

# “You call *this* archaeology?” How popular misrepresentations may influence site discovery and preservation

Daniel D. Dillon

## Abstract

From Indiana Jones to Tomb Raider, archaeologists have tended to be portrayed as adventurous and wild grave robbers that hunt for secret treasures and mysterious artifacts. These long-standing icons have undoubtedly influenced public perception and can impact how archaeology is thought of and, by extension, how sites are discovered or preserved. The aim of this research was to evaluate what archaeology is and is not, and to point out the connections between public perceptions and pop culture imagery. Survey methodology along with literature and media reviews were conducted to supplement information regarding misrepresentations, to aid with interpretations of how the practice is thought of, and to highlight how sites may be overlooked, or even destroyed, due to opinions about what archaeology is. The results indicate that the public still continues to misunderstand the discipline and makes associations based on media consumption. Further research can build off of this and work to increase public knowledge of the field to correct such enduring problems. What is ultimately found is that no, Professor Henry Jones, this is not what we call archaeology.

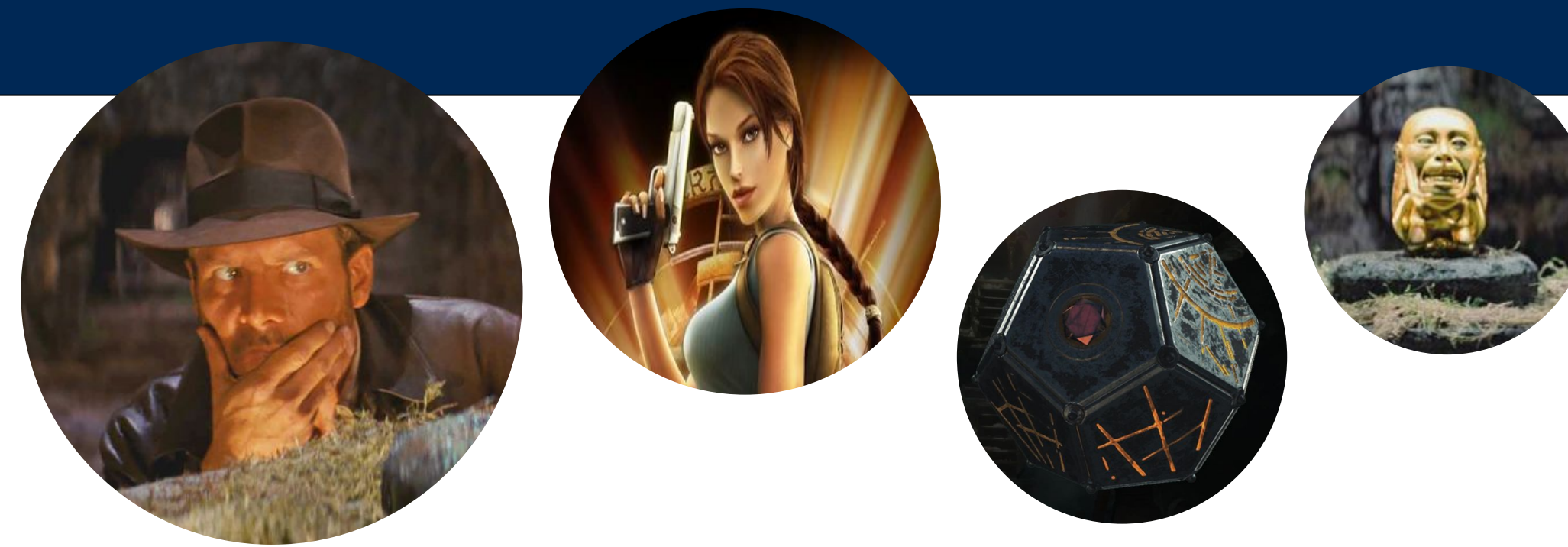
## Background

Archaeology, in the public eye, is a field full of mystery, discovery, and danger. From the tall tales of Nazi-fighting Indiana Jones to the treacherous adventures of gun-wielding Lara Croft, the field has been subject to a range of interpretations in modern media. However, the range of interpretations appear to be **inaccurate**, despite their popularity. This generates a significant question regarding how these types of representations may influence public opinions and, moreover, how they may influence site discovery and preservation.

