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Who's a heretic now? Conceptualising information seeking on controversial topics

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Abstract

Introduction. Controversial topics are an increasingly important and understudied context for information seeking.

Method. This paper is a conceptual paper based on a meta-ethnography of literature on controversial topics, followed by an assessment of the characteristics of controversial topics against existing information seeking models.

Analysis. This paper is based on a meta-ethnographic approach to literature on individual controversial topics, and then a literature synthesis based on the newly created definition of controversial topics.

Results. Controversial topics exhibit a variety of characteristics, including stigma and potential loss of community if the 'wrong' decision is made, or interest in the topic is revealed, a need to invest extensive energy in looking for related information, interest in experiential information for many topics, and high emotional investment. None of the existing information seeking models fully account for all of these factors, and many of them make information seekers vulnerable to misinformation and polarisation.

Conclusion. Controversial information seeking is associated with low levels of interpersonal information seeking, stigma, community orientation, and extensive effort. It is poorly accounted for by current information seeking models and thus may not be well supported by information systems. Research is needed to generate a new model and identify key strategies to support effective controversial information seeking.

Introduction

Controversial issues and polarisation have been the focus of much recent public discussion, particularly how they negatively impact families, poison political discourse, and promote misinformation (Epstein & Robertson, 2015; Koutra et al., 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Seargeant & Tagg, 2019). Both people and technology have been blamed for increasing polarisation. The technological explanation for polarisation is filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), algorithmic structures that putatively show us what we want to see. The social explanation is echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001), social structures that allow for niche interests and exclude those with disagreeable views. Recent research has questioned the utility of these ideas (Bruns, 2019b) and demonstrated that the picture is more complex. We are being polarised by ideas we did not previously find controversial (Törnberg, 2022), fuelled by social media. An early preprint suggests that this outcome is baked into the very way social media is designed, even when its interactions are simulated by bots (Larooij & Törnberg, 2025). We are poor at fact finding, partly because partisan information informs our search terms (Aslett et al., 2024; Elswailer et al., 2025), reinforcing our views rather than presenting different ideas.

Alongside polarisation, controversial information is associated with misinformation. In many of the debates where misinformation and disinformation are seen as a particular problem, profound social disagreements about the underlying issue often taint the information environment with COVID-19 and its vaccines being a clear example (Edwards et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2020; Schiavo, 2020), and climate change being another (Benegal & Scruggs, 2018; Farrell et al., 2019; Oswald & Bright, 2022; Vasek, 2011).

Recent research has shown that controversial topics result in complex and unique information behaviours (Koutra et al., 2015; Rieger et al., 2024). Polarisation means that information seeking through people can be socially risky, and even being seen to possess information on one position or another can come at a significant social cost (Bruns, 2019a). The information seeker has to both be vigilant against polarising misinformation from outside, and the risk of personal misjudgements within (Vydiswaran et al., 2015). Whatever the issue, the information seeker is walking a tightrope if their goal is to come to an independent, well-informed viewpoint consistent with their values, rather than a position overly influenced by activists who are intentionally seeking to spread dissent, weaken the public sphere, or trap the public into positions that are helpful to the activists' own purposes (Novin & Meyers, 2017).

Rather than address the specifics of polarisation, misinformation or disinformation, this paper focuses on the particular properties of controversial topic information seeking. We will briefly overview what is already known about controversial topics, and the information systems that meet controversial needs, demonstrating a lack of holistic understanding of controversial information seeking. We will next present a meta-ethnography of work addressing information seeking and behaviour in the context of controversial topics, drawing out common themes and characteristics. We then reflect on how this might interact with existing models of information seeking and behaviour. We illuminate the gaps in current models of human behaviour, highlighting what a useful controversial information model must capture and articulate to benefit researchers and practitioners. From that examination of the state of the art, we present a case for systematically examining information seeking in controversial topics, highlighting key gaps in empirical knowledge. We conclude with an argument for the urgent need to understand the specifics of information seeking behaviour in controversial issues and outline the features that we can already foresee a useful model would include.

