

Why the War on “Conspiracy Theories” Is Bad Public Policy

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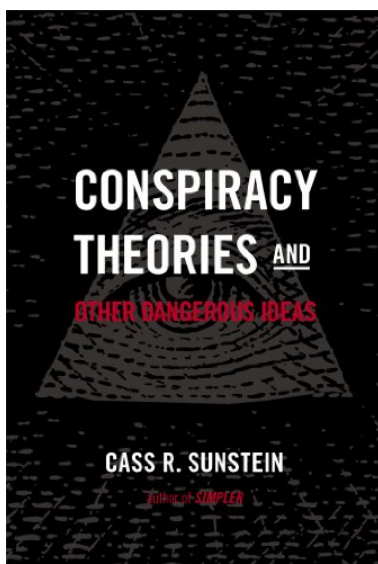
A Review of Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas by Cass Sunstein (based on an earlier paper co-authored with Adrian Vermeule); In Defense of Troublemakers: The Power of Dissent in Life and Business by Charlan Nemeth; and Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them, edited by Joseph E. Uscinski

On January 25 2018 YouTube unleashed the latest salvo in the war on conspiracy theories, [saying](#)

“we’ll begin reducing recommendations of borderline content and content that could misinform users in harmful ways—such as videos promoting a phony miracle cure for a serious illness, claiming the earth is flat, or making blatantly false claims about historic events like 9/11.”

At first glance that sounds reasonable. Nobody wants YouTube or anyone else to recommend bad information. And almost everyone agrees that phony miracle cures, flat earthism, and blatantly false claims about 9/11 and other historical events are undesirable.

But if we stop and seriously consider those words, we notice a couple of problems. First, the word “recommend” is not just misleading but mendacious. YouTube obviously doesn’t really *recommend* anything. When it says it does, it is lying.



When you watch YouTube videos, the YouTube search engine algorithm displays links to other videos that you are likely to be interested in. These obviously do not constitute “recommendations” by YouTube itself, which exercises no editorial oversight over content posted by users. (Or at least it didn’t until it joined the war on conspiracy theories.)

The second and larger problem is that while there may be near-universal agreement among reasonable people that flat-earthism is wrong, there is only modest agreement regarding which health approaches constitute “phony miracle cures” and which do not. Far less is there any agreement on “claims about 9/11 and other historical events.” (Thus far the only real attempt to forge an informed consensus about 9/11 is [the 9/11 Consensus Panel’s study](#)—but it seems unlikely that YouTube will be using the Consensus Panel to determine which videos to “recommend”!)

YouTube’s policy shift is the latest symptom of a larger movement by Western elites to—as Obama’s Information Czar Cass Sunstein put it—“[disable the purveyors of conspiracy theories](#).” Sunstein and co-author Adrian Vermeule’s 2008 paper “[Conspiracy Theories](#),” critiqued by [David Ray Griffin](#) in 2010 and developed into a [2016 book](#), represents a panicked reaction to the success of the 9/11 truth movement. (By 2006, 36% of Americans thought it likely that 9/11 was an inside job designed to launch wars in the Middle East, according to a Scripps poll.)

Sunstein and Vermuele begin their abstract:

Many millions of people hold (sic) conspiracy theories; they believe that powerful people have worked together in order to withhold the truth about some important practice or some terrible event. A recent example is the belief, widespread in some parts of the world, that the attacks of 9/11 were carried out not by Al Qaeda, but by Israel or the United States. Those who subscribe to conspiracy theories may create serious risks, including risks of violence, and the existence of such theories raises significant challenges for policy and law.

Sunstein argues that conspiracy theories (i.e. the 9/11 truth movement) are so dangerous that some day they may have to be banned by law. While awaiting that day, or perhaps in preparation for it, the government should “disable the purveyors of conspiracy theories” through various techniques including “cognitive infiltration” of 9/11 truth groups. Such “cognitive infiltration,” Sunstein writes, could have various aims including the promotion of “beneficial cognitive diversity” within the truth movement.

What sort of “cognitive diversity” would Cass Sunstein consider “beneficial”? Perhaps 9/11 truth groups that had been “cognitively infiltrated” by spooks posing as flat-earthers would harbor that sort of “beneficial” diversity? That would explain the plethora of expensive, high-production-values flat earth videos that have been blasted at the 9/11 truth community since 2008.

