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Measuring Public Pathology: A Brief Response to Dentith on Wagner-Egger et al.'s "Why Conspiracy Theories are 'Oxymorons...'", or "Just Asking Some Questions"

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Abstract

Wagner-Egger et al. still argue that public doubts and conspiratorial concerns represent a mass pathology in need of a mass psychological cure. This is known as the “pathologizing project”. I acknowledge the soundness of M R.X. Dentith’s analytical critique of Wagner-Egger et al.’s proposal to create a sophisticated psychological-public health project to attenuate peoples’ abilities to doubt the pronouncements and actions of government and corporate media. But the pathologizing project has empirically measurable properties, too. A simple Likert-scale questionnaire is provided to explicate and explore support for Wagner-Egger et al.’s pathologizing project. This tests the hypothesis that their proposal is, in fact, desirable to, and widely shared by, educated observers. The method used is commonplace among social scientists, including the pathologizing project’s practitioners.

The *Le Monde* group (2019) continue to defend and promote public funding for a mass project of pathologizing and “curing” the public of doubts about the reliability of government, media and other corporate statements and actions.¹

Dentith Responds to Wagner-Egger et al.

As previously discussed, Wagner-Egger et al. envision a mass psychological engineering project to curtail rational social epistemology, one particularly, but not limited to, targeting children in public schools.² M R. X. Dentith provides a sound (almost and justifiably scolding) critique of the various defenses by the *Le Monde* group of their planned interventions.³ Dentith also points out how Martin Orr’s, Gina Husting’s and Dentith’s own positions have been systematically (and some might uncharitably venture, sophomorically) misrepresented in these defenses.⁴ More important, Dentith has chronicled the gradual slipping of positions by the *Le Monde* group, as well as a laudable pattern of member-defections. Dentith also notes there is a long list of obvious logical contradictions that appear in their most recent piece.

For instance, I noticed that for Wagner-Egger et al., believing some conspiracy theories can be warranted is no barrier to simultaneously believing that absolutely none can be warranted.

¹ “Why ‘Healthy Conspiracy Theories’ Are (Oxy)morons: Statistical, Epistemological, and Psychological Reasons in Favor of the (Ir)Rational View” (hereafter, “(Oxy)moron”), *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (3): 50-67, 2019.

² Basham, Lee. 2019. “‘They’ are Back (and still want to cure everyone): Psychologists’ Latest Bid to Curtail Public Epistemology.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (7): 23-33.

³ Dentith, M R. X. 2019. “The Iniquity of the Conspiracy Inquirers.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (8): 1-11. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4hQ>.

⁴ Perhaps these groups might work on their comminations, perhaps by a practice of passing drafts about, so serious misrepresentations and simple misunderstandings are not littering our discussions. I think to our mutual credit, recently Wagner-Egger and me conducted an enjoyable series of exchanges of this sort. He will find an answer to his “flat earth” question in my previous contribution to SERRC in this series of exchanges.

They state these quite explicitly, within the same page.⁵ This is rather like believing Bin Laden can be, simultaneously, both dead and alive. Except to my knowledge, no one believes *that*.

However, I would prefer to explore broader responses to the *Le Monde* group's pathologizing project. These are, potentially, more supportive of the *Le Monde* group's vision for the future. We can do this with an exercise premised on our collective epistemic insight. That is, a "study." We can do this here and now. Please participate (below).

Background

Democracy's fundamental feature and motive is epistemic. Popular knowledge and concerns shape policies the polis both enjoy and are willing, after reflection on the relevant facts, even suffer for. Part of this process is public vigilance. Skeptical public communities of inquiry monitor official claims and submit official pronouncements to rational scrutiny. However, this foundation is under question. A rigorous system of information "curating" and exclusion from the public is now being advocated by powerful forces. This is a type of "epistemic paternalism", where information is withheld and manipulated, and abilities undermined, to produce a more desirable social outcome. Elements within academia, particularly a faction of social scientists, as well as national governments and corporate media, of recent endorse developing this aggressive stance. They support a large-scale project of information control, access-exclusion, social isolation of its sources and strict limitations on organized public discussion *via* the internet and other media.⁶ They also endorse the application of sophisticated psychological techniques to undermine the public's ability to entertain significant doubts about corporate media and government pronouncements and actions.⁷