Literature review

If we are to embark on an investigation into controversial topics, we first need a definition of what makes a topic controversial. We draw our definition of a controversial topic on recent work on

view change (McKay et al., 2024), and the definitions developed in the field of education (Bailey, 1975; Dearden, 1981; Hare, 1973). Education has a uniquely sophisticated understanding of what constitutes a controversial issue, having two major approaches: *behavioural* and *epistemic*. The former is determined by how people behave around a topic; the latter points to where there are crises between different frames of reference. The behavioural definition (Bailey, 1975) which has wider support, is that there is a topic of public dispute that disturbs a community. However, how to define what disturbs a community remains a fraught question. Drawing on recent work on view change, we instead see potential consequences for the individual as defining: controversial topics are those where if someone's view was known they could suffer adverse consequences in their personal, public, or professional life.

We first look at known information behaviours in the context of controversial topics. We start with reviewing research that specifically addresses controversial topics before looking at information seeking behaviours in related issues such as misinformation and disinformation. We then move our focus to encompass behaviours that are associated with view change, which is a particularly fraught issue in the context of controversial topics. We know that view change is an information-intensive activity (McKay et al., 2024), and that concerns about social monitoring by others alter people's information behaviour in general (McKay, Twidale, et al., 2020; Ruthven, 2022), and information seeking behaviours specifically (Draws et al., 2022; Rieger et al., 2024). Finally, we reflect on and synthesise these different aspects to provide a foundation for developing models that can support the analysis of information seeking behaviours on controversial topics.

We know that the emergence of a controversial topic impacts information seeking behaviour: for example, Koutra et al. (2015) studied web behaviour, both searching and browsing, following a mass shooting event in the USA. As may be expected, this event triggered extensive debate about gun control laws, the second amendment of the USA's constitution, and a range of related issues. Koutra et al. found that there were clear activist users on both sides of the debate who very actively disseminated information that supported their viewpoint. In contrast, most information seekers explored a range of information that was in general more nuanced and balanced. The picture is complex; however, another study (Menachemi et al., 2017) raised another perspective with a similar method, finding that most of the accessed documents from 5.6 million searches were advocacy material with a strongly entrenched viewpoint.

Such shocking events are not the only context for controversial information seeking. Limberg (1999) investigated how students engaged with information when researching the question of whether Sweden should join the European Union. Her analysis examined how individual students tried to form their own opinion with the available information. Insights from the study revealed that key activities included basic fact-finding, balancing sources, and analysing motivations. The balancing of sources involved ensuring they had multiple viewpoints on the topic, and motivation analysis sought to identify the agenda and bias behind each source article.

More recently, attempts have been made to ensure that when faced with the need to find information on a contested topic, information seekers are supported in seeing a variety of viewpoints. For example, Vydiswaran et al. (2015) undertook a controlled user study to evaluate a tool that advised information seekers of bias and expertise associated with different documents, finding that many participants needed encouragement to seek out a mixture of sources. Similarly, Rieger et al. (2024) found that technology design does influence information seeking behaviour, but that human factors are pivotal. As with Koutra et al. (2015), their participants who entered with an existing bias tended to show limited appetite for material with other viewpoints, but that human cognition influenced the progress of search for most. Exposure, confirmation, and other biases could contribute to a loss of diversity in the encountered material, but that markers to indicate stance of documents helped ensure seekers ended up with a more balanced set of views overall.

However, both these studies are laboratory-based and may not fully capture real-world information behaviours when someone searches for information without being observed.

Novin and Meyers (2016, 2017) similarly found that cognitive factors such as availability heuristics influenced the progress and flow of search sessions, and that the first-ranked item in the result list unhelpfully anchored most participants' expectations and unduly influenced their final judgment. This mirrors speculated concerns from search engine technology researchers who have done early research on the role of language in controversial information seeking (Yom-Tov et al., 2013) and advocated for more systematic investigation of influencing factors (Dori-Hacohen et al., 2015).

While none of these studies and papers gives a definitive view of how information seeking on controversial topics occurs in the wild, their findings are sufficiently consistent to provide a foundation for future work. There is good evidence that strongly established social positions influence both available content and the information seeking behaviour of a minority of the public. However, under observation at least, most information seekers aim to balance a variety of perspectives and are wary of material that seems to advocate strongly from a fixed position. The extant literature favours interactive search, though this is a limitation given search accounts for less than half of online information seeking (McKay, Makri, Chang, et al., 2020). Search is known to be cognitively demanding even under normal use (Hearst, 2009); existing research indicates that for controversial topics, the seeker needs to be even more proactive to avoid traps built into the technology, general limitations of human cognition, and the need to balance multiple perspectives.