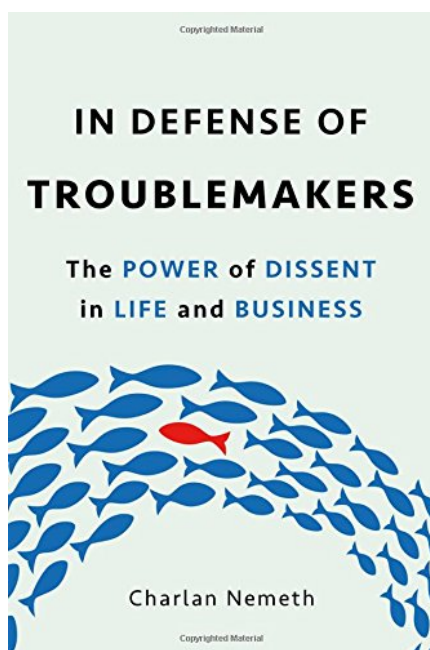
Why does Sunstein think “conspiracy theories” are so dangerous they need to be suppressed by government infiltrators, and perhaps eventually outlawed—which would necessitate revoking the First Amendment? Obviously conspiracism must present some extraordinary threat. So what might that threat be? Oddly, he never explains. Instead he briefly mentions, in vapidly nebulous terms, about “serious risks including the risk of violence.” But he presents no serious evidence that 9/11 truth causes violence. Nor does he explain what the other “serious risks” could possibly be.

Why did such highly accomplished academicians as Sunstein and Vermuele produce such an unhinged, incoherent, poorly-supported screed? How could Harvard and the University of Chicago publish such nonsense? Why would it be deemed worthy of development into a book? Why did the authors identify an alleged problem, present no evidence that it even *is* a problem, yet advocate outrageously illegal and unconstitutional government action to solve the non-problem?

The too-obvious answer, of course, is that they must realize that 9/11 was in fact a US-Israeli false flag operation. The 9/11 truth movement, in that case, would be a threat not because it is wrong, but because it is right. To the extent that Americans know or suspect the truth, the US government will undoubtedly find it harder to pursue various “national security” objectives. Ergo, 9/11 “conspiracy theories” are a threat to national security, and extreme measures are required to combat them. But since we can’t just burn the First Amendment overnight, we must instead take a gradual and covert “boil the frog” approach, featuring plenty of cointelpro-style infiltration and misdirection. “Cognitive infiltration” of internet platforms to stop the conspiracy contagion would also fit the bill.

It is quite possible, perhaps even likely, that Sunstein and Vermeule are indeed well-informed and Machievellian. But it is also conceivable that they are, at least when it comes to 9/11 and “conspiracy theories,” as muddle-headed as they appear. Their irrational panic could be an example of the bad thinking that emerges from groups that reflexively reject dissent. (Another, larger example of this kind of bad thinking comes to mind: America’s disastrous post-9/11 policies.)

The counterintuitive truth is that embracing and carefully listening to radical dissenters is in fact good policy, whether you are a government, a corporation, or any other kind of group. Ignoring or suppressing dissent produces muddled, superficial thinking and bad decisions. Surprisingly, this turns out to be the case even when the dissenters are wrong.



Scientific evidence for the value of dissent is beautifully summarized in Charlan Nemeth’s *In Defense of Troublemakers: The Power of Dissent in Life and Business* (Basic Books, 2018). Nemeth, a psychology professor at UC-Berkeley, summarizes decades of research on group dynamics showing that groups that feature passionate, radical dissent deliberate better,

reach better conclusions, and take better actions than those that do not—even when the dissenter is wrong.

Nemeth begins with a case where dissent would likely have saved lives: the crash of United Airlines Flight 173 in December, 1978. As the plane neared its Portland destination, the possibility of a problem with the landing gear arose. The captain focused on trying to determine the condition of the landing gear as the plane circled the airport. Typical air crew group dynamics, in which the whole crew defers to the captain, led to a groupthink bubble in which nobody spoke up as the needle on the fuel gauge approached “E.” Had the crew included even one natural “troublemaker”—the kind of aviator who joins Pilots for 9/11 truth—there almost certainly would have been more divergent thinking. Someone would have spoken up about the fuel issue, and a tragic crash would have been averted.

Since 9/11, American decision-making elites have entered the same kind of bubble and engaged in the same kind of groupthink. For them, no serious dissent on such issues as what really happened on 9/11, and whether a “war on terror” makes sense, is permitted. The predictable result has been bad thinking and worse decisions. From the vantage point of Sunstein and Vermeule, deep inside the bubble, the potentially bubble-popping, consensus-shredding threat of 9/11 truth must appear radically destabilizing. To even consider the possibility that the 9/11 truthers are right might set off a stampede of critical reflection that would radically undermine the entire set of policies pursued for the past 17 years. This prospect may so terrify Sunstein and Vermeule that it paralyzes their ability to think. Talk about “crippled epistemology”!

Do Sunstein and Vermeule really think their program for suppressing “conspiracy theories” will be beneficial? Do YouTube’s decision-makers really believe that tweaking their algorithms to support the official story will protect us from bad information? If so, they are all doubly wrong. First, they are wrong in their unexamined assumption that 9/11 truth and “conspiracy theories” in general are “blatantly false.” No honest person with critical thinking skills who weighs the merits of the best work on both sides of the question can possibly avoid the realization that [the 9/11 truth movement is right](#). The same is true [regarding the serial assassinations of America’s best leaders during the 1960s](#). Many other “conspiracy theories,” perhaps the majority of the best-known ones, are also likely true, as readers of Ron Unz’s [American Pravda series](#) are discovering.