Next, we attempt to empirically explore and respond to the pathologizing project countering public vigilance, skepticism and suspicion. The hypothesis is that advanced education, especially in logic, the humanities (including history) and particularly, epistemology, is correlated with more positive attitudes towards key elements of a *Le Monde* style political pathologizing project.⁸ This may be confirmed or disconfirmed, of course. The contrast group will have a no more than a "high school" education or one year in college.

Study 1⁹

Do you agree with key elements of this proposed project? Agreement can be empirically measured with a series of simple questions. Please answer each on a Likert scale¹⁰ of 1 to 5, where,

⁵ "Oxymoron," 60.

⁶ Cass Sunstein (rather notoriously) has endorsed this tactic, where governments routinely conspire against citizens who accuse the government of conspiring against them. His suggestion ("cognitive infiltration") was widely criticized in philosophical circles. In his subsequent book, *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas* he vanishes the project from mention, while maintaining, verbatim, his other manipulative recommendations.

⁷ This is the special, and especially disturbing, contribution by the *Le Monde* group.

⁸ A similar study could also use social scientists and philosophers, including and/or limited to, epistemologists, as contrast groups.

⁹ Study 2 will compare/contrast academic disciplines.

1 =s Strongly agree. 2 =s Agree. 3 =s Not sure. 4 =s Disagree. 5 =s Strongly disagree.

Let us proceed. For each of the following questions, circle one of these options,

1. You prefer publicly funded education dismantles your ability to doubt the coordinated proclamations of corporate media and your national level government?

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

2. You prefer your education downplays the importance of this ability and how to conduct it on the basis of rational review and organization of evidence, of whatever source and nature?

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

3. You prefer the availability of information presented to you be “curated” for purposes of social stability, tranquility and to facilitate the unencumbered leadership of politically selected and empowered experts?

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

4. You prefer that the information was “curated” so that you and others, in a “community of inquiry” could not evidentially, responsibly review it and reach conclusions that might involve interference with or modification of public policy (even involving the declaration and conduct of wars)?

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

5. You prefer that social scientists and national law enforcement agencies identify you and your skeptical community of inquiry as an actionable threat when your conclusions differed from the coordinated proclamations of corporate media and your national level government?

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

6. You prefer that, pursuant to this identification, your skeptical community of inquiry be “cognitively infiltrated” by covert agents of the state, and set against itself or censored into non-existence by whatever means necessary?¹¹

¹⁰The Likert scale (introduced ~1935) measures responses to propositions in terms of folk-psychological responses of agreement, disagreement, like or dislike, etc., typically on a five or seven option continuum; often but not always allowing a center-point “opt out” response (“don’t know”). It, and its abuse, is a basic method in the pathologizing project’s data production. See <https://www.simplypsychology.org/likert-scale.html> for more information on the method.

¹¹ See our several critiques in the Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective, in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, and Kurtis Hagen “Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems” in *Argumenta* 3 (2): 303-26, 2018, and in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*.

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

7. Would you prefer none of the above?

Circle one: 1. Strongly agree. 2. Agree. 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree. 5. Strongly disagree.

Please set your pencil or pen down, take a moment to relax, and then calculate your average for 1-6.

Pathology Scoring

A low average score on questions 1-6 indicates admirable political piety. If low enough, ~1, a member of the “model citizens club”; a solid establishmentarian and virtual extension of the state and corporate media.¹² An average high score on questions 1-6 identifies the participant as a potential public menace. Question 7 inverts the issue. A low score is disquieting, a high score more reassuring of properly placed political pieties.

How Dentith or Wagner-Eggers et al., might perform on this simple inventory is at this moment unknown (we await data), but we might guess easily in the former case, and in the latter case, there might, hopefully, even be surprises. What some have termed a “moment of clarity”.

We leave it to you.

¹² (avg. < 2)