## Methodology

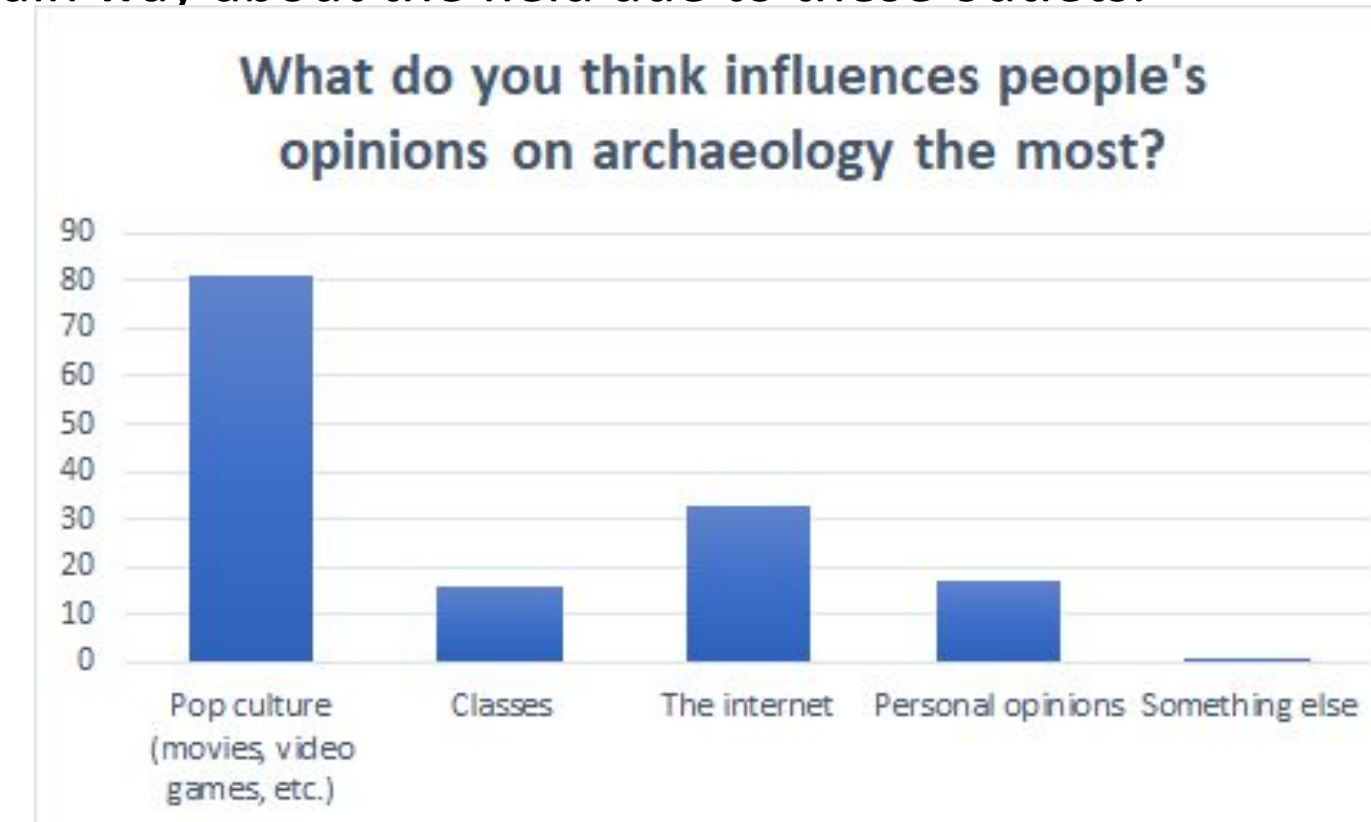
Analyses of the first Indiana Jones movie and a more general review of the *Tomb Raider* video game series were conducted (Spielberg 1981)(VanityFairMagazine 2020). These were done more so to look at the stereotypical portrayals of archaeology and to build on the existing literature that already discusses these topics (Nichols 2006). The reviews served the purpose of pairing with, or refuting, the past studies utilized in the literature review.

