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This Sounds Like an Episode of The X-Files: Analyzing How Twitter Users Interpreted the COVID-19 Pandemic through the Lens of Sci-Fi Television

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All across America, people are rapidly dying from an unknown, aggressive contagion. Televised news media outlets are interviewing medical experts in an effort to provide the general public with the most up-to-date information on how this virus is being spread. Hospitals and morgues are filled beyond capacity, lockdowns are implemented as people are told to stay home, those who do go outside need masks, and scientists are doing everything they can to create an effective vaccine to fight against the deadly virus. Due to the quick transition from outbreak to global pandemic, conspiracies about governmental DNA tampering and digital cataloging started proliferating in fringe groups, inspiring civil and political unrest that soon manifested as riots and protests. While these descriptions encapsulate what occurred when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in 2020, it is actually a synopsis of a storyline from *The X-Files*' 2016 and 2018 revival seasons.

Regarded as a defining television series of the 1990s, *The X-Files* (1993-2002; 2016-2018) is known for storylines involving pernicious government agencies and looming threats accompanying emerging technologies (Kellner, 1999, p. 170). The series follows Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Special Agents, Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), as they investigate unsolved cases dealing with supernatural and unexplainable phenomena. Through the progression of the series, the elusive 'Truth' the agents seek is revealed to be deeply embedded agendas and conspiracies perpetrated by government agencies for the purpose of programming, cataloging, and experimenting on the human population. The series' original run addresses cultural anxieties of the 90s surrounding control technologies and the mechanization of humans that, while allegorically executed within the show through science fiction tropes, represent real fears about the potential impact of the growing digital age (Howley, 2001, pp. 276–277). When the show was revived in 2016 and 2018, the anxieties represented evolved to better portray contemporaneous attitudes. The two revival seasons examine how humans have adapted to the pervasive surveillance and control that has become inescapably embedded in their everyday lives through digital means. However, as the manifestations of these fears evolved alongside cultural attitudes, some audiences saw these fictional depictions as validation for their real anxieties about the government, surveillance, and control.

While science fiction has a long-standing habit of predicting future technologies (Bell et al., 2013, pp. 5–14), *The X-Files*' focus on anatomical manipulations as a means of control resulted in a plotline that inadvertently mirrored the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred a few years after airing. A recurring theme in *The X-Files* is the susceptibility of vulnerable people (i.e., uninformed or naive) to human experimentation and body-altering technologies; but while these intrusions usually occur through abstract representations and allegorical metaphors such as alien abductions, the proximity to such a similar, real-

world situation resulted in audiences perceiving the events happening around them through the lens of science fiction tropes. In this paper, I argue that the prevalence of *The X-Files*' thematic representations of paranoia, governmental distrust, and fear of bodily manipulation in popular culture influenced how some audiences responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To best examine how *The X-Files*' paranoia influences the audience's reading of the text, the paper develops in the following ways. First, I draw on literature from *The X-Files*' sociohistorical contexts and industrial/production aspects to inform my analysis. Second, I explain the methodological and theoretical frameworks of this essay. Third, I analyze specific moments in *The X-Files* that involve vaccinations by putting those examples in conversation with relevant tweets from my data collection. I synthesize how people used science fiction as a framework for understanding the COVID-19 pandemic by examining tweets that illustrate the relationship between dominant and oppositional reading approaches and vaccination beliefs. Lastly, I will conclude with a discussion of how these anxieties evolved from the original series to the revival, considering how the audience grew alongside the show.

