

8-28-2023

## Why Evidence Will Never Convince Someone the World Isn't Flat: the Certainty of Misinformation

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### Recommended Citation

Ozubko, Jason, "Why Evidence Will Never Convince Someone the World Isn't Flat: the Certainty of Misinformation" (2023). *Myth and Science, 2023-24*. 1.  
<https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/ideas-that-matter-23-24/1>

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**GENESEO**  
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## **IDEAS THAT MATTER**

### **2023-2024 Myth & Science**

#### **Lesson: Why Evidence Will Never Convince Someone the World Isn't Flat: The Certainty of Misinformation**

Prepared By: Jason Ozubko, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology

#### **Lesson Learning Outcomes**

Students will:

- Understand why and how belief in conspiracies and misinformation spreads
- Apply psychological models of belief and persuasion to real world discussions and arguments
- Understand why attempts to persuade via rational argument can often simply entrench beliefs
- Learn how to engage and understand those with opposing views to you in an inclusive manner, and understand how individuals can arrive at a diverse array of beliefs based on their unique backgrounds

#### **Annotated Bibliography**

Susan, N., & Sweeney, B. J. (Producers), & Kahan, D. (Director). (2018). Behind the curve [Documentary]. United States: Netflix.

A documentary examining the lives and beliefs of the modern flat earth community. Featuring interviews with scientists and flat earthers. An insightful look into the community and sense of belonging that drives belief in flat earth. Contains numerous interviews with scientists that explain the difference between belief and dogma, and why it is so difficult for misinformed individuals such as flat-earthers to abandon their beliefs and return to the mainstream. See

<https://www.behindthecurvefilm.com/>

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Association for Psychology Science*, 13(3), 106-131.

A review of the scientific literature behind persuasion and misinformation, detailing why and how misinformation works and is so effective, and the best known techniques to combat and correct misinformation. Provides a good psychological explanation of both the logical and not so logical ways in which we are influenced by persuasive techniques. A good paper to include but does miss out on the social aspect of why misinformed beliefs persist.

Rand, W., & Matthews, A. (2016). Russian Firehose Propaganda: Falsehoods Spread Like Wildfire. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

An article detailing modern misinformation techniques on social media and in the news, and the monumental practical challenges and limitations behind combating such techniques. This paper provides a nice applied look at the problem with misinformation and just how much individuals can be bombarded with a coordinated effort to misinform them. As far as the practical and applied angle of misinformation goes, this reading shows us just how hard it is in modern life to fight against misinformation.

Pennycook, G. & Rand, D. G. (2019). Who falls for fake news? The roles of bullshit receptivity, overclaiming, familiarity, and analytic thinking. *Journal of Personality*, 88(2), 185-200.

An examination of the psychological factors behind belief in nonsense and how humans are poor at judging whether messages contain meaning. Demonstrates that we have a tendency to see meaning in almost anything, and highlights the fact that really almost anything could be believed or be seen as meaningful. Helps explain why even relatively meaningless drivel can be seen as insightful if one is motivated to see it that way.

Bite Size Psych. (2015). Why internet arguments are useless and how to start winning arguments [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qe5pv4khM-Y>

A short video detailing why appeals to rationality rarely work, and instead of resulting in thoughtful discussion often simply trigger heated debate. Helps explain why simply trying to engage in debate will almost never work to persuade people. Rather than viewing debates as a chance to learn we often view it as a fight, and when we are in "fight mode" we are driven more by winning than by thinking. Also discusses the false sense of understanding we derive from familiarity. This phenomenon helps

explain why people can often hold beliefs that seem to make no sense on closer inspection, because as humans we aren't bothered by having a vague understanding of ideas, and often don't even realize we do.

TEDx Talks. (2017, May 18). I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here's why I left | Megan Phelps-Roper [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVV2Zk88beY>

A TED talk exploring how someone brainwashed into a cult was able to exit the cult through prolonged positive and friendly interaction with the outside world, and how challenging it still was to leave. Does explore the role of debate and discussion in trying to reach someone with a misinformed belief system but also highlights the needs for social connections to motivate a change in beliefs.

Hussain, M. (2019, November 21). Deradicalization in the Deep South: How a former neo-Nazi makes amends. The Intercept.  
<https://theintercept.com/2019/11/21/deradicalization-white-supremacy-neo-nazi/>

A news article about a former neo-Nazi's attempts to help others exit the lifestyle, again not through argument or debate, but interestingly enough, through human connection and friendship.

## **Pre-Class Activity**

Have students write a short paper describing their thoughts on "How to Change Someone's Mind" before engaging in any class readings or materials. After they have read and watched the class materials, return to the question with a big class discussion. Ask people to explain what they wrote before the class and what they think now.

### *Student Prompt:*

Write a short paper on "How to Change Someone's Mind". Describe methods of persuasion you think are ineffective and those that you think are effective. What is the best way to get into a discussion with someone and actually influence their opinion? Draw on examples from your own life where you have had such debates with friends or family members. What was the outcome? Did anyone's mind change? What could have been done better?

## **Instructor Notes for Papers and Class Discussion**

The most common response to this prompt will be for students to describe how one needs to approach debates and arguments with a calm and cool demeanor, how one needs to lay out their points in a clear and logical manner and backed up with evidence. Students will often explain how one needs to remain calm, avoid being pulled into a shouting match, and not demean or dismiss opinions that contradict their own immediately so as not to alienate the person they are arguing with. This all makes sense and seems like the best way to persuade people. Generally though, none of this works all that well.

The materials provided for class are meant to highlight the “irrational” ways that people form beliefs and cling to them. For most of us, the beliefs we hold are not held for logical reasons but because they provide us with a feeling of completeness and allow us to belong in a community. Yes, arguments and debates can help people start to see cracks in their beliefs, but it is extremely rare for someone to enter a debate and leave with a completely different mindset. If you really want to change someone’s mind, you almost need to become their friend and invite them into your community; not always something that is easy or possible to do of course.

**Lecture Outline:** Please see lecture slides; I’ve integrated lesson notes with the slides in an integrative fashion.

### **Instructions for Two Brief Integrative and Applied Learning Activity**

- (1) In small groups, talk to one another about your “How Do You Change Someone’s Mind” papers that you wrote before class. What did you write about and what do you think now? Were you aware of some of the issues we discussed in class? Was there anything surprising that jumped out at you? Did you suggest doing anything that now you might not think is a good idea? How has today’s class changed your mind on this question?
- (2) In small groups, pick an example of a group that would be considered misinformed that exists in the real world. Go through the recommendations from today’s lesson together and come up with an action plan of how you could approach individuals in these groups. What challenges might you encounter when trying to reach out to these people? What kinds of conversations would you try to have with them? What are some short-term and long-term strategies you could employ to try to communicate with these people and help them adopt more moderate viewpoints? After working on your plans in small groups we’ll discuss the plans as a class and hear what all the groups came up with.

## Assessment

One of these activity prompts can be provided post-class.

- (1) **Prompt:** Reflect on how you thought you could best change someone's mind before class and your opinions now. Has your opinion changed? Would you try different approaches? Why did you not consider these approaches before class? What did you learn that changed your mind about how to change the minds of others?
- (2) **Prompt:** Given what you now know about how individuals can be indoctrinated into belief systems and how difficult it can be to leave, how do you view individuals who grow up in cult-like scenarios (e.g., the Westboro Baptist Church). Is it their "fault" for the beliefs they hold? Is it someone else's? Is it no one's?