For the other method of data collection, two surveys were conducted as a means to gather information on these topics. The first survey included 90 informants, asking six questions that were divided into four polls and two open-ended responses. The second survey was a short free-listing exercise that included 11 informants. This consisted of three exercises. The questions mostly touched on ideas of where their archaeological information comes from, what they think of in terms of archaeology, and where they think others get their information from.

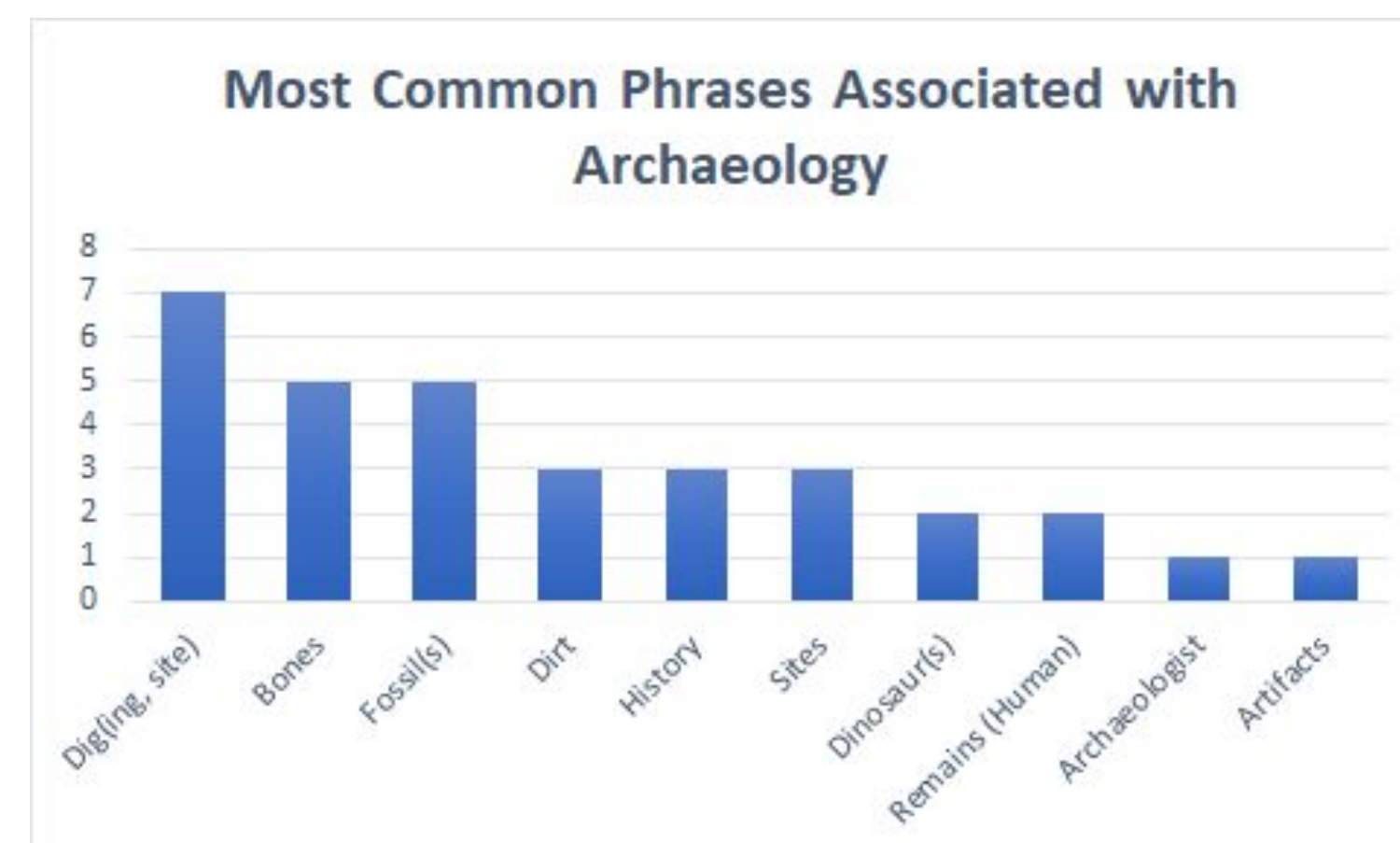


## Results

In the first survey, 81 informants identified pop culture as the main source of knowledge of archaeology. 48 individuals identified pop culture as their personal source of information, with 47 also saying the internet was a major source. Not only this, but pop culture was also said to be the largest influence on *opinions* regarding archaeology, meaning that individuals may feel a certain way about the field due to these outlets.



