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Evaluating Information: Where Do Librarians and Skeptics Align?

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Introduction

Although librarians may not realize it, our profession has many shared goals and values with those who consider themselves methodological or scientific skeptics—a term we denote here as “Skeptics” with a capital ‘S’. A thorough review of the literature indicates that, while a Skeptical attitude toward information is arguably important to the work of instruction librarians, no research has been conducted on the Skepticism of librarians.

The researchers of the present study surveyed a variety of librarians who teach information evaluation in an effort to explore the following research questions:

- What attitudes do librarians have toward Skeptics and Skeptical values?
- How closely do the values of librarians align with those of the Skeptic community?
- How much—and in what ways—do librarians who teach information literacy instruction employ Skeptical values and principles?

Background: The “Skeptic Community”

The modern Skeptic community is thought to date back to Martin Gardner’s book, “In the Name of Science”, published in 1952. Other early founders of the movement include James “The Amazing” Randi, a magician who appeared often on The Tonight Show and elsewhere in the media; Paul Kurtz, philosopher and founder of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which eventually became the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI); and Michael Shermer, the founder of the Skeptics Society and *Skeptical Magazine*. Intellectuals and public figures from a variety of fields have become important (and controversial) voices for the Skeptic community as well, including the late astronomer and science popularizer Carl Sagan; neurologist Steven Novella; physician and “SkepDoc” Harriet Hall; philosopher Massimo Pigliucci; Center for Applied Rationality co-founder Julia Galef; and magicians Penn & Teller, among many others.



Figure 1. Digital artifacts of the Skeptic community. From top left: Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (a component of the Center for Inquiry); Skeptics in the Pub movement; Skeptic Magazine (publication of the Skeptics Society); from middle left: Skeptical Inquirer magazine (publication of the Center for Inquiry); Skepticon 9 logo (the “largest free skeptic conference in the nation”—see: <https://skepticon.org/what/>); Skepticity (official podcast of the Skeptics Society); from lower left: The Cleveland Skeptics logo; New York City Skeptics logo

Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted via a web-based survey hosted online from a secure link using Qualtrics, and distributed through nine professional librarian e-mail lists. The study was submitted to, and accepted by, the institutional review boards of both Cleveland State University and Case Western Reserve University. The authors first designed a nineteen-question survey instrument to collect data about librarians’ attitudes toward, and application of, Skeptical principles. Of the 19 survey questions, two were open-response.

Responses were collected over the course of four weeks, and the survey data were subsequently cleaned and analyzed using Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. The responses of survey-takers who took <2 min. to complete their responses were eliminated, as were respondents who identified themselves as non-librarians (e.g. subject faculty members) and those who skipped answering all non-demographic questions. The number of remaining responses was 499 (out of an initial total of 539). Open responses were assessed for overall themes and representative quotations.

Study Limitations

The *purposive or judgment sampling* method that we employed was the most practical method available to us for surveying librarians across many libraries and in many locations. However, such a method produces data with weak generalizability and external validity due to the many forms of sampling bias inherent in the method. In addition, while our survey instrument was piloted with several test participants before being deployed, it was not thoroughly evaluated for internal validity and reliability, resulting in a certain amount of unavoidable measurement error.

This study is meant to be a preliminary step toward understanding the role of Skepticism in information literacy instruction. We are fully aware of the many limitations of survey research, especially research which uses purposive sampling. While some barriers of research in this field are so difficult to overcome as to be impractical, others, we hope, can be addressed in future research.

Results

The results of our survey are broken down into five sections: Demographics, Association, Alignment, Awareness, and Application of Skepticism to Information Literacy Instruction (data not shown). The ‘Association’ section asked participants to associate specific words with Skepticism and critical thinking. The ‘Alignment’ section prompted respondents with a series of statements corresponding (or in opposition) to Skeptical principles. Respondents were asked to indicate how closely each statement aligned with their personal beliefs, suggesting the extent to which librarians’ values overlap with those of Skeptics. In the ‘Awareness’ section, participants indicated their awareness of the modern Skeptic movement and their willingness to identify as a Skeptic. Lastly, respondents were asked to share how frequently and in what ways they applied skeptical principles when teaching information literacy. This section included an open-response question which yielded a variety of librarians’ self-reported methods for teaching source evaluation. The final survey question asked respondents to share any comments or concerns they had with the survey overall, and these comments may be found in the Padlet linked on our research guide.

