

From conspiracy theories to climate change denial, a cognitive psychologist explains

April 17 2014, by Stephan Lewandowsky



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Stephan Lewandowsky, chair of cognitive psychology at the University of Bristol, [answered](#) questions posed by the public on Reddit. The Conversation has curated the highlights.

Conspiracy theories

Under what conditions do conspiracies spread? What can one do to convince people to be more sceptical of extraordinary claims in conspiracy theories?

In societies that are not transparent and less democratic, conspiracy theories flourish because the government cannot be trusted. In general, the people who believe in conspiracy theories are low on trust and feel that they have been treated badly by life or society.

Countering this is very difficult, but education and reducing inequality will go a long way.

Can you name one conspiracy theory that turned out to be true?

The [tobacco industry](#) is now known to have "conspired" against the public in their efforts to undermine the well-established scientific evidence linking smoking to ill health. One of the US judges famously [said](#): "The US tobacco industry has engaged in a criminal conspiracy for more than 50 years."

What kind of cognitive traits does conspiratorial thinking exhibit?

There are [some researchers](#) who have linked conspiracy beliefs to personality variables. So yes, it is quite possibly a stable characteristic of some sort. The most striking thing is that conspiratorial thinking can be self-contradictory, for example [people think](#) MI6 killed Princess Diana while also thinking that she faked her own death.

To what extent do you see climate conspiracists denying climate change science as opposed to denying the feasibility of providing an economically acceptable solution to reversing its effects?

Very interesting question. I cannot be certain because I do not have data that speak to this issue directly. However, in general, conspiracism is just one form of "motivated cognition". There are others, such as worldview defence. The reason worldviews are inflamed by climate change is because of the threat of government interference with the free market that might result from mitigation efforts. It is for this reason that people who cherish free markets are less inclined to oppose mitigation when it is framed as providing an opportunity for the nuclear industry than when it is framed as pollution cuts.

Bottom line: It is pretty clear that fear of the solutions drives much opposition to the science. This manifests itself in motivated cognition, and one form of that is conspiracism. That said, it is notable that other science denial – for instance HIV-AIDS – also involves conspiracism, and the links to worldviews are less clear there.

Climate change denial

How important are political ideologies in understanding the rejection of climate science?

I can ask people four questions about the [free market](#) and I have roughly 67% "confidence" (that is, variance) in their attitudes towards climate change.

As a conservative, I find myself in the frustrating position of being one of the few among my inner circle who is not a dogmatic climate change sceptic. It's happening and humanity is contributing in a major way. Something that *does* frustrate me, however, is misinformation about exactly what steps would need to be taken to seriously combat global warming effects. What are your thoughts on this?

Recycling is largely a farce. Yes, it is better to recycle that soda bottle than to throw it out. But what is far better is to reuse it or not use it in the first place. But there's no political will to move the needle on the economic to support such a system. (I do try to recycle anyway, by the way. I just don't pretend that it makes any significant difference.)

Gasoline use is even worse. The fact is that, without abundant sources of non-fossil-fuel power, we are going to burn every last bit of carbon we can pull out of the earth's crust. Me driving an electric vehicle (which I don't, by the way) just makes it that much easier for someone on the other side of the world to fill up their gas tank.

I think there is, however, some utility in the example that it sets. If my vegan friends make a dinner that is fantastic and satisfying, maybe their decreased resource consumption gives me some ideas how to reduce my consumption of meat. My neighbour's electric vehicle might convince me that I don't need to drive a gas-guzzling SUV, and might help incrementally advance the technology to make a wholesale change in power for transportation possible.

Overall, the micro-level stuff is small potatoes, and won't make a difference without the macro stuff. But I think the micro stuff can help sell the macro stuff, and that's the reason it matters.

Do you think that people with same views (no matter how absurd) will easily find each other and gather around somewhere?

Yes, there are cyberghettos and clusterings. This is a problem all in itself already, but to make matters worse, it creates an incentive for politicians to engage in more extremist dialogue. [Work by economists](#) has shown that it is advantageous for politicians to be extreme if messages to their

followers remained inside an echo chamber. As a consequence, whereas politicians used to compete for the "median voter", it is now advantageous to be extremist. This has undesirable consequences for us all.

How much of an effect has science denial had on the progress of the science itself?

It is difficult to quantify, but there is some evidence to suggest that science denial has affected not just public discourse but also science itself. For example, [an analysis](#) of media coverage found that the IPCC reports in 2007 were more likely to underestimate than overestimate the risk from climate change. A more [recent analysis](#) expanded on this topic and argued that scientists' natural reticence biases them towards cautious estimates rather than alarmism, a tendency they call erring on the side of least drama.

Is it a waste of my time trying to convince those that don't believe in climate change or should I just focus on helping those that do become more educated?

The answer is pretty nuanced: There are some people who are so entrenched in their contrarian views that there is little point in talking to them about anything other than solutions. In the end, it doesn't matter what a person thinks about [climate change](#) if they put a solar panel on their roof – and who wouldn't in Geraldton, Western Australia?

However, there are also people who really want to know more, and whose reticence to accept the science arises from lack of information. I would send those people to [Skeptical Science](#). Differentiating between entrenched contrarians and those who are open to knowing more is challenging because sometimes it is difficult to know at the outset.

What kind of dialogue may perhaps serve to move the national discussion in a more productive direction, given your insights into the psychology of denial?

My views are: first, the public is currently being denied the right to be fully informed about the risks it is facing. Second, there are many reasons for this, from "doubt-mongering" to ideologically-motivated denial. Third, we know from much [research on misinformation](#) that people cannot dismiss "noise" or misinformation unless they are given a reason to do so. This is why it is important for the public to understand who the people are who oppose [climate science](#).

In a nutshell: underscore the consensus which will move all but the hardcore, and identify who the hardcore contrarians are so the remainder of the population can make an educated choice about who to listen to.

I will graduate this year with an MSc in Climate Change. What should someone with my skills be doing in order to do a job which benefits the planet?

I think that scientists themselves could refine their messaging. Often they put the uncertainty first, without saying what we do know or without saying that [uncertainty is a compelling reason](#) to mitigate. That said, also remember that the problem is compounded by the role of worldviews. To overcome that, emphasising the consensus is only a partial tool.

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