

Identity, Belonging, and the Search for Community in the Digital Age: A Narrative Review of Misinformation, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

The digital age has transformed the way individuals construct identity, form social relationships, and seek a sense of belonging. Online communities can provide recognition, friendship, and shared purpose across geographical boundaries, but the same social processes can also encourage echo chambers, misinformation, and communities organized around unsupported or conspiratorial claims. This narrative review examines the relationship among belonging, digital community formation, conspiracy beliefs, misinformation, media visibility, critical thinking, and satire. Peter McIndoe's TED Talk and the satirical "Birds Aren't Real" movement are used as a central case through which the research literature is interpreted. Evidence from psychology and communication research indicates that belonging is a fundamental human motivation, while conspiracy beliefs can be associated with epistemic, existential, and social needs. Studies of social media further show that selective exposure and interaction among like-minded users can support polarized information environments. At the same time, misinformation is not explained by group identity alone: analytic reasoning, source evaluation, and the persistence of false information after correction are also important. The review argues that effective responses to misinformation should combine evidence-based reasoning with an understanding of the social functions that communities provide. Healthy digital belonging requires both human connection and the capacity to question claims critically.

Keywords: identity, belonging, digital communities, misinformation, conspiracy theories, echo chambers, satire, critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have always formed communities around shared experiences, interests, values, and interpretations of the world. What has changed in the digital age is the speed and scale at which such communities can form. A person no longer needs to live near others who

share the same interests or beliefs. Social media, discussion forums, fan communities, messaging platforms, and video-sharing sites make it possible to locate like-minded people almost immediately and to maintain those relationships continuously.

This development has created important opportunities for social connection. It has also created conditions in which misinformation and unconventional narratives can circulate rapidly. The same mechanisms that help a young person find a supportive community around a hobby, identity, or experience can also help people assemble around inaccurate information. For this reason, misinformation cannot be understood only as a problem of incorrect facts. It is also connected to social relationships, identity, trust, and belonging.

The importance of belonging is well established in psychological research. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that the desire to form and maintain stable interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation. In a digital environment, the need to belong can be fulfilled through communities that may exist primarily or entirely online. These communities can be constructive, but strong identification with a group can also make its shared narratives psychologically important.

Peter McIndoe's satirical movement, *Birds Aren't Real*, offers an unusual case through which these issues can be examined. The movement was deliberately built around the absurd claim that birds had been replaced by government surveillance drones. Yet it developed recognizable symbols, slogans, public events, media attention, and a large community. In his TED Talk, McIndoe (2023) uses the experience to argue that public responses to conspiracy communities often focus on belief before belonging. His central insight is that people may remain attached to a community not only because of what it claims, but because of the identity and social connection that participation provides.

This paper reviews relevant research on belonging, conspiracy beliefs, digital echo chambers, misinformation, reasoning, and satire in order to evaluate that argument. Rather than treating all unconventional beliefs as identical, the review also distinguishes evidence-based scepticism from unsupported claims. The broader question is whether efforts to reduce misinformation can be more effective when they consider both the accuracy of beliefs and the social needs that communities fulfil.

1. Scope of the Review

This paper is a narrative review rather than a systematic review. It synthesizes a selected body of established peer-reviewed research from psychology, communication, political psychology, cognitive science, and computational social science. The literature was chosen because it directly informs the main themes raised by McIndoe's case: the need to belong, motives for conspiracy belief, the formation of echo chambers, the spread and correction of misinformation, analytic reasoning, and the interpretation of satire.

McIndoe's TED Talk functions as a contemporary case and organizing example rather than as scientific evidence by itself. Literary examples such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* are used only as interpretive parallels. Claims about human behaviour and misinformation are grounded primarily in peer-reviewed scholarship.

2. Belonging and Identity as Foundations of Community

A useful starting point for understanding digital communities is the psychological importance of belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) reviewed a wide range of evidence and proposed that human beings have a strong and pervasive need to form lasting interpersonal attachments. Belonging is therefore more than simple social contact. It involves repeated positive interaction and a sense that one is part of a stable relationship or group.

This distinction is especially important online. An individual can interact with hundreds of people and still feel socially disconnected, while another individual may feel deeply understood by a relatively small online group. Digital communities can provide shared vocabulary, humour, rituals, recognition, and a sense of being known by others. These features can become part of a person's social identity even when members rarely or never meet in person.