To successfully meet controversial topic information needs, information seekers must manage all these complexities alongside any other information work in which they are engaged. Understanding how to support them will require new thinking, empirical research, and model development in information science. This paper aims to break new ground in this thinking, adding potential models that might provide a foundation to which we can attach empirical evidence as it emerges.

We adopt a meta-ethnographic approach (Noblit & Hare, 1988), which is a powerful means for contrasting and synthesising qualitative investigations into the processes of information seeking.

Meta-ethnography

To get to a deeper understanding of how people experience information seeking on controversial topics, we conducted a qualitative meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988) of papers on information seeking and use over a variety of controversial topics, including vaccination both pre-COVID-19 (Carrion, 2017) and post-COVID-19 (Corbie-Smith, 2021; Lockyer et al., 2021), gun control (Koutra et al., 2015), climate science (Benegal & Scruggs, 2018; Oswald & Bright, 2022), abortion (Astbury-Ward et al., 2012; Aune & Möller, 2012; Marlow et al., 2014), baby weaning (Arden, 2010), extreme body modification (Lingel & boyd, 2013), LGBTQIA issues (Augustaitis et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2021), cannabis use during pregnancy (Taneja et al., 2023), illicit drug use (Haasio et al., 2020), pornography use by teens (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010), and sadomasochism (Harviainen, 2015). We also looked at more general works that address controversial topics in passing, such as McKay, Makri, et al.'s work on view change that includes flat earth beliefs, voting decisions, climate change and abortion (Beall et al., 2023; McKay, Makri, Gutierrez-Lopez, et al., 2020; McKay et al., 2024), Seargeant and Tagg's (2019) work that includes political views, and Törnberg's (2022) work that looks at how views become controversial. We analysed these works to understand common characteristics of information on controversial topics, and common experiences of looking for it.

The controversial topics we discuss in this paper are predominantly what those might term as uncontroversially controversial: topics that are widely recognized as controversial. We broadly confine ourselves to these issues to avoid stigmatizing minoritised groups that may view as

controversial issues that a majority hold to be settled. Nonetheless, we did discover examples of minoritized groups holding views that cut against western liberal ideals (e.g. a lower socio-economic group holding strong anti-vaccination views), and these are included in our data set, but not explicitly called out.

The first characteristic of a controversial view is the potential for *stigma* associated with a *wrong* or non-normative view, a feature universal to all controversial topics. This stigma is highly context dependent, as in the infant feeding (Arden, 2010) or vaccine work we examined (Carrion, 2017; Corbie-Smith, 2021); one can be stigmatised in one community for a view that is accepted in others. This was notable in the study of pornography use, where girls felt stigma, and the topic was controversial, but boys felt no shame and pornography was normative light entertainment (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). The stigma can be relatively minor, as with infant feeding (Arden, 2010), or it can be so severe that a person may be cast out of the community should their views or actions be discovered (Marlow et al., 2014).

Associated with stigma was *strong emotions* around the controversial topic. This emotion could be relief or elation when desired information was found (Harviainen, 2015), fear about possible outcomes (Augustaitis et al., 2021; Taneja et al., 2023), shame about their own potential choices (Astbury-Ward et al., 2012), or antipathy for people who made other decisions .

The second characteristic we identified is the importance of *community* for many types of controversial information seeking. Community may be valuable in providing information that is not readily available due to legal issues (Harviainen, 2015; Lingel & boyd, 2013; Taneja et al., 2023) or the aforementioned stigma (Astbury-Ward et al., 2012; Marlow et al., 2014). Community was also a useful forum for seeking personal experience that was vital to many people looking for information on controversial topics. Even seemingly scientific topics, such as climate change, attracted a sense of community identity, and information from in-group members was more trusted than information from out-group members (Benegal & Scruggs, 2018; Oswald & Bright, 2022).

Many, though not all of the controversial topics, also resulted in a sense of *identity* around the topic, either because it was an inherent identity (as with LGBTQIA+ folks (Augustaitis et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2021) or minoritised racial groups (Corbie-Smith, 2021)), or because the topic has become an identity (such as vaccine refusal being a 'maternal instinct' identity (Carrion, 2017), and extreme body modifiers sharing a sense of identity (Lingel & boyd, 2013)). Controversial information did not always result in identity though, for example infant feeding choices and abortion choices were not always associated with identity (Arden, 2010; Astbury-Ward et al., 2012). Where identity occurred, community was an important part of expressing and confirming that identity.