***The X-Files*' Sociohistorical Contexts and Cultural Anxieties**

Premiering on the FOX Network in 1993, the initial seasons of *The X-Files* introduced audiences to a world of unbelievable phenomena and otherworldly threats. While many of the series' storylines were fanciful fiction, the series has a history of representing real contemporaneous cultural attitudes held towards the government during the time of airing (Mooney, 2017, p. 7). Specifically, paranoia is continually represented through both the show's depictions of its own corrupt government and the allegorical social commentary woven throughout the show's dialogue and plot. Darren Mooney (2017) emphasizes this in his claim: "The anxieties that play out across the nine-year run of *The X-Files* are those that reflect the uncertainties of a particular moment in American cultural history." Kevin Howley (2001, p. 258) tries to categorize what these uncertainties stem from thematically, and he asserts that the social trends reflected within the show address: "the increased acceptance of conspiracy theories, a growing disillusionment with mainstream science, and an eruption of millennial angst." *The X-Files* addressed cultural anxieties of the 90s — specifically, in a time of political discontent, loss of faith, and growing distrust of the government, *The X-Files* gave audiences a place where their paranoia could be validated (Mooney, 2017, pp. 3–9).

When *The X-Files* returned to FOX Network for two revival seasons, in 2016 and 2018 respectively, the show was tasked with rekindling the interest of viewers from the original series while simultaneously making a twenty-year-old show interesting to newer audiences. The show did this by tapping into the legacy

of paranoia *The X-Files* left in its wake and inserting these themes into the contemporaneous political landscape. In the publication “‘Your Government Lies’: Why the *X-Files* Revival Is Just Right for Our Climate of Extreme Scepticism,” Mark Lawson provides a strong rationale for why *The X-Files*’ distrust of the government would fit perfectly in the fraught political climate. Specifically, the 2016 presidential election created tensions where people were pitted against one another, and each side framed the other as disingenuous and having bad intentions. “[B]oth Trump or Sanders could have echoed Fox Mulder’s claim that ‘your own government lies as a matter of course, a matter of policy’” (Lawson, 2016). When *The X-Files*’ six-episode miniseries was announced in 2016, Chris Carter, the series’ creator stated that he believed the legacy of the show’s paranoia, conspiracies, and governmental distrust would be easily applicable to the new sociopolitical landscape (Dredge, 2015). He explained that within the tenth season “[the show is] trying to be honest with the changes dealing with digital technology: the capability of spying. Clearly, we’re being spied on in the US – or at least spying on you – and there seems to be no shame in it” (Dredge, 2015). Aspects of paranoia in the original series pertaining to emergent technologies became a cultural norm in the timespan *The X-Files* was off the air, and for some, it seemed the line between fiction and reality was becoming harder to define.

Paranoia and Vaccinations in *The X-Files*

With taglines such as “Trust No One,” “Deny Everything,” “Resist or Serve,” and “The Truth Is Out There,” appearing at the beginning of every episode, *The X-Files* continually encourages audiences to look for the Truth in an environment shrouded with deceit. While these taglines refer to the fictional world of the show and the conspiracies within, *The X-Files* often incorporates real-world injustices into the storylines, and consequently, the text invites audiences to use their own knowledge and/or experiences as part of the decoding process. Many of these historical references involve instances where government agencies have lied to the public or experimented on unsuspecting civilians (e.g., Unit 731, the Holocaust, the Tuskegee Experiments, the Watergate Scandal, etc.). “Far from presenting neat distinctions between the United States and its enemies, the central plotline of *The X-Files* suggests that at various times U.S. authorities have been in collusion with Nazi scientists or linked up with covert Soviet operations” (Cantor, 2001, pp. 119–120). One of the ways in which *The X-Files* represents this control and abuse of power is through utilizing historic and fictionalized vaccinations to represent means of control and genetic tampering. At the beginning of this article, I explained that the revival episode “My Struggle II” (season 10, episode 6) featured a plot ominously similar to the events that would take place four years later at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. While disarming in its similarities to real-world events,

plots surrounding medical tampering and infectious diseases were not exclusive to the revival seasons. Since the beginning, *The X-Files*' main serialized narrative (referred to as the mythology) explored vaccine technologies and genetic manipulations. When considering what ideologies encoded in the show are, it is important to examine how vaccines are represented within the show's text and any possible moral or political implications.

