the relevant ads. Example: I was thinking about getting new underwear a few weeks ago. I was browsing a few tech sites and saw ads for Haines men's underwear. I thought that I was being "spied" on for the targeted ad, but in reality I probably had those ads before but just never noticed them because I wasn't looking for new underwear at the time. (Reddit)

Often, however, these displays of epistemic virtue depend not just on displays of expertise on the part of skeptics, but also on positioning believers as "epistemically vicious" (Cassam, 2016), calling into question the forms of reasoning and strategies of argumentation they use. In the excerpts below, for instance, posters undermine the value of experiential or 'anecdotal' evidence (excerpt 8), point out believers' flawed logic (excerpt 9), or call on them to provide empirical evidence for their claims (excerpt 10).

(8) Anecdotal evidence is the best evidence because you can use it to prove any tinfoil you want! Where's the control in these "experiments"? How often do these ads come up when NOT mentioned? Did they track all the other information? Because every moment one is online one is being tracked in some way. They really don't need to listen, because you give permission for access with every app you use. (YouTube)

(9) it doesn't even make sense. You probably refer to thousands of different categories of inanimate objects every day, and the vast majority of those references don't have anything to do with planned purchases. Y'all really think there's people out there

> buying ads for "people who said the word 'belt' out loud in the last two days?" That would be a huge waste of ad money. (Reddit)

> (10) I also bet you can't prove it that Facebook are delivering ads based on voice recognition and private, offline conversations... prove it, not just a hypothetical, occam's razor type dribble like this but actual real proof, showing data being sent, recordings on the phone and so on... where's the evidence? (YouTube)

Often, attacks on the epistemological basis of believer's arguments deploy the frame of conspiratorial thinking to discredit these beliefs (see also Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus, Chapter 4 in this volume). In such cases, attacks on believer's arguments can cross over into attacks on believers themselves.

> (11) They'd run out of server space (imo) faster than you can say 'conspiracy theory'. (Reddit)

> (12) Get over your tinfoil hats, boys. Your life isn't as interesting as you might think it is. (YouTube)

Donovan (2007) notes that "skeptics" and "debunkers" often play an important part in the way rumors develop and are spread through social networks. On one hand, as will be seen below, skeptics help to define the parameters of the argument, sometimes helping believers to strengthen their theories by responding to or anticipating the "holes" in them that skeptics have identified. On the other hand, the ways skeptics *position* believers as "conspiracy theorists" can sometimes make believers *more* committed to their views as they engage in the

discursive work needed to counter being positioned in undesirable ways (Levy 2017). This is particularly evident in the way believers responded to Mark Zuckerberg labelling their beliefs a "conspiracy theory":

> (13) The mere fact that fuckerberg said "oh you're talking about the CONSPIRACY THEORY that we listen in?" TELLS you everything you need to know. 🙄🤣 They use the term to discredit ALL truth. It's getting boring....🤦🤦🤦. (YouTube)

Believers

People who advance the theory engage in a very different range of discursive practices based less on logical argumentation and more on narrating their lived experiences and "feelings" of being listened to. In fact, one reason for the resilience of the belief, even in the face of the "logical arguments" from skeptics, is the genre of narrative itself. As Jones (2013) notes in his analysis of the MMR vaccine controversy in the UK, abstract arguments, no matter how carefully constructed with "facts" and statistics, are never as compelling as stories because of *temporal logic* of narrative, which compels readers or hearers to infer a "chain of causality" between events which are arranged in sequence, even when such a relationship may not actually exist (Carranza, 2015). Indeed, it is the inference of causality that separates a "story" from a sequence of random events.

The stories believers tell tend to follow a fairly stable narrative template (see Figure 1), usually starting with a kind of "abstract" (Labov and Waletzky 1967) in which tellers frame their experience as "odd" or "suspicious", typically followed by two accounts, one involving

a physical conversation, the other involving them noticing some kind of echo of that conversation in the online ads they received. By placing these events in narrative sequence, narrators invite readers to infer a causal link. This is usually accompanied by some form of disclaimer which preempts interpretations that are inconsistent with the theory that the narrators are trying to promote, sometimes followed by a process of "ruling out" other possibilities. The stories usually end with some kind of evaluation of the incident; sometimes involving an explicit articulation of the theory, but, more often consisting of innuendo, a rhetorical question such as "Coincidence?", or some kind of *affective* evaluation regarding how "scary", "weird" or "creepy' the experience was:

> (14) This is weird. Recently I picked up a small instrument at a thrift store and played it to see what kind of sound it made. Later that day on Facebook I see an ad for finger guitar. I've never heard of a finger guitar. Coincidence? (YouTube)

> (15) This happens to me all the time, Facebook definitely listens, I don't have a baby, I don't know anyone who has a baby and yet I went out for lunch and sat next to a crying baby and the next day I was recommended baby grows, toys and buggies. Little bit creepy not gonna lie. (YouTube)

<insert Figure 1 here>

Figure 1: Narrative template for stories of believers

Although these stories are presented as uninterrupted blocks of text, they are *co-constructed*, responding to and anticipating the contributions from other posters, both other believers and

skeptics. Disclaimers, for example, are often supplemented with evidence to "prove" the disclaimer and pre-empt any possible doubts on the part of hearers:

> (16) I've never searched for cat items EVER because... I HAVE TWO DOGS. No cats. (YouTube)

Similarly, processes of "ruling out" often take up the "reasonable" explanations offered by skeptics and attempt to undermine their explanatory power, demonstrating how debunkers of theories can also play a key role in their propagation by helping proponents hone their stories.

> (17) This has happened to me multiple times now, some of the times I could accept that maybe it was using say an IP address to target and someone searched something that was said, but other times it seems near impossible anything else than audio listening was happening. This is creepy, and obviously illegal. (Reddit)

The critiques of skeptics are also taken up in the multiple instances where narrators preface their stories with insistences that they are "not paranoid", which is both an attempt to counter skeptics' positioning of them as "irrational" and to "anticipate and disarm the authority of expert criticism" (Knight 2000: 17). The fact that believers feel it necessary to defend themselves against accusations of paranoia suggests that the "anti-conspiracy theory discourse" of skeptics has powerful regulatory effects. At the same time, however, these acts of counter-positioning also create opportunities for believers to create solidarity among themselves by unburdening one another of the "paranoid" label:

(18) i honestly thought I was becoming paranoid. I'm so glad someone else has had this experience. (Quora)

(19) You're not paranoid. You're simply seeing the truth for the first time. (YouTube)

But perhaps more important is the way these stories respond to and reinforce the contributions of *other believers* by essentially taking up the same narrative template used by previous posters and populating it with their own details. In a sense, the template functions in the same way image macros do in the circulation of memes, providing a stable format within which users are invited to produce their own creations, and, by doing so, demonstrate that they are "literate" in the genre (Shifman 2014). These stories are also often structurally chained, with narrators linking their stories with those of previous tellers with abstracts like: "the same thing happened to me!" In other words, the stories are linked both paradigmatically by always reproducing the template, and syntagmatically —each one functioning as a response to the previous story and as an invitation for the next person to chime in with "Me too!" and share their own version of this experience.

And the more these stories are recreated and reworked, the more they come to take on the weight of doxa, a kind of "truth" that comes about through the iterative accumulation of shared perspectives on the same experience:

(20) Too many people say this has happened to them for me to not believe it. It's happened to me, it's happened to people i know, and it's happened to so many people here in this thread. We're not all crazy. We're not all imagining this, so even if we can't figure out how, we know it's happening. (YouTube)

(21) I've experienced it too many times. It's happened to too many people. Everyone knows it's happening. (Reddit)

Particularly telling is the way this template crosses genres, moving from retrospective accounts of fortuitous experiences to proactive performances of the phenomena in the form of make-shift "experiments":

(22) I decided to try an experiment. Twice a day for five days, I tried saying a bunch of phrases that could theoretically be used as triggers. Phrases like I'm thinking about going back to uni. The changes came literally overnight. Suddenly I was being told mid-semester courses at various universities. (Reddit)

(23) I tested it by talking a lot about getting hair implants (I have a full head of hair so it's something I would have no actual use for, or would legitimately discuss otherwise). Boom -- ads for hair implants. (YouTube)

While this experimental frame is in some way a response to skeptics, an effort to make the arguments of believers more "scientific", it also has the same memetic character of the shared stories, increasing the virality of the argument by presenting not just a story that people can tell together, but a *practice* that they can *do* together—not unlike the "Ice Bucket Challenge". Indeed, this challenge has been widely taken up both by tabloid journalists and by users of social media, with the "is my phone listening to me experiment" becoming a kind of YouTube sub-genre.