Many topics, including vaccination (Carrion, 2017), cannabis use in pregnancy (Taneja et al., 2023), sadomasochistic practices (Harviainen, 2015), flat earth beliefs (McKay et al., 2024), and body modification (Lingel & boyd, 2013) were associated with *significant effort and research* on the part of the information seekers. Information seekers on these topics were *unsatisfied with dominant or hegemonic narratives* and information sources, and thus sought significant additional information, often from very high-quality sources. Even where the end result of these processes are beliefs that are far from the mainstream, the assumption that beliefs are ill informed is at high risk of being erroneous.

Finally, for every one of our topics, *online information seeking* was an important component. Arguably this is true of any modern information seeking process, but it was especially important to participants in all the studies we reviewed. In many cases this is because there is a dearth of 'official' information (Haasio et al., 2020; Taneja et al., 2023), or a dearth of local experience of the stigmatised information. In some cases, unofficial trusted sources existed, such as sadomasochistic clubs, or an online trust rating for drug dealers (Haasio et al., 2020). Online information seeking also affords the privacy necessary to reveal stigmatised information or views, and allows people

the opportunity to look for information anonymously, protecting them from social stigma (Magi, 2011).

Information seeking process models

In this section we will compare our understanding of controversial information seeking to selected salient models of the processes of information seeking. We specifically focus on Kuhlthau's model, because it deals with emotion; everyday life information seeking, which is most topically aligned to controversial topics; and Ruthven's transitions theory, which is also closely aligned to controversial topics. We will then consider other widely used models to determine whether any account well for controversial information seeking.

Kuhlthau's model

Kuhlthau's information search process model is based on formalised information seeking behaviour activities of high school students, and incorporates emotion, cognition, and behaviour. Her model has the unique characteristic of including emotional state as part of the model. We know from the existing literature that affective states are commonplace in the context of controversial topics, and a model that provides this scaffolding is a good candidate for consideration as an influence on a model of information seeking in controversial topics. It also offers a useful structure for the extensive research done by participants in some studies. It was the foundation for an analysis of the information needs of illicit people who use illicit drugs, which looked at physiological, affective and cognitive elements of decision making around information seeking (Haasio et al., 2020).

Kuhlthau's model has also influenced McKenzie's (2003) model of information practices in everyday life information seeking, along with other models found below. McKenzie's model was itself forged in the context of pregnancy: clearly a context where affective state is often high as pregnancy has substantial impacts on both life and health. However, as McKenzie notes, Kuhlthau's model was based on study of students at a high school engaged in essay writing: a context shared by Limberg's (1999) case-study on information seeking on controversial contexts.

Everyday life information seeking models

The everyday life information seeking body of theory (Savolainen, 1995) has gained significant ground in recent years for studying information behaviour. The major principle of everyday life information seeking is that we develop our information activities, including sources of information, information practices, and attitudes to information, to create a '*mastery of life*' (p. 262), a sense of ownership and control over one's life and a way of organising one's information activities to gain this sense of control (Savolainen, 1995). Everyday life information seeking emphasises a drive towards developing coherence within our information worlds. Our mastery of life develops over time and over a lifetime, with birth environments giving a model for mastery of life (Savolainen, 1995).

Savolainen (1995) posits that we require different types of information; orienting information to inform ourselves about current events, practical information to solve practical problems, and project information regarding hobbies and interests, and that this information may come from different sources. Savolainen and Kari (2004) introduced the idea of information source horizons, defined as a *perceived* information environment, the sources and channels of which we are aware and of which we may have experience. They proposed that sources and channels are ordered with the most relevant ones closest and the least relevant furthest away, and that we consult sources in order, consulting the most important sources first, then less important ones, if required. How they are ordered can depend on many things including general tendencies to value some sources over others, experience of sources, others' opinions, situational demands, the information content needed at any point, and the perceived accessibility of sources. They claim that some information

source horizons are relatively stable, reflecting general patterns in how individuals solve problems, whereas others are dynamic in reflecting the specifics of the problem or tasks at hand.