There are three main vaccines featured in *The X-Files*, and all are depicted as life-saving technologies that are necessary for survival. The first vaccine is the only one that reflects the real world: the smallpox vaccine. By the time *The X-Files* began airing in 1993, smallpox had been eradicated for over a decade, but the show incorporated it into the main storyline by implying that the government put a genetic tag in the vaccine in order to catalog and inventory the human population (Carter, 1995), shown in Figure 1. The second, most prominent, vaccine is called "Purity Control" or just "the vaccine" and was created by the series' main antagonists (the Syndicate) as a means of protecting themselves against an alien virus called "Purity" or "Black Oil" (Carter). The final, and most recent, vaccine in the show is one Scully creates in a dream/vision to fight against the "Spartanvirus" — a pervasive, alien virus that is spread to everyone in the world who does not possess alien DNA as their immune systems are triggered to collapse due to the smallpox vaccination altering their DNA (Simon, Fearon, & Carter). When these vaccines are brought up in the text of *The X-Files*, they are often being used to catalog people or to somehow alter the recipient's DNA which parallels anti-vaxxers' anxieties surrounding what is being put in their bodies. However, these vaccines are simultaneously represented as a life-saving protocol that is necessary to prevent the spread of disease, much like the COVID-19 vaccine. This duality has resulted in audiences internalizing various different interpretations of *The X-Files*' stance on vaccines.

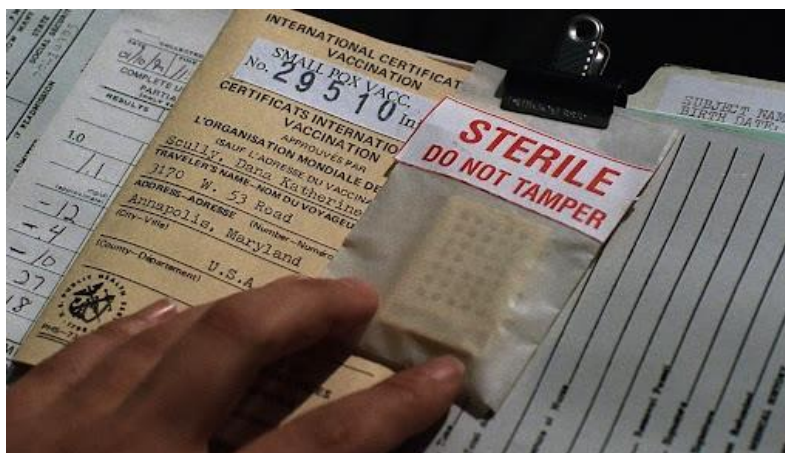


Figure 1: The hidden archive of smallpox vaccination records (“Paper Clip”)

In the 1990s, audiences may or may not have gotten the Smallpox vaccination to empathize with Scully and the other characters when they realized their vaccines had been tampered with, but when 2020 sparked conversations about getting vaccinated, audiences may have been influenced by the two-decades worth of skepticism and distrust in the government brought upon by *The X-Files* — “However fantastic these tales may be, they do provoke timely and relevant questions regarding government integrity” (Howley, 2001, p. 276). Aaron Gulyas (2015) explains that while audiences might adopt the paranoia on screen, they should also adopt the approaches taken by the characters wherein they mediate their paranoia by seeking information and trusting science. Dr. Anne Simon, the scientific consultant for the show and creator of the show’s fictional Spartanvirus, is adamant that no one should incorporate *The X-Files* into their real worldview at all. In an interview with the Smithsonian, she explained that “[P]eople say 'you're making people afraid of vaccines!' But if you think that people are going to avoid vaccinating their kids because of imaginary aliens doing things on a TV show, that is just ridiculous. There isn't any hope to begin with for anyone that dumb” (Landers, 2016). Although there are mixed opinions on how or if television should play any part in someone’s interpretation of their own lived experiences, for some, it does. In the case of *The X-Files* and vaccines, however, there can be potentially harmful implications.