While the most common response for the second chart shown was “dig” or “digging,” individuals also included fossils/dinosaurs as a part of archaeology. Five out of the eleven informants included fossils on their lists.



What both surveys can disclose is a mixture of informed and misinformed responses that have the potential to point toward a lacking understanding of archaeology in general. In the same fashion, the media reviews can disclose blatant misrepresentations of the field of archaeology, which can undoubtedly influence the ways in which people perceive the discipline.

## Conclusions

Individuals identified that their knowledge most commonly comes from popular sources and then followed this up by detailing what they believe archaeology is. **Looking at this together, it would be entirely possible that the consumption of popular media such as the *Indiana Jones* franchise or the *Tomb Raider* series can impact the ways in which archaeologists are understood.**

Enduring stereotypes that are shown in pop culture manifest in ill-informed and sometimes angry responses to the work that does get done, all the while sometimes preventing work from occurring in the first place (Kramarczyk et al 2020). **If individuals believe that archaeologists really act similarly to how they are shown in the media, then perhaps they would not want to work with them.** Depending on how misinformed an individual is, perhaps they would do anything, even bury a site completely, to avoid that.

This poses a great opportunity for non-anthropologists to see how portrayals of archaeology are incorrect, which can then assist in shifting opinions. Perhaps one day, with such efforts, the critical gap in knowledge between those in the field and those in the public can be bridged and we can reach a point where the public understands that no, Professor Henry Jones, what we see in the movies is **not** what we call archaeology.

## References

- Kramarczyk, Krzysztof, Aleksandra Ćwiek, Bartłomiej Kurczab, Marcelina Czok, Agnieszka Bratek, and Krzysztof Kucia. 2020. “Does pop-culture affect perception of medical procedures? Report on knowledge and attitude towards electroconvulsive therapy among Polish students.” *Psychiatria Polska* 54(3): 603 – 612. <https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/109157>.
- Nichols, Stephen. 2006. “Out of the Box: Popular Notions of Archaeology in Documentary Programmes on Australian Television.” *Australian Archaeology* 63: 35 – 46.
- Spielberg, Steven, dir. 1981. *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. United States: Paramount.
- VanityFairMagazine, dir. 2020. *Archaeologist Reviews Archaeology in Movies, from 'Indiana Jones' to 'Lara Croft: Tomb Raider'*. YouTube. Vanity Fair. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7wSTmhrZr0&ab\\_channel=VanityFair](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7wSTmhrZr0&ab_channel=VanityFair).

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family for being willing to discuss their views on archaeology with me as well as my professors for allowing me to conceptualize and carry out my own research. This project would not have been possible without everyone’s support of my ideas!



# Abstract

- From Indiana Jones to Tomb Raider, archaeologists have tended to be portrayed as adventurous and wild grave robbers that hunt for secret treasures and mysterious artifacts. These long-standing icons have undoubtedly influenced public perception and can impact how archaeology is thought of and, by extension, how sites are discovered or preserved. The aim of this research was to evaluate what archaeology is and is not, and to point out the connections between public perceptions and pop culture imagery. Survey methodology along with literature and media reviews were conducted to supplement information regarding misrepresentations, to aid with interpretations of how the practice is thought of, and to highlight how sites may be overlooked, or even destroyed, due to opinions about what archaeology is. The results indicate that the public still continues to misunderstand the discipline and makes associations based on media consumption. Further research can build off of this and work to increase public knowledge of the field to correct such enduring problems. What is ultimately found is that no, Professor Henry Jones, this is not what we call archaeology.