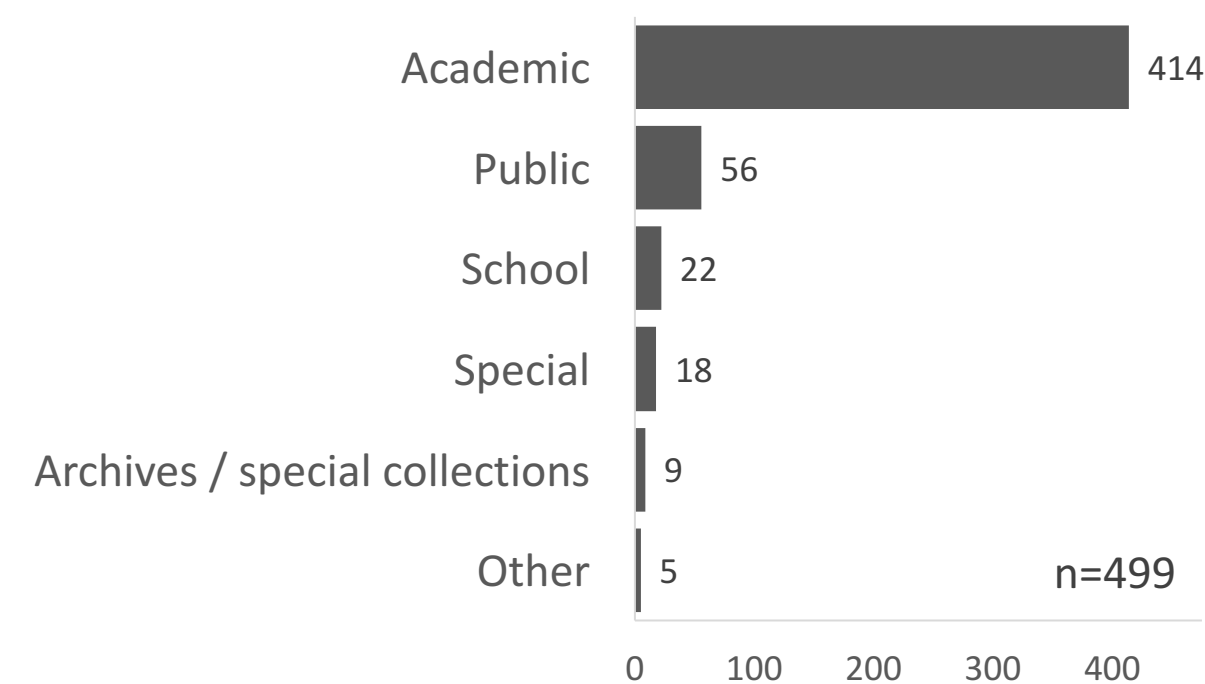


Figure 3. Number of survey respondents (n=499) reporting the type of library or archive they work at. Note: survey respondents could choose more than one answer.