Mulder as Oppositional, Scully as Dominant

According to Stuart Hall (1997), it is people who inscribe meanings to things and who find meanings. This process of meaning-making between the viewer and the text can also be influenced by identification with certain characters in the text. While the roles of skeptic and believer are usually rigidly attached to Mulder and Scully, it is not that unambiguous. Mulder consistently states that he *wants* to believe, but it does not come easily. In his own way, he is just as skeptical as Scully. When considering attitudes towards vaccines, it appears some audiences have extrapolated Mulder and Scully from the context of the show and simplified their characters based on their reputations as “conspiracy theorist” and “scientist” exclusively.

Although *The X-Files* demonstrates anxieties about the intentions of the government towards its citizens, the protagonists, Mulder and Scully, are Special Agents of the FBI. However, even though they are a part of this government institution, they act as the audience’s insight into the world. It is their positionalities as agents of the government that aid in heightening paranoia (Lavery et al., 1996), for if they are not safe, who is? Mulder acts as a touchstone for audiences who want to explore their own fears and anxieties. Whenever he is presented with a case, he

will adopt an oppositional approach toward figuring out an answer, usually offering theories that are extraordinary or seemingly unbelievable. Through Mulder, audiences are invited to question everything, and their paranoia is often validated. Whereas Mulder invites an oppositional approach, Scully is rooted within the dominant approach, recognizing the rational contexts of a situation and advocating for an Occam's Razor approach. If a theory cannot be substantiated with her science, it is not credible.

Methods

As *The X-Files* continually evolved to address cultural fears, the audience's relationship with and understanding of the show evolved as well. Adopting a cultural studies approach is vital for this study as it is important to consider the various factors that contribute to the audience's relationship to the text. The main theoretical framework I utilize in this paper is Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model. In this model, encoding refers to the production and dissemination of messages, while decoding refers to the audience's interpretation and understanding of these messages. Since all media texts are polysemic, there are various ways in which a media's text can be understood. However, Hall (2001, pp. 127–137) delineates three specific types of readings that often occur when audiences interpret media texts:

- 1) Dominant Readings which usually have the “institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them.”
- 2) Negotiated Readings which recognize the hegemonic codes at play, but imbue alternative interpretations.
- 3) Oppositional Readings which understand the “literal and connotative” meanings of a text, but choose to decode the messages in a contrasting manner.

Through considering these approaches as they apply to *The X-Files*, I analyze how the different reading styles influenced how audiences interpreted their own lived experiences. For my case study, I examine two objects of study that contribute to my argument that tropes from how *The X-Files* dealt with vaccines were prominent in some audience's response to COVID-19 protocols. In this paper, my first objects of analysis are episodes from *The X-Files*. The episodes chosen were ones that heavily featured vaccination plotlines. I have chosen to utilize a textual analysis so I can examine language being used within the episodes of the show to examine what dominant ideologies are present in the text. My second objects of analysis are tweets about the show and vaccines. If the text of the episodes are metaphorical seeds of distrust planted in the audience, these tweets are evidence of what bloomed as a result.

For this study, I utilized the Twitter search engine and searched the following combinations of words: “x files vaccine”; “x-files vaccine”; x files vax”; “x-files vax”; “x files vaccination”; and “x-files vaccination” from October 2019 to May 2022 when discussions about COVID transmission and vaccination accessibility were emerging. My rationale for not including “coronavirus” or “COVID” as search variants is that, upon my initial search, most of those results pertained to individuals contracting the virus and tweeting about watching the show while they recovered. Additionally, I only used tweets written in English since the show focuses on concerns pertaining specifically to Western governments wherein English is the primary language. After gathering these tweets, I analyzed how these users are referencing the show, whether it be generally or citing specific examples in the show’s text. Then, I examined the tweets by contextualizing them within the series to see what type of readings the user is adopting and how that manifests in their feelings towards the COVID-19 protocols. In order to protect the privacy of the users whose tweets I examined, I followed the anonymization practices suggested by Casey Fiesler and Nicholas Proferes (2018, p. 10) wherein I removed all identifying details that could lead back to the user. This included removing usernames and substituting unique phrasing within the text of the tweet in lieu of verbatim quoting.