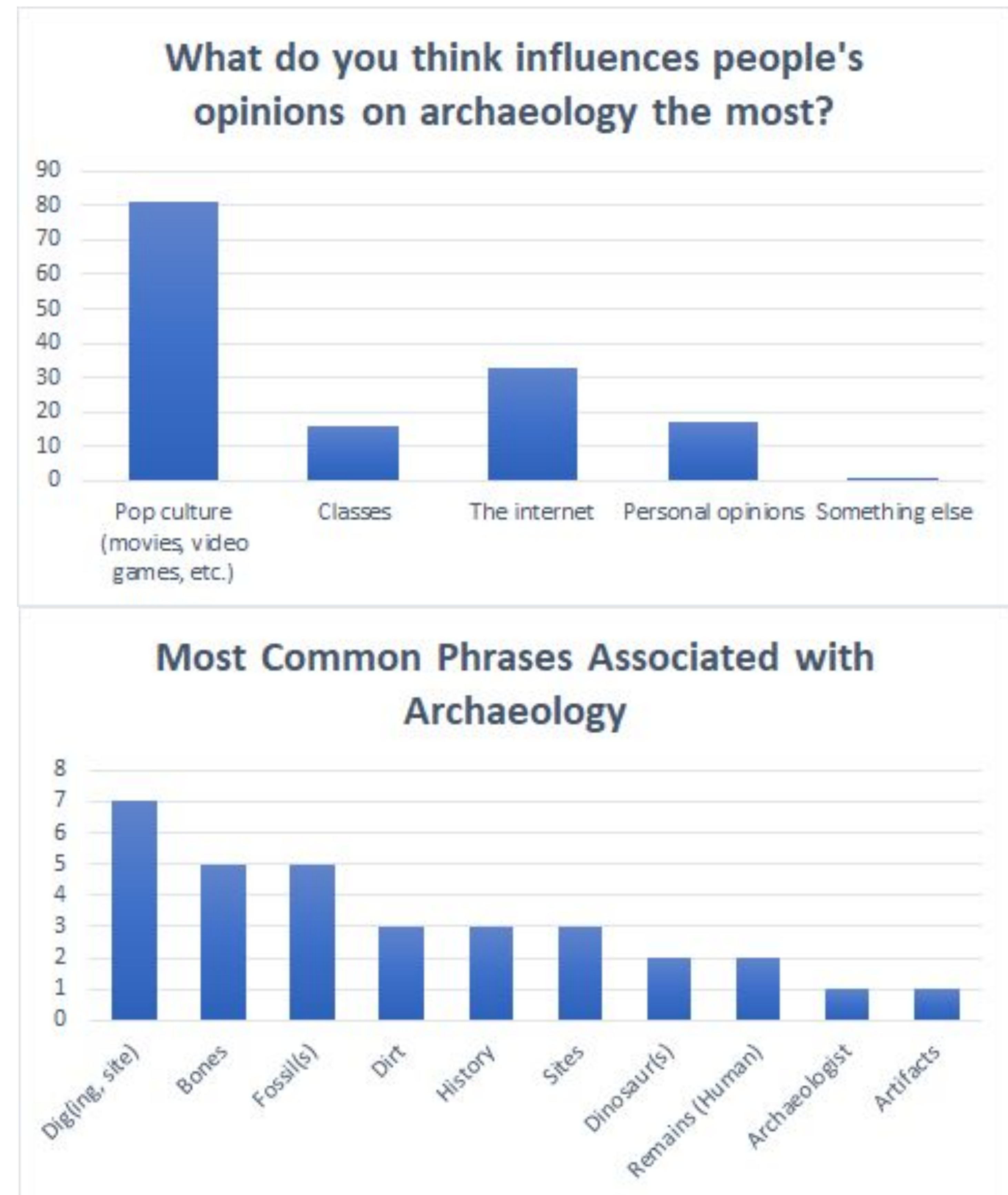
# Background and Methods

- Archaeology, in the public eye, is a field full of mystery, discovery, and danger. From the tall tales of Nazi-fighting Indiana Jones to the treacherous adventures of gun-wielding Lara Croft, the field has been subject to a range of interpretations in modern media. However, the range of interpretations appear to be inaccurate, despite their popularity. This generates a significant question regarding how these types of representations may influence public opinions and, moreover, how they may influence site discovery and preservation.
- Analyses of the first Indiana Jones movie and a more general review of the *Tomb Raider* video game series were conducted (Spielberg 1981)(VanityFairMagazine 2020). These were done more so to look at the stereotypical portrayals of archaeology and to build on the existing literature that already discusses these topics (Nichols 2006). The reviews served the purpose of pairing with, or refuting, the past studies utilized in the literature review.
- For the other method of data collection, two surveys were conducted as a means to gather information on these topics. The first survey included 90 informants, asking six questions that were divided into four polls and two open-ended responses. The second survey was a short free-listing exercise that included 11 informants. This consisted of three exercises. The questions mostly touched on ideas of where their archaeological information comes from, what they think of in terms of archaeology, and where they think others get their information from.



# Results

- In the first survey, 81 informants identified pop culture as the main source of knowledge of archaeology. 48 individuals identified pop culture as their personal source of information, with 47 also saying the internet was a major source. Not only this, but pop culture was also said to be the largest influence on *opinions* regarding archaeology, meaning that individuals may feel a certain way about the field due to these outlets
- While the most common response for the second chart shown was “dig” or “digging,” individuals also included fossils/dinosaurs as a part of archaeology. Five out of the eleven informants included fossils on their lists.
- What both surveys can disclose is a mixture of informed and misinformed responses that have the potential to point toward a lacking understanding of archaeology in general. In the same fashion, the media reviews can disclose blatant misrepresentations of the field of archaeology, which can undoubtedly influence the ways in which people perceive the discipline.