The social dimension is also relevant to conspiracy beliefs. Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017) organize the motives associated with conspiracy belief into three broad categories: epistemic motives, which involve the desire to understand events; existential motives, which concern security and control; and social motives, which involve identity and the desire to maintain a positive view of oneself or one's group. This framework does not imply that everyone who experiences uncertainty or exclusion will adopt conspiracy beliefs. Instead, it shows why certain narratives may become attractive under conditions in which people are searching for explanation, control, or social value.

Van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) similarly emphasize that conspiracy beliefs are social as well as emotional and cognitive phenomena. Their review describes conspiracy theories as consequential, widespread across contexts, influenced by emotional states, and closely linked to social and intergroup processes. This perspective supports McIndoe's broader claim that unusual belief communities should not be analysed only at the level of factual accuracy. The social experience of membership also matters.

3. Digital Communities, Selective Exposure, and Echo Chambers

Social media can make community formation easier because users can selectively follow people, pages, channels, and accounts that match their interests. This process can be harmless and useful, but it may also reduce exposure to disagreement. When individuals repeatedly encounter information from similar sources and interact primarily with people who share the same interpretation of events, a more homogeneous information environment can emerge.

Del Vicario et al. (2016), in a large-scale analysis of Facebook interactions, found that users tended to form polarized communities around distinct narratives and that information consumption patterns were strongly shaped by selective exposure. The study is important because it demonstrates that misinformation is not simply a collection of false posts moving randomly through a network. Information travels through social structures in which users cluster around shared narratives.

Cinelli et al. (2021) extended the study of echo chambers across multiple social media platforms and found substantial differences in how platforms support segregation and interaction among like-minded users. Their findings caution against treating 'social media' as one uniform environment. Platform design, recommendation systems, network structure, and user behaviour can all affect how strongly echo chambers develop.

These findings help explain why belonging can reinforce belief. If an individual receives information mainly from a community that also provides friendship and identity, claims repeated within that group may appear increasingly normal. Repetition can create familiarity, while social approval can make particular narratives feel safer to express. This does not mean users are passive victims of technology, nor does it mean all online communities become echo chambers. It means that social structure and information structure can become closely connected.

4. Why Conspiracy Beliefs Can Become Socially Attractive

Conspiracy theories are commonly understood as explanations that attribute significant events or conditions to secret coordination by powerful and malevolent actors. The academic literature, however, stresses that belief in such explanations does not arise from one single personality type or one simple cause. Douglas et al. (2019) reviewed an interdisciplinary literature and concluded that conspiracy beliefs are associated with a range of psychological, political, and social factors and are communicated through both traditional and social media.

The epistemic dimension is important because uncertain or complex events create a strong desire for understandable explanations. A conspiracy narrative can appear to organize confusing information into one coherent story. The existential dimension is relevant when people feel powerless or lack control. A narrative that identifies a hidden cause can make events feel less random, even when the explanation is poorly supported. Social motives matter because conspiracy narratives can distinguish an in-group that 'sees the truth' from an out-group that is considered deceived, threatening, or corrupt (Douglas et al., 2017).

These motives should not be interpreted as proof that conspiracy believers are irrational in every area of life. Nor should the word 'conspiracy' be used to dismiss every allegation of secrecy or wrongdoing. Real conspiracies have occurred historically, and scepticism toward institutions can sometimes be justified. The critical issue is the quality of evidence. Van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) argue that conspiracy beliefs should be studied as a social-psychological phenomenon without removing the need to evaluate individual claims on their evidence.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens critical thinking. A person can question an official explanation while still demanding verifiable evidence for an alternative explanation. The error occurs when scepticism becomes self-sealing - when every piece of contrary evidence is treated as additional proof of the conspiracy. In that situation, a belief becomes difficult to test because there is no possible evidence that could count against it.

5. Misinformation, Reasoning, and Resistance to Correction

Belonging is only one part of the misinformation problem. Cognitive processes also influence whether people recognize inaccurate information. Pennycook and Rand (2019) found that stronger analytic thinking was associated with better discrimination between false and true news headlines. Their results challenge the idea that people always reason mainly to defend their

existing political preferences; insufficient reflection can also play an important role in susceptibility to inaccurate claims.