Findings

Through examining these tweets, four main themes emerged: 1) *The X-Files*’ becoming a colloquialism/used as an adjective to insinuate paranoia; 2) references to the specific plot points in the show; 3) implications that the show contributed to anti-vaccination sentiments; and 4) implications that the show contributed to pro-vaccination sentiments. Some tweets had overlaps and contained a few different aspects. Table 1 details the findings of my analysis.

Keywords	x files vax	x-files vax	x files vaccine	x-files vaccine	x files vaccination	x-files vaccination	Total
Total	25	33	102	91	11	59	321
adjectival phrase	10 (40%)	12 (36%)	36 (35%)	24 (26%)	1 (9%)	20 (34%)	103 (32%)
References plot	7 (28%)	11 (33%)	51 (50%)	44 (48%)	6 (55%)	27 (46%)	146 (45%)
anti-vax	9 (36%)	11 (33%)	25 (25%)	38 (42%)	4 (36%)	21 (36%)	108 (34%)
pro-vax	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (%)	8 (3%)

Table 1: Analysis of Twitter findings

Though the keywords “Mulder” and “Scully” were not sought out, evaluations of their characters frequently occurred, usually positing Scully as a representative of logic and reason (pro-vaccine) while Mulder was posited as a figurehead for conspiracy theories and skepticism against the government (anti-vaccine). Overall, it appears that when individuals focused on Mulder, specifically his paranoia, they were more likely to recognize or internalize oppositional readings of the show. Conversely, when audiences focused on Scully’s scientific approach, they were more likely to advocate and reinscribe the dominant reading. To further explore how these Twitter users were using *The X-Files* as a means of understanding the COVID-19 pandemic, I will analyze examples from the show alongside relevant tweets based on the negotiated, dominant, and oppositional readings.

The X-Files as a Framework for COVID-19

Negotiated Reading: Embracing the Skepticism and Paranoia in *The X-Files*

Through the contemporaneous, colloquial usage of “*The X-Files*” as a synonym for paranoia or conspiracy, there is an act of cultural memory-making that treats the show as synonymous with distrusting the government, being paranoid, or disseminating conspiracy theories. Many of the individuals online who took a negotiated approach simply acknowledge similarities between contemporaneous events and the story’s mythology. Some people allude to real events that are strange and/or unusual and reference *The X-Files*, drawing a parallel between the fictional plot points of the show and inserting them into a real-world context. There were several tweets that embodied the sentiment: “This is similar to an episode of *the X-Files* from the 1990s” and “It’s possible we’re seeing vaccination side effects of course but it certainly is not some X-Files cover up.” Some individuals just wholistically used *X-Files* as an adjectival phrase in lieu of the words crazy, paranoid, obsessive, etc. In doing this, these individuals reinforce the series’ cultural affiliation with conspiracy theories and paranoia.

Many of these negotiated tweets called upon the hypothetical archetype of a ‘conspiracy nut’, someone who was expressing fears about COVID as a result of their overconsumption of science fiction narratives. “Stop watching the X files, there aren’t conspiracies happening everywhere.” These phrasings call upon an assumption that those overexposed to conspiracy narratives will immediately decode messages within an oppositional reading, something they are attributing to *The X-Files’* influence. While these individuals usually acknowledge that the show is not positioning itself as a cautionary tale to be followed, they recognize the potential danger that may emerge if someone wholeheartedly believes in the oppositional readings. “I am curious what role the X Files’ popularity in the 1990s

has in the vaccine conspiracy theories. It is where I first came across the concept that vaccines could be harvesting data or genetically tagging.” Even though these individuals are not specifically asserting there is a direct correlation between the show and vaccination beliefs, they are recognizing that a show with a prevailing cultural influence might have a cultural memory that, when drawn upon, could cause people to be fearful.

