

Let The Best Ideas Win: Should Skeptics Engage Conspiracy Theorists Directly?

Written by DJ Grothe
Sunday, 03 March 2013 09:00

Mark Hoofnagle, the influential blogger who is one of the folks who came up with the concept of “denialism,” and who writes at [National Geographic's Science Blog](#) on the topic, has an interesting [post](#) about what happens when conspiracy theorists turn their attention to those who theorize about conspiracy theorists. He reports on the [paper](#) by Stephan Lewandowsky et. al. in the journal [Frontiers in Psychology](#) about how conspiracy theorists react to being the focus of academic and journalistic scrutiny, coming up with new conspiracy theories in the process.

Lewandowsky, and his coauthors John Cook, Klaus Oberauer, Michael Hubble, studied how conspiracy theorists reacted to a previous paper that some of them authored on conspiracy theories, “[NASA faked the moon landing|Therefore \(Climate\) Science is a Hoax: An Anatomy of the Motivated Rejection of Science](#)”. They used Google searches and other methods to catalogue responses to the paper, and organized the responses into six categories. Responses demonstrated:

1. an assumption of nefarious intent on the part of the authors of the paper
2. delusions of persecution
3. a “nihilistic degree of skepticism”, paranoia, what I’d call “hyper-skepticism”
4. an inability to believe in mere coincidence
5. a toleration of inconsistencies and contradictions in their own counter-hypotheses as long as they challenge the “official” version
6. the incorporation of contrary evidence as further evidence of a conspiracy thus “self-sealing” their hypothesis

All six of these types of responses are the standard fare for any conspiracy theorist as he or she deals with scrutiny or criticism. These responses could easily turn into a Conspiracy Theory Bingo game to make listening to Alex Jones even more fun.

Hoofnagle summarizes the paper:

For the meat of the study, the authors then go through the evolution of reactions to their paper, and it’s fascinating. Starting with lots of allegations of “scamming” (must be wrong) and a smear to make them look like nutters (persecution victimization) the conspiracy theories then evolved about everything to whether or not the authors didn’t actually contact skeptic blogs (amazingly the blogs they did contact came out and appear to have lied about not being contacted), persecutorial delusions about the authors blocking individual skeptics IP addresses from accessing the paper (and further conspiracies that when they are being unblocked it’s just to make them look paranoid), conspiracies about it being a ploy by the Australian government (nefarious intent), and it gets crazier and crazier from there.

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The most important part of this paper is when the authors explore the implications of their research on these conspiracy theorist responses to their previous paper for science communication in general. They essentially argue that because of the nature of conspiracy theories, and how they are seemingly immune to criticism and disconfirmatory evidence, that it is a waste of time for science educators (and they might as well say skeptics, as well) to even engage with conspiracy theorists and treat them seriously at all. Hoofnagle seems to agree with Lewandowsky et. al. here. The argument goes that if conspiracy theorists are ridiculed and exposed as the “defective brains that they are,” to use Hoofnagle’s phrase, instead of directly challenging them “as if they’re honest brokers,” then their influence and numbers will wane.

This is not completely unlike the argument that [scientists should not debate creationists](#), a position that leading science educators like [National Center for Science Education](#)’s [Eugenie Scott](#) have made over the years, and that scientists like [Richard Dawkins and Stephen J Gould](#) have also expounded.

I guess I disagree, even while recognizing that Hoofnagle and Scott and Dawkins make some really good points. Yes, debating denialists and peddlers of anti-science or conspiracy theories may seem to legitimize them. In the minds of a public undecided on the issues, whether we’re talking climate change or evolution or other consensus science challenged by the fringe, mainstream thinkers may lend credibility by giving them attention. But, indeed, I disagree that directly engaging the fringe is not useful. This is because, as a veteran of a few debates and a lot of direct engagement [with creationists](#) over the last 15+ years (and dozens of other debates and direct engagement on other interesting topics, like the proper role of religion in public schools, the existence of God, gay marriage, etc.), I have a pretty firm faith in public debate, in directly engaging my cultural competitors. I have to believe that the best ideas, argued well, will rise to the top. And shouldn’t science educators and science communicators and other professional truth-tellers be willing to engage their cultural competitors publicly, knowing that the best ideas will win if effectively communicated? Or should the destructive ideas of conspiracy theorists and others be ignored, ridiculed, or only addressed in the academy, unavailable to the wider, interested, low-information public.

Public argument and debate — direct engagement — even with the believing fringe, is an important antidote to the regrettable truth that throughout their lives, most people only interact with others who already share their central beliefs, whether about God, government, the paranormal, or issues like climate change, or important social issues. I used to run a program when I was at the Center for Inquiry called “Faith In College,” which were public events we put on at universities in cooperation with campus skeptics and freethought groups. These Faith in College events consisted essentially of panel discussions (often with much rigorous, if

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moderated, debate) among and by students of differing religious worldviews. It was always breathtaking to me to hear a student say publicly in front of an astonished audience that yes, he actually believed his good friend sitting next to him, well, was in fact going to burn in hell for eternity. Or to hear the atheist talk about why she lacked belief in God. Or to hear a Buddhist or Muslim or Sikh or Satanist share their experiences. Or to hear a secular humanist talk in front of the audience about where she gets her sense of right and wrong from, if not from God Almighty.

What was most spectacular, however, was to hear various perspectives rigorously challenged by other student panelists, in a public forum. That sort of direct scrutiny of belief happens far too infrequently, especially of fringe views. I may be too optimistic but I believe audiences left these and other similar events we put on asking themselves important questions about why they believed what they believed. And I think we owe the same opportunity to conspiracy theorists and denialists by challenging them directly, and talking to them, not just only ever about them and their whackaloon views.

It is, I think, a tad too fatalistic or defeatist to hear arguments that people of strongly different views, even on very important issues like climate change, complementary and alternative medicine, or the grand suspicions that fuel political conspiracy theories, have insurmountable differences that cannot be bridged by direct debate and engagement. Such fatalism, such rejection of any attempt to directly challenge conspiracy theorists of all stripes in public debate or argument, seems to foreclose any meaningful opportunity for mutual understanding, and seems far too acquiescent to the view that those who have fringe and unsupportable views will never be able to change their minds. Instead, I say Let The Best Ideas Win.

D.J. Grothe is president of the James Randi Educational Foundation and host of the interview program [For Good Reason](#) . A version of this post first appeared at [conspiracycycheck.net](#) , his blog focused on analyzing conspiracy theory culture and psychology.