The persistence of misinformation creates an additional difficulty. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) reviewed research on the continued influence effect: even after misinformation is corrected, it can continue to shape memory and reasoning. A correction does not necessarily erase the original false information. This explains why simply posting a fact-check after a false claim has circulated may not fully solve the problem.

More recent work by Ecker et al. (2022) synthesizes cognitive, social, and affective drivers of misinformation and reviews strategies for both preventing and correcting false beliefs. Their analysis distinguishes reactive approaches, such as debunking after exposure, from pre-emptive approaches, sometimes called prebunking, that help people recognize misleading techniques before they encounter them. The research suggests that effective correction is a psychological process, not merely an information-delivery problem.

At the population level, it is also important not to exaggerate how evenly misinformation is distributed. Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) found that sharing of fake-news content on Facebook was concentrated among a relatively small subset of users in their study. This finding is useful because public debate can create the impression that everyone is constantly sharing false information. In reality, exposure and sharing can be unevenly distributed, and interventions may need to account for those differences.

6. Media Visibility and the Construction of Public Importance

McIndoe's experiment also raises a separate question: what happens when an unusual idea becomes newsworthy because it is unusual? The Birds Aren't Real campaign was visually memorable and easy to summarize. Its slogans, rallies, costumes, and deliberately absurd claims made it attractive as a media story. Once journalists and social media users discussed the movement, visibility itself became part of the phenomenon.

Visibility, however, should not be confused with credibility. A claim may receive extensive coverage because it is entertaining, controversial, emotionally provocative, or unusual. None of these features establishes that it is accurate. Digital audiences therefore need a form of media literacy that asks why a piece of content is being shown, what incentives may encourage

its circulation, whether the evidence is independent of the attention it receives, and whether the source can be verified.

The distinction between reach and reliability becomes particularly important when repetition increases familiarity. A person may encounter the same claim through multiple accounts and mistakenly experience the repetition as independent confirmation even when all accounts ultimately derive from one source. Echo-chamber research demonstrates how network structure can amplify this effect by repeatedly circulating similar narratives within a community (Cinelli et al., 2021; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

7. Satire as Social Criticism: The Birds Aren't Real Case

Satire uses exaggeration, irony, parody, and humour to expose weaknesses in social behaviour or public reasoning. McIndoe's use of a deliberately ridiculous conspiracy resembles a long tradition in which an obviously extreme proposition is used to reveal a more serious point. Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is a classic literary example: its shocking fictional proposal was not intended as a literal policy suggestion but as a way of criticizing social indifference and political thinking.

Satire is powerful partly because it can attract attention without beginning as a formal argument. Humour lowers the barrier to engagement and can make a difficult topic memorable. McIndoe's slogans functioned in this way. The absurdity of the movement invited laughter, but the social experiment eventually raised questions about media attention, polarization, stereotyping, and the human desire for community.

At the same time, satire is not interpreted identically by every audience. LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009), studying political satire, showed that viewers can interpret the same satirical performance differently depending on their prior perspectives. Although their study concerns a different context, it demonstrates a broader limitation of satire: the satirist cannot fully control how the message will be understood.

This ambiguity matters in the digital age, where short clips or screenshots can travel without their original context. A satirical claim may be taken literally, while a serious claim may later be defended as 'just a joke.' Satire can therefore expose misinformation but can also contribute to confusion when context disappears. McIndoe's movement is especially useful because it makes this ambiguity part of the subject itself.

8. Belief Before Belonging - or Belonging Before Belief?

McIndoe's most useful contribution is the proposal that public discussion often begins by attacking belief when it might first need to understand belonging. If membership in a group provides companionship, status, recognition, humour, and a shared identity, rejecting the group's central narrative may involve more than changing one's mind. It may also involve risking social loss.

This perspective is consistent with research showing that conspiracy beliefs can have a social component (Douglas et al., 2017; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). It also helps explain why ridicule can be ineffective. Insulting a person's intelligence may strengthen the boundary between an in-group and an out-group. A community that already believes outsiders do not understand it may treat public mockery as further confirmation that membership is necessary for acceptance.

However, the belonging-first perspective should not be turned into a claim that facts are secondary or unimportant. Evidence still determines whether a factual claim should be accepted. The stronger conclusion is that the social and factual dimensions of belief interact. Effective communication may require both respectful engagement and clear standards of evidence.