Interestingly, the opposite occurred quite frequently wherein, after living through a pandemic, individuals became more critical of these narratives being represented on television. Specifically, many noted that it was unrealistic for there to be any unity in these situations and that it was laughable that individuals might actually fight each other in order to obtain a new vaccine: “In ‘21 the X Files is no longer a realistic conspiracy theory narrative because a big part of the story is about developing a vaccine to save humanity from an alien virus, and positive portrayal of a vaccine in a conspiracy narrative now seems hilariously unrealistic.” In these cases, individuals were using the pandemic to recontextualize storylines from the show rather than the other way around.

Dominant Reading: Scully’s Science

Nothing within *The X-Files* can be fully substantiated until it is verified through science. The series continually asserts that scientific evidence is the most credible source, and the process of scientific validation most often comes from the character Dana Scully. She reinforces the show’s representation of vaccines as life-saving technology and something to be desired and accepted, despite potential tampering or nefarious creation. A recurring theme within tweets utilizing the dominant reading approach was individuals who were rooting their comments within the text of the show and drawing upon Scully’s positionality as a doctor to emphasize the pro-science, pro-vaccine stance of the show.

When users adopted the dominant reading position, their tweets typically had a more positive tone as, for them, the show provides comfort and resolution for the anxieties it provokes. One of the most cited textual examples for the dominant reading tweets was when Mulder uses an early form of the Syndicate’s vaccine to save Scully’s life in the 1998 movie, *Fight the Future* (Figure 2). For example: “The X-Files film demonstrated to us that vaccines work in ‘98” and “Watching *Fight the Future* and, pleasingly, a vaccine was the real hero #vaccinationssavelives.” Another individual directly addressed the importance of vaccines in the show to contrast the prevailing oppositional reading: “always love when anti-vaxxers cite the x files in their rants as if the first movie isn’t about mulder using a vaccine to save scully from dying bc of a virus.” Even though the vaccine in the film was still in the early stages of development, it was still portrayed as a crucial tool for saving Scully, representing the need to trust science.



Figure 2: Scully near-death before receiving a vaccine (*Fight the Future*)

One of the more controversial portrayals of vaccines, the revival's "My Struggle II" (season 10, episode 6), is typically cited with oppositional readings; but a few people acknowledged that, despite the circumstances surrounding the need for the vaccine, Scully's scientific and medical expertise was the only thing that could save those infected with a virus. "There's an episode from the X-Files revival where there's an epidemic and, within the day, Scully finds a cure and creates a vaccine." Although the events of "My Struggle II" are a dream/vision of Scully's, and therefore exaggerated, it still demonstrates her belief that nothing should prevent anyone from seeking life-saving medical intervention.

As demonstrated in Table 1, these readings were scarce. Perhaps there is a correlation between people tweeting out of anxiety more than tweeting out their self-assured comfort, but on this platform, it was evident that individuals were not expressing these sentiments as much. It is likely that the oppositional reading of the show is culturally prevailing over the dominant encoding within the show's text.

Oppositional Reading: Mulder's Conspiracies

While the dominant readings emphasize the medical benefits of vaccines, the oppositional readings remain focused on the conspiracies surrounding their conception. Additionally, even though *The X-Files* ideologically recognizes vaccines as innovative medical technology, the show also represents human rights violations and non-consensual experimentation/genetic tagging during the creation processes of the vaccines. One of the first instances of vaccine tampering within the mythology of *The X-Files* is when Scully discovers that the smallpox vaccination has been used to imbue people who received it with a genetic, individualized tag ("Herrenvolk", season 4, episode 1).

SCULLY: What I'm saying is that I think this protein is a tag... some kind of genetic marker that was applied to me when I was inoculated against smallpox as a child.

SENIOR FBI AGENT: Why you?

SCULLY: Not just me... all of us... quite possibly anybody who's been inoculated over the past fifty years.

[...]

SKINNER: So what you're saying, Agent Scully, is we're being tagged, cataloged and inventoried? By who?

SCULLY: I don't know, but it would have to be a government agency.