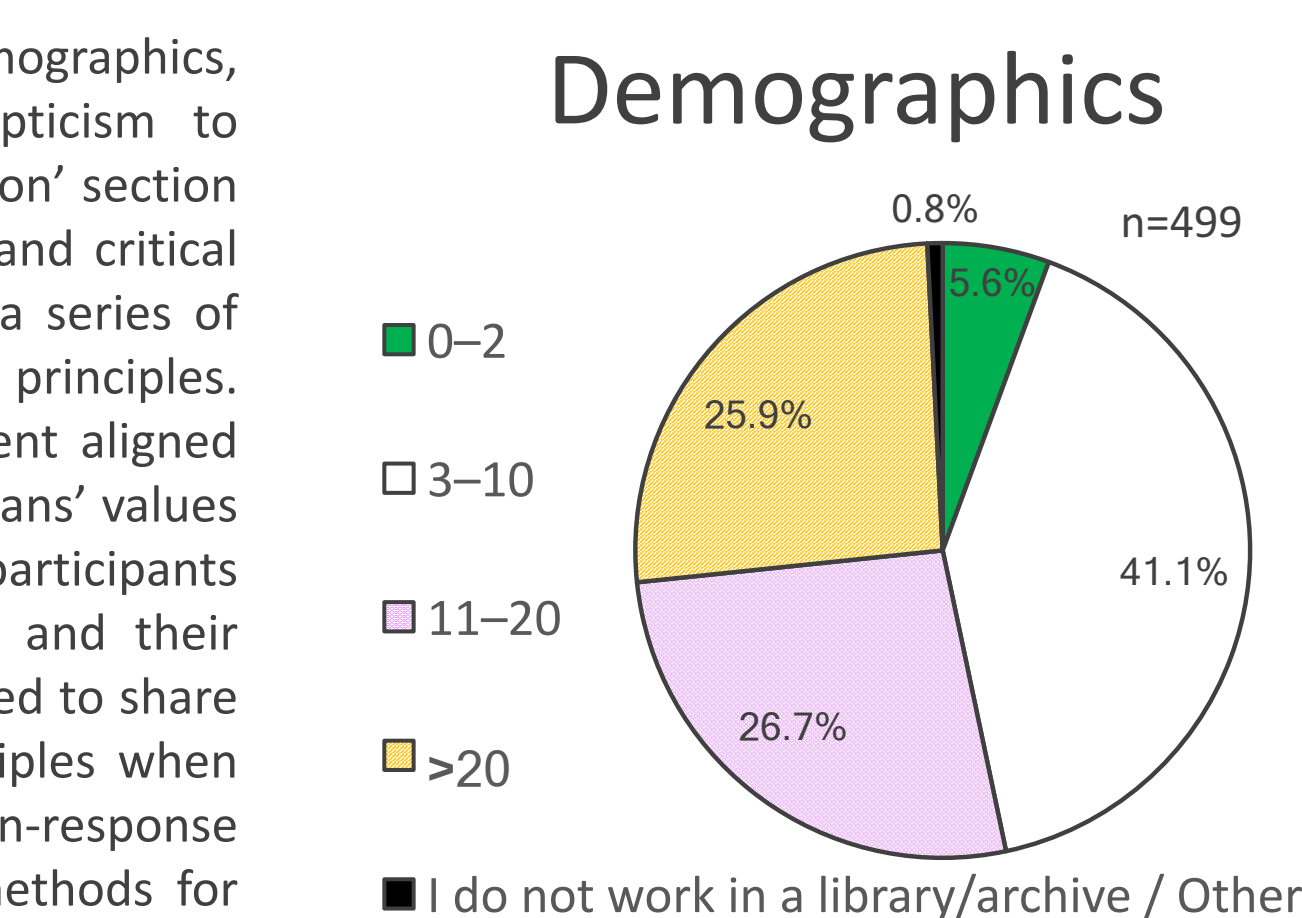


Figure 2. Percentage of survey respondents (n=499) reporting number of years spent working in a library/archive.