This balance is important because empathy without evidence can become uncritical acceptance, while evidence presented without any understanding of identity or social context can fail to persuade. The most productive approach is therefore neither blanket ridicule nor blanket validation. It is a combination of human respect, source evaluation, willingness to revise beliefs, and opportunities for people to belong without needing to accept demonstrably false claims.

9. Critical Skepticism Versus Baseless Claims

One concern raised in the original discussion of McIndoe's talk is whether satire risks treating all unconventional beliefs as equally unreasonable. This concern is valid if 'conspiracy theory' becomes a label used to end discussion rather than a description of a particular kind of explanation. Critical thinking requires room for questioning powerful institutions, examining conflicts of interest, and revising accepted explanations when new evidence appears.

At the same time, critical scepticism is not the same as believing every counter-narrative. Evidence-based scepticism asks whether a claim is testable, whether the evidence comes from reliable and independent sources, whether alternative explanations have been considered, and

what evidence would cause the believer to change position. Baseless misinformation often operates differently: it may rely on selective anecdotes, unfalsifiable claims, circular reasoning, or the assumption that contradictory evidence is itself proof of deception.

Pennycook and Rand's (2019) findings on analytic reasoning are relevant here because they suggest that slowing down and evaluating accuracy can improve discernment. The goal of critical thinking is therefore not to trust authority automatically or distrust it automatically. It is to apply consistent standards of evidence to both mainstream and alternative claims.

DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this paper supports a more complex understanding of digital misinformation than the simple idea that some people believe false things because they are uninformed. Beliefs develop within psychological and social environments. People seek understanding, control, identity, and connection. Digital platforms can make it easier for these needs to converge around a shared narrative, while network structure can repeatedly expose users to similar information.

McIndoe's Birds Aren't Real movement is valuable because it separates literal belief from community formation. The movement's central claim was intentionally fictional, yet the shared identity built around it was socially real. Participants could recognize slogans, attend events, create content, and experience a sense of membership. The case therefore makes visible a distinction that is harder to observe in genuine conspiracy communities: a belief can function as a social symbol in addition to functioning as a factual claim.

The research also shows the limits of explaining misinformation only through belonging. Analytic reasoning affects accuracy judgments, corrections can fail because misinformation continues to influence memory, and platform structures can shape exposure patterns (Ecker et al., 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). A complete account must therefore combine cognitive, social, technological, and communicative explanations.

There are also limits to the evidence considered here. Much of the literature studies particular platforms, populations, or types of conspiracy belief, and findings cannot automatically be generalized to every online group. Social media platforms also evolve quickly. In addition, McIndoe's movement is an intentionally satirical case, so genuine conspiracy

communities may differ in motivation, emotional intensity, and resistance to correction. The case is best treated as a lens for interpretation rather than a direct model of all conspiracy belief.

Despite these limitations, the broader implication is clear. Digital literacy should include more than learning to identify unreliable websites. It should include understanding how identity influences information processing, how repetition and group approval can shape perception, why corrections sometimes fail, and how to remain connected to communities without giving up independent evaluation of evidence.

CONCLUSION

The search for belonging is one of the most important forces shaping human social life, and the digital age has expanded the number and variety of communities available to individuals. Online communities can provide genuine support, creativity, friendship, and shared purpose. The same mechanisms, however, can also create environments in which misinformation becomes socially reinforced and disagreement becomes difficult.

Research on conspiracy beliefs demonstrates that people may be drawn to explanatory narratives for epistemic, existential, and social reasons. Research on echo chambers shows how digital networks can cluster users around shared narratives, while work on analytic thinking and misinformation correction demonstrates that cognition and memory also influence belief. Satire can reveal these processes in memorable ways, but its ambiguity means that it must be interpreted carefully.

McIndoe's central question - whether society sometimes addresses belief before belonging - is therefore a useful starting point, but not a complete solution. Belonging helps explain why some communities become meaningful and why ridicule can deepen social boundaries. Evidence, however, remains essential for deciding whether claims are true. A healthy information environment requires both: communities in which people can feel valued and a culture in which claims can be questioned, tested, corrected, and revised without threatening a person's basic sense of human worth.

In the digital age, the strongest form of belonging is not one that demands unquestioning agreement. It is one that allows connection to coexist with curiosity, evidence, disagreement, and the freedom to change one's mind.

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