The eradication of smallpox is considered a significant triumph in modern medicine, but *The X-Files* takes that positive and shrouds it with fear and violation. While the original series tapped into fears about surveillance and control by representing the smallpox vaccine as a way to categorize and inventory the human race, the revival expanded on fears of non-consensual genetic tampering by revealing a DNA mutation was put into the smallpox vaccine that will result in 90% of the population's immune systems to collapse, causing them to become susceptible to a deadly virus. While fictional, these representations of governmental violation created an environment where some audiences felt their paranoia was validated.

The oppositional reading approaches appeared in tweets usually one of two ways: implying or directly stating that *The X-Files* made them feel secure in their decision not to get vaccinated and/or explicitly blaming the show for anti-vaccination sentiments. While it is always possible these users are trolling or otherwise being hyperbolic, some users plainly stated a correlation between watching *The X-Files* and not getting vaccinated. "After watching the X-Files, I dont know if im gonna be getting the vaccine"; "My first experience of enlightenment was watching the xfiles and the show was my primary reason for not getting the H1N1 vaccine!"; and "When people start having bad side effects in a few years or (as i think) the whole world turns into the episode My Struggle II of the X Files, maybe then the sheeple will wake up, but it'll be too late. Do not vaccinate your kids" (Figure 3). Oppositional readings are often reactionary or resistive by nature, and these individuals, to varying degrees, are expressing that they will not be 'deceived' into taking a vaccine. While there is plenty of textual and historical evidence that demonstrates the dangers of what can happen *without* vaccines, these oppositional readers are using *The X-Files* to validate their paranoia that these vaccines will cause them more harm than good, frequently disregarding aspects of the show that conflict with their reading.



Figure 3: Scully and a colleague developing a vaccine (“My Struggle II”)

Mulder’s character arc within *The X-Files* deals with him recognizing he has been exploited as a pawn in a governmental conspiracy, and he continually expresses distrust towards authority as a result of his mistreatment (Figure 4). It appears that many of these oppositional viewers identify with this cynicism. Just as Scully and her science is often used to reinforce the dominant reading, Mulder has become an unintentional representative for anti-vax conspiracy theorists. This can be seen in sentiments like: “mulder would’ve been anti-vax, solely because the genetic tagging/tracker thing in the x files” and “The X-Files is pretty much completely responsible for the popularisation of the type of thinking that inspired Vaccination conspiracies and Q-Anon. Fox Mulder would be an anti-vaccination Q-aNUT.” Despite the prevalence of textual examples showcasing Mulder expressing pro-vaccination sentiment, some audience members essentialize his character and use his willingness to consider conspiracy theories as validation for their personal belief in them.



Figure 4: Mulder being forcibly injected as a test subject (“Terma”)

Conclusion

The penultimate episode of the original series focuses on a central question that extends beyond the screen: “Why are people still watchin’ a 30-year-old TV show?” (Gilligan, 2002). While the original series of *The X-Files* routinely incorporates these moments of reflection, from tongue-in-cheek nods to contemporaneous critiques of the show to the aforementioned question about what the show’s legacy will be once it goes off the air, the revival seasons imbue these reflections with years of sentimentality and decades of critical praise. However, this project illustrates that audiences may hold an interest in the show depending on how they decode it and how that decoding adheres to or conflicts with their understanding of the world. While some enjoy the commentary it creates on paranoia, others take this paranoia to heart and choose to focus on the aspect above all else.

The X-Files is fraught with anxieties surrounding the potential loss of freedom as a result of totalitarian government control. These anxieties are a part of the show’s continual, reflexive paranoias regarding the lingering impacts of the Cold War as demonstrated through elaborate plots about control and malicious surveillance. While *The X-Files* has audiences fearing monstrous creatures and horrific situations, it invites audiences to realize that the true monsters are the systems that created them, creating potentially harmful implications. Ultimately, while the show’s tagline argues for a need to “Fight the Future,” it is consistently demonstrated that audiences are always drawing upon the past to shape their worldviews.

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