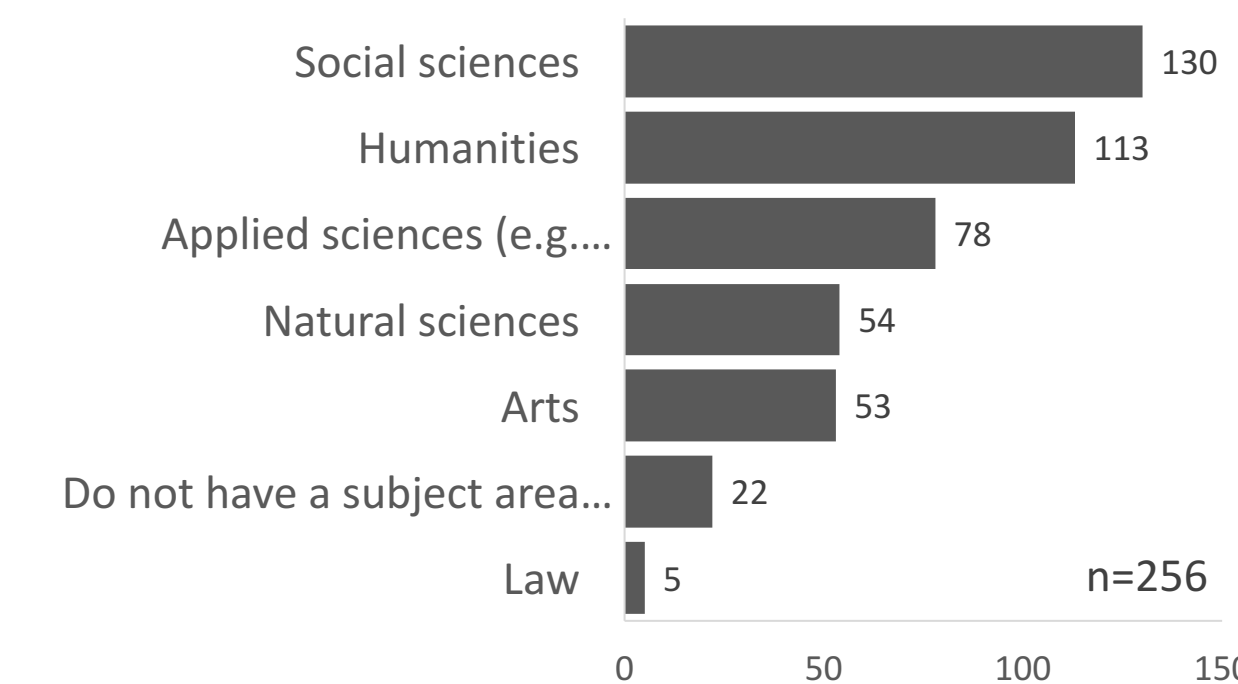


Figure 4. Number of academic librarian survey respondents (n=256) reporting discipline(s) or subject area(s) they support.