The viewpoint here is then of (relatively) ordered information sources. Savolainen (2008) notes that a major context for everyday life information seeking is 'making sense of problematic situations', but we lack an understanding of how disruptive views of the kind we discuss here fit into everyday life information seeking. In this case, the controversial topic disorders our natural way of thinking about information environments and we may not be able to order them or even predict which are safe to consult. Everyday life information seeking is generally quiet on the consequences of interacting with sources. A consequence of dealing with controversial topics is that we may be working on the margins of our perceived information horizon and therefore in the position of vulnerability as we are working with less understood information sources and channels. We may therefore have to reconstruct existing horizons to deal with controversial topics, but it is not clear how this is done.

This question is similar in spirit to Lloyd's idea of fractured information landscapes (Lloyd, 2017, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2013), a situation in which people enter new information environments, such as a new workplace or community, and must rework or reconstruct their understanding of how information works within these new communities. Controversial topics, and the communities that engage in them, may themselves constitute information landscapes, and dealing with controversial topics involves constructing information landscapes.

Transitions theory

A more recent theory of information behaviour during times of change is Ruthven's (2022) transitions theory, which proposes that people go through three stages of change: understanding the change (working out what the change means), negotiating the change (dealing with the change), and resolving the change (creating a stable new identity and information environment to live with the change), each of which have associated information behaviours (Ruthven, 2022a, 2022b). This theory acknowledges that some changes may occur in unsupportive social environments and therefore people may face issues of stigma, or lack of resources, and may need to take more risks in obtaining information in such cases. This reflects our understanding of controversial topics. Gibson et al. (2025) expand this theory to consider privacy challenges when trying to access information during times of change, indicating that people will often hide the transition, for example, by creating fictitious online personas to allow them to see information in hidden ways. These works each address stigma, a need for privacy, and Ruthven's work also addresses community (and changes of community), however neither specifically offer a process model for making information-facilitated transitions, and not all controversial information seeking is transitional.

Other models

Turning to the wider range of information seeking models, we now examine those of Marchionini (1995), Ellis (Ellis, 1993; Ellis et al., 1993; Ellis & Haugan, 1997) and others. These provide contrasting representations of information seeking, but, in contrast to the models above, have a less direct potential relationship with the issue of controversial topics.

Marchionini's model captures the process of interactive search, starting from becoming aware of an information need through to the stopping of active search. The controversiality of an issue may influence how each step manifests, but is unlikely to change the overall process. Extant research shows that a strongly-held position influences the choice of query terms (for example, 'climate hoax' versus 'climate change') (Chelaru et al., 2013; Vedejová & Čavojová, 2022). The evaluation of results might similarly be influenced by a seeker's existing bias (Vydiswaran et al., 2015). Thus, the model needs annotations on each step, or the process as a whole, to encompass the influence of controversiality.

Ellis' (1989) model is focussed on behaviours. Example behaviours include *monitoring* and *verifying*. As with Marchionini's model, we can anticipate that the controversiality of a topic influences how a behaviour is enacted. When *monitoring* for new information, a seeker might either monitor more frequently or avoid checking entirely. Both patterns are seen in health information seeking (Miller, 1987). The model is descriptive and behaviours are inherently conducted differently, in altered sequences and frequency in different contexts. Controversial topics bring no inherent change to the model overall, but again this needs annotation.

Other common models include Wilson's (1997, 1999) multiple models, including his general model. These models present the socio-cultural environment, encompassing controversiality, albeit not explicitly, as contextual factors. Wilson (1999) himself has cautioned that there is a lack of 'indication of the processes whereby context has its effect upon the person'. Ingwersen's (1996) search model also encapsulates controversiality as a contextual factor.

All these other models share the weakness that Wilson critiqued in his own. Emotions, hegemonic narratives, and stigma are all treated as context surrounding the model. The issues of identity and community are similarly challenging. However, the focus on process and behaviours could support the understanding of intense information seeking that we saw in the meta-ethnography.

One lens that may be useful for considering controversy, though not a model, is the notion of cognitive authority (Rieh, 2002). This idea frames how information is vested with credibility based on its source. Generally speaking, societies share cognitive authorities, however in controversy and polarisation this breaks down. An example of this is climate experts being seen as questionable by those who do not believe in anthropogenic climate change.