This more performative and embodied version of an already experiential narrative points to one of the main differences between this conspiratorial narrative and many others—the fact that it is, no matter who engages in it, a *personal narrative*. Since it is based on these personal, embodied experiences, either recalled in stories or performed in YouTube videos, the argument becomes simultaneously more engaging and more difficult to debunk.

Indeed, the *experiential* dimension of believers' reasoning is perhaps the thing most responsible for the persistence of this theory. Unlike the abstract, technological arguments of skeptics, the stories that believers tell are tangible, embodied, and situated in their physical and social worlds, often involving other people such as their brother-in-law, wife, or boyfriend, who share with them the disconcerting feeling of being listened to without their consent. In fact, believers frequently contrast their experiential knowledge with the abstract arguments of skeptics. "Anyone may dispute this as much as they want," says one poster, "but I've experienced too many of these for them to be mere coincidence" (Reddit).

It is in part, the experiential, embodied nature of these narratives – narrators' sense that their *physical territory* has been violated (Altman 1975) -- that contributes as well to their insistence on the corporality of their surveillors. Even when relatively friendly skeptics remind them that "There is no person on the other end, it's just a machine" (YouTube), or "It might be better to say that it's 'reading' since it's just processing data…it has no ears!", believers insist on characterizing what is happening as "listening":

> (24) If it can listen for "OK Google", what's stopping it from listening for other things? (Reddit)

(25) isn't it common sense that it has to always be listening? How else could it work? (YouTube)

While these experiences are represented as based in situated, embodied perception, they are also presented as deeply "felt", emotional happenings, and this also contributes to their virality. As I mentioned above, nearly every story is accompanied by an affective evaluation, usually expressing how "creepy" the experience was. In fact, "creepiness" arises as a kind of *leitmotif*, surfacing again and again as people share their stories:

(26) This is so damn creepy. If true, of course. (YouTube)

(27) Very creepy and big-brother like (Reddit)

(28) Creepy...🦉 (YouTube)

(29) It's creepy as f**k (Reddit)

(30) It's friggin creepy and definitely unlawful. (Reddit)

(31) It's hilarious. And creepy (Reddit)

(32) creepy practices like this are why we can't have nice things. (Quora)

In their examination of the circulation of memes through what they call "light communities", Varis and Blommaert (2018) argue that sharing memes is a kind of "phatic" communication,

less about exchanging information and more about exchanging *affect*. Raab and his colleagues make a similar point about conspiracy theories, that what chiefly contributes to their spread is that they are compelling stories that paradoxically often serve as much to *re*-mystify situations as to de-mystify them. Guerin and Miyazaki (2006) similarly suggest that rumors and conspiracy theories are spread not to reduce anxiety, as others (see e.g. Rosnow, 1991) have argued, but "precisely because they are anxiety-provoking" (25), and so facilitate the circulation of affect among believers (see also Lee, Chapter 10 in this volume).

Somewhat paradoxically, however, another evaluation that often pops up is 'cool'.

(33) If so, that's pretty dang cool/terrifying. (YouTube)

(34) That's actually pretty cool (YouTube)

(35) Cool story. (Reddit)

(36) I thought that was really cool because its true. (Reddit)

(37) That's very cool, Google! (Reddit)

Somehow, though, it should not be a surprise that the words "creepy" and "cool" are used to describe the same phenomenon, sometimes in the same utterance. The root of many people's ambivalence about digital technologies in general, and digital surveillance in particular is the sense of the "uncanny" they create, the almost unavoidable pleasure that people take in the "magical thinking' that they invite them to participate in (Jones 2021). In fact, for many tech