Awareness of Skeptics, Skepticism, and the Skeptic Community

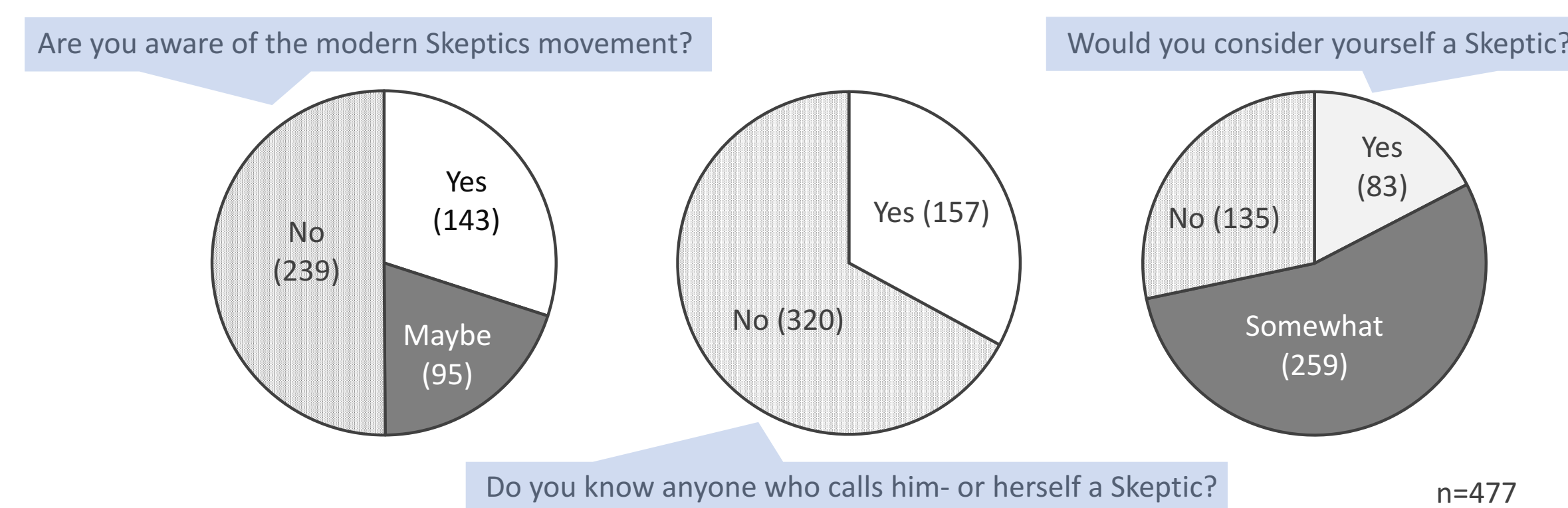


Figure 5. Numbers of respondents (n=477) answering the three questions shown above regarding their awareness of Skeptics, Skepticism, and the Skeptic community. The third question (right) also probes survey-takers’ self-awareness regarding whether they might call themselves Skeptics, given the definition presented in the survey.