It is not just in the context of controversy that views on cognitive authority may not be shared, though: minoritised groups (including urban youth (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005), Indigenous folks (Duncker, 2002), and international students (Bahl et al., 2025; Chang & Gomes, 2017)) may vest authority differently and access better information as a result. In contrast to narratives that centre information seekers is Chatman's work (Chatman, 1990; Chatman & Pendleton, 1995) which focuses on a concept she described as 'information poverty'—not being able to access necessary information due to knowledge or circumstance. While genuine access to information can be a problem, Chatman (1990) (ironically perceived as a cognitive authority in information science) held some very problematic views on minoritized groups, so we will not discuss her work further here.

Discussion and future research directions

We have demonstrated, using a meta-ethnographic approach, that information seeking on controversial topics shares a specific set of characteristics across topics. These characteristics include stigma, identity, community and online information seeking, and occasionally low satisfaction with dominant narratives and extensive information seeking.

Many of our process models for information seeking capture some elements of this type of information seeking, but none can account for all these characteristics. Notably our existing models typically account for either online information seeking or social information seeking, but not both. The stigma and concomitant secrecy that is a defining feature of controversial information seeking is absent from all models, which assume relatively straightforward access to information; but this is clearly not the case.

Our novel definition of controversial information seeking poses several novel research questions for the field of information science, first and foremost, what might a process model look like? Extensive qualitative research is needed to define such a process model, which might then be validated with a quantitative approach.

The twin challenges of mis- and disinformation are particularly salient in the context of controversy, where there are significant social and financial incentives for bad actors to create this content and social media platforms to promote it (Robertson et al., 2023; Sano, 2018). Where people are challenging dominant narratives, there is opportunity for mis- and disinformation to flourish, though this might be mitigated by the inclination to do extensive research shown by many of the participants in studies we reviewed. How to support people in drawing accurate conclusions from their information seeking, how to reduce value for bad actors around controversy, and how to effectively correct incorrect beliefs at the community level are all avenues for future research stemming from this definition. On the flipside, information science is well placed to develop human-centred and thoughtful understandings of how people can effectively find the right information for them, even if it is non-dominant, and how we can support pluralistic, contextual evaluations of information.

We have to be mindful of social and cognitive factors: consideration of isolation, and the other factors of stigma and alienation need to be understood as (potentially) abroad in controversial topics. Established norms, such as Rieh's (2002) cognitive authority still play a role in information seeking, but authority may be vested for reasons that are not aligned with dominant assumptions (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005). Cognitive authority may still hold, but where authority lies may be altered due to individual or group belief systems and the impact of partisan sorting (Törnberg, 2022), where someone is credited with authority on one subject because of their perceived reliability on another.

How digital information systems can more effectively support information seeking and discovery, without either limiting access to useful information or promoting access to misinformation remains a challenge for future work. Our current information platforms have been based on the earlier information seeking models discussed in this paper, and have been well served by them (Baeza-Yates & Ribeiro-Neto, 1999). Good information systems for controversial topics are critically necessary, and likely to better serve minoritised and stigmatised groups than current systems (Noble, 2018). With a process model we can make steps toward these more inclusive, supportive information systems.

Conclusion

Understanding how people look for information on controversial topics is an important and timely research question, and one that has (thus far) been explored piecemeal, either by looking at individual topics (e.g. (Arden, 2010; Astbury-Ward et al., 2012; Carrion, 2017; Haasio et al., 2020; Harviainen, 2015; Lockyer et al., 2021; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Marlow et al., 2014; Oswald & Bright, 2022), as incidental findings to research on other topics (McKay et al., 2024; Törnberg, 2022), or in terms of interactive search systems that may support controversial information seeking (Draws et al., 2022). In this paper we present a meta-ethnographic approach to understanding individual, holistic information seeking behaviour across controversial topics, and identify several characteristics of controversial information seeking, including stigma and the importance of both community and online information seeking. When we compare the characteristics of controversial information seeking to existing models, we see that they each account for only part of a controversial information seeking experience, demonstrating a clear gap for future research. Controversial topics are important and understudied; if we are going to reduce polarisation and the influence of misinformation on society, we need to get to work, so that accurate, personally consistent, and useful information is no longer seen by those who need it as heresy.

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