companies, the secret of consumer engagement is being able to "tread the thin line between cool and creepy" (Tene and Polonetsky 2014: 65). It is, in fact, by playing the "creepy" and the 'cool' off one another that such companies work to gradually shift social norms around privacy, making people more willing to accept the "creepiness" of surveillance in exchange for the "cool" convenience that digital platforms offer. But this relationship between the "creepy" and the "cool" is also implicated in the spread and gradual acceptance of conspiracy theories, which are often couched in stories which both terrify and delight (Campion-Vincent 2004, Raab et al. 2013).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the conspiracy theorizing that takes place in response to the ubiquitous surveillance practices of tech companies is a kind of "literacy practice" which functions to generate both shared explanations for phenomena that non-expert users of technology find difficult to explain and shared outrage against powerful entities against which they feel powerless. Like other "literacy practices", conspiracy theorizing about technology involves distinct stances, forms of discourse, and discursive strategies, which I demonstrated by contrasting the arguments of 'skeptics' – who frame their contributions as "logical arguments" based on abstract reasoning and hypothetical situations, and position themselves as "knowledgeable experts"— with those of 'believers' – who construct their contributions as embodied *experiences*, whether as personal stories or as quasi-empirical "experiments" that they have conducted in the "real world", and position themselves as "ordinary people" approaching the issue with 'common sense".

Sociologist Anthony Giddons (1991) notes that one of the key features of modernity is that it demands that we build relations of trust not just with people, but with *systems* – large

organizations, socio-technical systems, platforms. The way such trust is built is through what he calls “access points” (83) —points where people can peek into the system and see how it works. In the absence of transparency, however, the only access points available are the outputs of the black box and the vaguely unsettling feelings those outputs create. In the case of digital surveillance, the only access points that are available to most people are their own, embodied experiences of being “watched” or “listened to”. Such feelings, as Ellis and his colleagues (2013: 720) write, are characterized by their simultaneous “normalization and …incomprehensibility.”

It is not surprising, then, that when confronted with the reality (and opacity) of digital surveillance, people cling stubbornly to the only access point they have available to them: their own embodied experience. Part of the “common sense” of the conspiracy theory that we are being literally “listened to” through our phones is the persistence of 20th century imaginaries of surveillance, in which it was chiefly a matter of “eavesdropping”. “wiretapping”, “bugging” -- intercepting physical voices with physical ears. Elsewhere, in my work (Jones 2020b), I have written about the problems of approaching digital surveillance with analogue ontologies – “human” understandings of what it means to speak and listen and infer meaning -- because the ways digital systems process data and infer meanings is very different. But it is, at the same time, inevitable that the frame of human communication persists, and in some ways, it can be seen as a productive way to process the experience of digital surveillance. Nick Couldry (2006) argues that aural metaphors embedded always in an embodied intersubjective space of perception, help highlight for us the ways we might be present for others online, including those who wish to track us. In other words, thinking that “they are listening” may not be technically accurate but may lead to more productive relationships with technologies. In the case of the “believers” in this study,

for example, this belief often led to more critical, skeptical approaches to their own media practices, to learning more, for example, about the arcane privacy settings on their phones, or to engaging more seriously with the disembodied and in many ways more insidious ways digital surveillance takes place.

Conspiratorial thinking is often treated as a failure of literacy, especially nowadays when conspiracy theorists seem to be eating away at the very fabric of our societies. But there is a sense, especially in the face of increasingly powerful tech companies that *really are conspiring* to manipulate us for their own profit, that conspiratorial thinking might constitute a productive response. Not always, but these stories of people and their phones highlight the fact that understanding the literacies people build up in the context of constant surveillance requires that digital literacies scholars listen closely and empathically to their felt experiences, seeing them not just as "irrational" or "paranoid", but as people caught up in a bind over the limits of their own agency.

New literacies studies taught us that literacy is not just a cognitive affair, that it is also social. But understanding digital literacies in the context of the hyper-synthetic personalization made possible by digital technologies also requires attention to the *affective* dimensions of literacies. "Knowing" about surveillance is not enough, and indeed, much of what is happening is unknowable. "To 'know' amidst the digital swarm," says Sun-ha Hong (2018:137) "is less a question of firm evidence possessed by the rational individual and more a question of a collective investment into a deferred and simulated heuristics" -- a more improvisational epistemology. We need to understand more generally how affect is discursively produced and amplified in digital contexts, and how people respond to it – where it can be destructive, and where it can be productive. We need to understand when "paranoia"

might actually be the healthiest response. And we need to develop, as Shklovski (2014) and her colleagues suggest, a practical theory of "creepiness', an understanding of how affect can function as an access point to knowledge and how it can be deployed as a tool for having productive ethical conversations about the kind of societies we want to live in.

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