Association of Terms with Skepticism vs. Critical Thinking

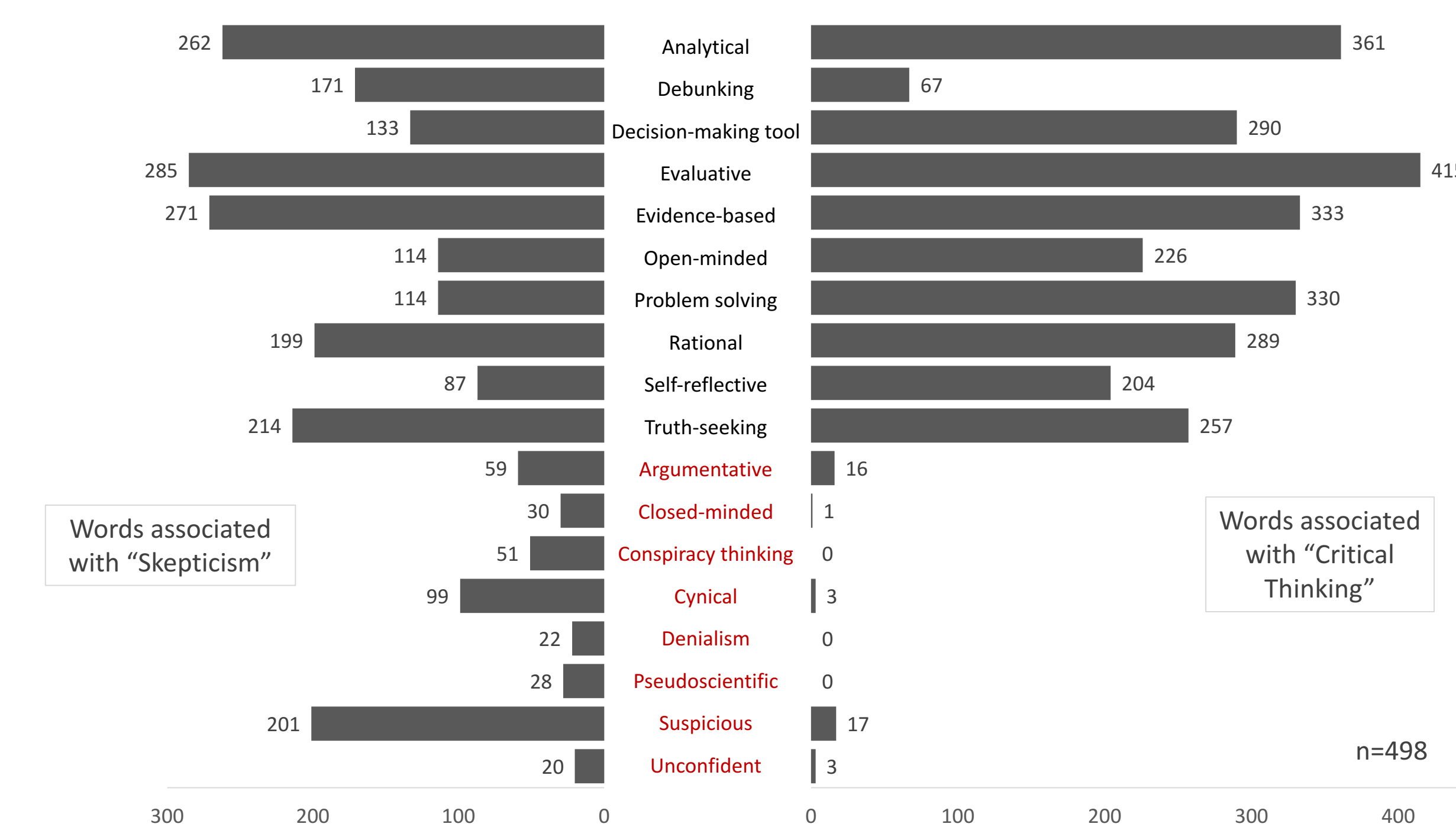


Figure 6. Survey respondents were asked to associate the above words with either “Skepticism” or “Critical Thinking”, and the numbers of associations with either are shown above. The words in black text (“Analytical” through “Truth-Seeking”) were coded as having either positive or technical associations, according to our predictions, whereas the words in red text (“Argumentative” through “Unconfident”) were coded as having “negative” associations.