# Conclusions

- Individuals identified that their knowledge most commonly comes from popular sources and then followed this up by detailing what they believe archaeology is. Looking at this together, **it would be entirely possible that the consumption of popular media such as the *Indiana Jones* franchise or the *Tomb Raider* series can impact the ways in which archaeologists are understood.** Continuing down this line of reasoning, if individuals believe that this is what archaeology is, they might be less inclined to want to work with them.
- Enduring stereotypes that are shown in pop culture manifest in ill-informed and sometimes angry responses to the work that does get done, all the while sometimes preventing work from occurring in the first place (Kramarczyk et al 2020). **If individuals believe that archaeologists really act similarly to how they are shown in the media, then perhaps they would not want to work with them.** Depending on how misinformed an individual is, perhaps they would do anything, even bury a site completely, to avoid that.
- This poses a great opportunity for non-anthropologists to see how portrayals of archaeology are incorrect, which can then assist in shifting opinions. Perhaps one day, with such efforts, the critical gap in knowledge between those in the field and those in the public can be bridged and we can reach a point where the public understands that no, Professor Henry Jones, what we see in the movies is *not* what we call archaeology.

# References and Acknowledgements

Kramarczyk, Krzysztof, Aleksandra Ćwiek, Bartłomiej Kurczab, Marcelina Czok, Agnieszka Bratek, and Krzysztof Kucia. 2020. "Does pop-culture affect perception of medical procedures? Report on knowledge and attitude towards electroconvulsive therapy among Polish students." *Psychiatria Polska* 54(3): 603 – 612. <https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/109157>.

Nichols, Stephen. 2006. "Out of the Box: Popular Notions of Archaeology in Documentary Programmes on Australian Television." *Australian Archaeology* 63: 35 – 46.

Spielberg, Steven, dir. 1981. *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. United States: Paramount.

VanityFairMagazine, dir. 2020. *Archaeologist Reviews Archaeology in Movies, from 'Indiana Jones' to 'Lara Croft: Tomb Raider'*. YouTube. Vanity Fair. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7wSTmhrZr0&ab\\_channel=VanityFair](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7wSTmhrZr0&ab_channel=VanityFair).

- I would like to thank my family for being willing to discuss their views on archaeology with me as well as my professors for allowing me to conceptualize and carry out my own research. This project would not have been possible without everyone's support of my ideas!