Suggested Reading by William Remak

<https://www.amazon.com/Wisdom-Crowds-James-Surowiecki/dp/0385721706>

<https://www.amazon.com/Stuck-Vaccine-Rumors-Start-They/dp/0190077247>

<https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0141033576>

<https://www.amazon.com/Trust-Revolution-Digitization-Revolutionize-Government-ebook/dp/B07T9MCY49>

<https://www.amazon.com/Innovators-Dilemma-Technologies-Management-Innovation/dp/1633691780>



YouTube Viewing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s&fbclid=IwAR2z3tcQOC_Z_g7sKjZfYrH38LPU0aNmJzIe247lyRuzBwzqHwLyHwzCCBo>

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201904/what-makes-people-believe-in-conspiracy-theories>

[](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/joe-pierre-md)

[**Joe Pierre M.D.**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/joe-pierre-md)



[Psych Unseen](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen)

**What Makes People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?**

**The psychology of flat earthers, antivaxxers, and truthers**

Posted Apr 23, 2019



Chemtrail or contrail? Adrian Pingstone (2007)

Source: Public domain

With the recent DVD release of [*Behind the Curve*](https://www.behindthecurvefilm.com/), a documentary about flat earthers in which I appear as an expert, Melissa Matthews from *Men's Health* magazine reached out for an interview for her [article](http://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a26766130/flat-earth-conspiracy/) about conspiracy theories. Below is a transcript of our entire conversation.

**Why are people drawn to conspiracy theories? What are they seeking when they first go down the rabbit hole? Are there specific** [**personality**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/personality) **types that are more prone to conspiracy theories than others?**

There's been a lot of recent work in psychology attempting to figure out why some people are particularly drawn to conspiracy theories. For example, research has found that people who believe in conspiracy theories tend to have a greater need for cognitive closure1 (the desire to find an explanation when explanations are lacking) and to be unique.2 They're more likely to have a cognitive [bias](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/bias) called hypersensitive agency detection3 or teleologic thinking4 (whereby events are overattributed to hidden forces, purposes, and motives). Some research has also found that conspiracy beliefs are associated with lower levels of [education](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/education)3 and analytic thinking.5

That said, studies have also revealed that half of the US population believes in at least one political or medical conspiracy theory.6,7 So belief in conspiracy theories is far more “normal” than many of us might think.

The popularity of films like [*JFK*](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102138/)*,* [*The Manchurian Candidate*](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056218)*,* and [*Conspiracy Theory*](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118883/)illustrates how many of us can be drawn to a good conspiracy theory. Over the two past years, half of the country has been anxiously expecting that the Mueller report would reveal one of the biggest conspiracy plots in American history, while the other half believes that the conspiracy was the Mueller investigation itself. And of course, occasionally conspiracy theories turn out to be true!

**What role do companies like YouTube and Google play in spreading conspiracy theories?**

In the "old days," people sought information from books, print newspapers, major network TV news, and experts. That has shifted dramatically since the internet, where most of us now seek out information online where there are many, many more sources of information than ever before. One result has been that expertise is now devalued and knowledge has been democratized.

Just how much the internet is increasing belief in conspiracy theories isn’t clear, but we do know that for many people these days, [“going down the rabbit hole”](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/feb/17/study-blames-youtube-for-rise-in-number-of-flat-earthers) is primarily an online experience. With something like the belief that vaccines cause [autism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/autism), it’s harder to distinguish between reliable information and misinformation when you’re trying to find answers from social media.

The nature of search algorithms is such that once you click on something related to a conspiracy theory, you’re more likely to see something else related to a conspiracy theory. All of us are susceptible to [confirmation bias](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/motivated-reasoning)—the tendency to reinforce pre-existing beliefs when we look for information. With the amount of information available online that's tailored to our interests and preferences, we’re now living in an era of “[confirmation bias on steroids](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201611/fake-news-echo-chambers-filter-bubbles-survival-guide).”

**Are flat-earthers any different from people who believe in other conspiracies?**

Yes and no. In general, I think it’s a mistake to lump “flat earthers” into a homogenous group. The recent documentary [*Behind the Curve*](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201902/behind-the-curve-the-science-fiction-flat-earthers) does a good job of highlighting that flat earthers are not a monolith. Within the larger flat earth movement, there are some that are “dilettantes looking for answers" who are skeptical of mainstream teaching, and others that are far deeper down the rabbit hole.

But research has shown that belief in one conspiracy theory predicts belief in others.8 The general psychological make-up of those who believe in conspiracies therefore appears to be shared across different conspiracy theories.

**Why shouldn’t we mock people who believe the earth is flat? What is a better way to deal with people who believe in conspiracies?**

article continues after advertisement

Ridicule and argument don’t appear to be effective strategies if you’re trying to change hearts and minds. At their core, conspiracy beliefs are often rooted in lack of trust in institutions. So, when conspiracy theories are related to science like with flat-earthers or [anti-vaxxers](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201902/antivaxxers-and-the-plague-science-denial), it means that science educators have to revamp our efforts, being mindful of what works and what doesn’t.

[Empathic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy) listening is usually the best place to start. The greatest potential lies in reaching out to the “dilettantes looking for answers," such as flat earthers or anti-vaxxers who are trying to resolve the disparities between mainstream scientific knowledge and what they’re seeing on YouTube.

For those who are so far down the rabbit hole that they’re putting out those videos themselves, with their identities (and sometimes incomes) depending on them, it’s not clear what it might take to get someone to back down. When beliefs are tightly tied to [identity](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/identity), they can be highly resistant to change.

***To read more about flat earthers and other conspiracy theorists, see my other blog posts below:***

► [Understanding the Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Part 1](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202001/understanding-the-psychology-conspiracy-theories-part-1)
► [Understanding the Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, Part 2](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202001/understanding-the-psychology-conspiracy-theories-part-2)
► [Flat Earthers: Belief, Skepticism, and Denialism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201702/flat-earthers-belief-skepticism-and-denialism)
► [Behind the Curve: The Science Fiction of Flat Earthers](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201902/behind-the-curve-the-science-fiction-flat-earthers)
► [Antivaxxers and the Plague of Science Denial](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201902/antivaxxers-and-the-plague-science-denial)

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