Alignment of Statements with Personal Beliefs

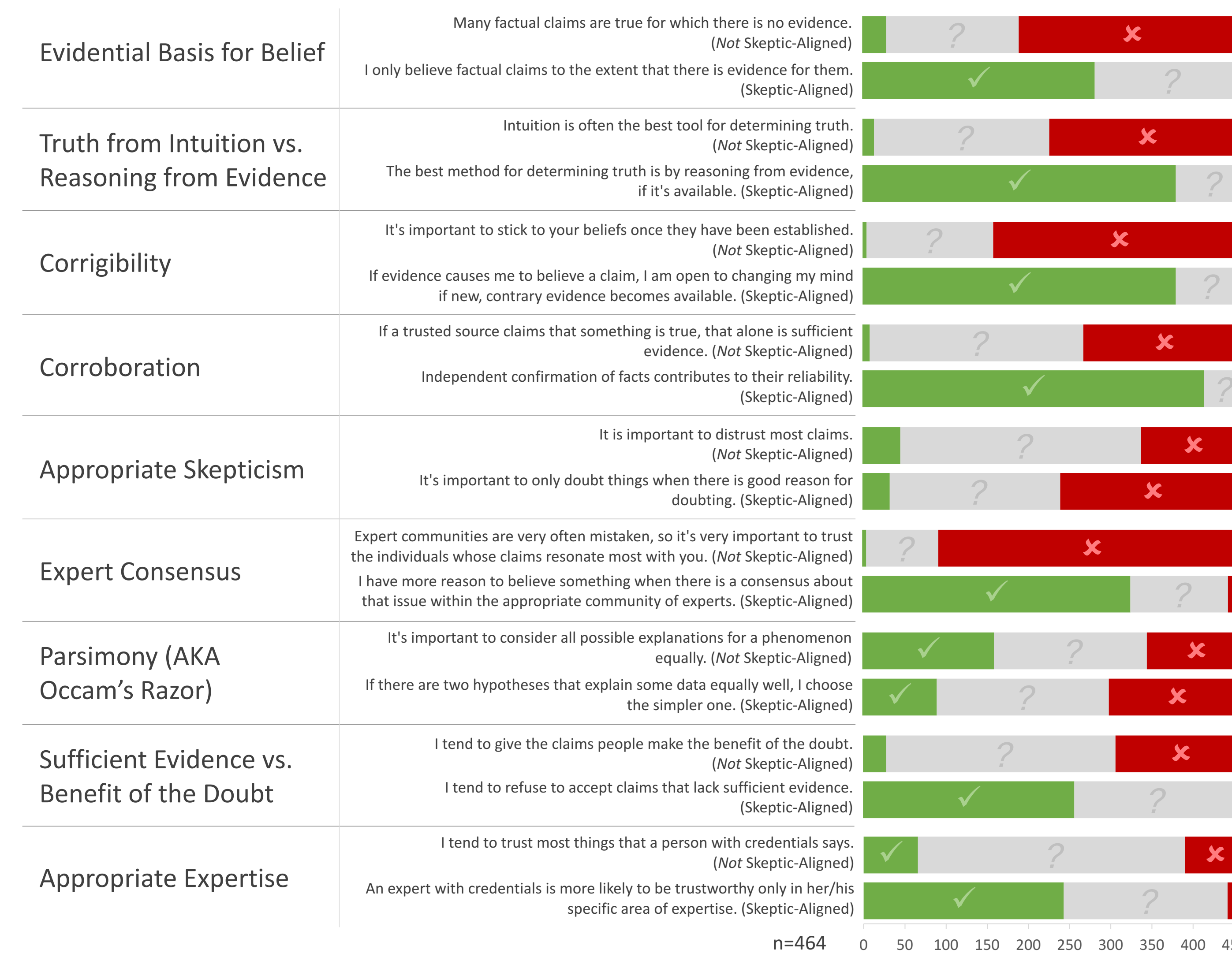


Figure 7. Proportion of survey-takers (n=464) responding with “Very much” (green, left-most bar on each graph, symbolized by “✓”), “Somewhat” (gray, middle bar in each graph, symbolized by “?”), and “Not at all” (red, right-most bar on each graph, symbolized by “✗”) regarding their agreement with the statement shown to the left of each graph. While statements were presented to survey-takers in a random order, pairs of statements—each containing statements deemed “Non-Skeptic Aligned” and “Skeptic-Aligned” by the researchers—are named (far left) for the Skeptical principles they contravene or exemplify, respectively.

Application of Skepticism to Information Literacy Instruction

When asked whether they “Always”, “Often”, “Sometimes”, “Rarely”, or “Never” do the following, the majority of respondents who reported having information literacy instruction responsibilities (n=388) reported that they “Always” or “Often” encouraged students to refuse to accept information that lacks sufficient evidence (65.2%), to re-evaluate their beliefs based on new evidence (64.4%), and to examine the expert consensus within a subject or discipline as part of the source evaluation process (79.1%). 257 of this group also submitted responses to the open question, “What activities or exercises do you use to teach information evaluation?” (See our research guide for a list of representative responses.)

Selected Open-Response Comments

Of the total number of survey respondents (n=499), 128 responded to the open question, “Do you have any comments about Skepticism, information evaluation instruction, or this survey?” Selected responses to these questions are displayed here:

In an era of “fake news,” Skeptics and information literacy librarians are natural partners in education.

I find librarians are often insufficiently skeptical of other librarians.

I wasn’t aware of Skepticism as a movement and will be looking into it more. It doesn’t sound negative-- I suppose everyone should have a healthy amount of skepticism when investigating claims-- but it still conjures images of climate change deniers for me.

My understanding of skepticism is based largely on Carl Sagan’s The Burden of Skepticism, which complements and has informed my approach to critical thinking and evaluation of information.

I have heard that the Skepticism Movement has been accused of being very non-diverse, made up of mostly older white men, with allegations of sexual harassment toward women in the movement; many “skeptics” also have a reputation for being self-righteous, angry, and rude. This is based on my limited Wikipedia-level knowledge of Skepticism. Perhaps some people might be more inclined to consider themselves “skeptics” if these issues within the movement were addressed.

Learn more on our accompanying research guide:

Visit <http://researchguides.csuohio.edu/skepticalibrarians> to see a list of our sources, a recommended reading list, and, as requested, a sign-up form to receive updates about our future research on this topic.