Second, and less obviously, those who would suppress conspiracy theories are wrong even in their belief that suppressing *false* conspiracy theories is good public policy. As Nemeth shows, social science is unambiguous in its finding that any group featuring at least one passionate, radical dissenter will deliberate better, reach sounder conclusions, and act more effectively than it would have without the dissenter. This holds even if the dissenter is wrong—even wildly wrong.

The overabundance of slick, hypnotic flat earth videos, if they are indeed weaponized cointelpro strikes against the truth movement, may be unfortunate. But the existence of the occasional flat earther may be more beneficial than harmful. The findings summarized by Nemeth suggest that a science study group with one flat earther among the students would probably learn geography and astronomy better than they would have without the madly passionate dissenter.

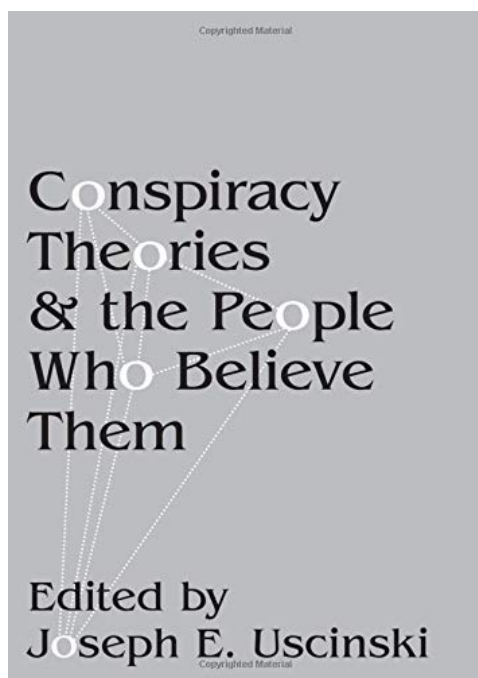
We could at least partially solve the real problem—bad groupthink—through promoting genuinely beneficial cognitive diversity. YouTube algorithms should indeed be tweaked to

puncture the groupthink bubbles that emerge based on user preferences. Someone who watches lots of 9/11 truther videos should indeed be exposed to dissent, in the form of the best arguments on the other side of the issue—not that there are any very good ones, as I have discovered after spending 15 years searching for them!

But the same goes for those who watch videos that explicitly or implicitly accept the official story. Anyone who watches more than a few pro-official-story videos (and this would include almost all mainstream coverage of anything related to 9/11 and the “war on terror”) should get YouTube “suggestions” for such videos as [September 11: The New Pearl Harbor, 9/11 Mysteries](#), and the work of [Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth](#). Exposure to even those “truthers” who are more passionate than critical or well-informed would benefit people who believe the official story, according to Nemeth’s research, by stimulating them to deliberate more thoughtfully and to question facile assumptions.

The same goes for other issues and perspectives. Fox News viewers should get “suggestions” for good material, especially passionate dissent, from the left side of the political spectrum. MSNBC viewers should get “suggestions” for good material from the right. Both groups should get “suggestions” to look at genuinely independent, alternative media brimming with passionate dissidents—outlets like the Unz Review!

Unfortunately things are moving in the opposite direction. YouTube’s effort to make “conspiracy videos” invisible is being pushed by powerful lobbies, especially the Zionist lobby, which seems dedicated to singlehandedly destroying the Western tradition of freedom of expression.



Nemeth and colleagues’ findings that “conspiracy theories” and other forms of passionate dissent are not just beneficial, but in fact an invaluable resource, are apparently unknown to the anti-conspiracy-theory cottage industry that has metastasized in the bowels of the Western academy. The brand-new bible of the academic anti-conspiracy-theory industry is *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Editor Joseph Uscinski’s introduction begins by listing alleged dangers of conspiracism: “In

democracies, conspiracy theories can drive majorities to make horrible decisions backed by the use of legitimate force. Conspiracy beliefs can conversely encourage abstention. Those who believe the system is rigged will be less willing to take part in it. Conspiracy theories form the basis for some people's medical decisions; this can be dangerous not only for them but for others as well. For a select few believers, conspiracy theories are instructions to use violence."

Uscinski is certainly right that conspiracy theories can incite "horrible decisions" to use "legitimate force" and "violence." Every major American foreign war since 1846 has been sold to the public by an official theory, backed by a frenetic media campaign, of a foreign conspiracy to attack the United States. And all of these Official Conspiracy Theories (OCTs)—including the theory that Mexico conspired to invade the United States in 1846, that Spain conspired to sink the USS Maine in 1898, that Germany conspired with Mexico to invade the United States in 1917, that Japan conspired unbeknownst to peace-seeking US leaders to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941, that North Vietnam conspired to attack the US Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, and that 19 Arabs backed by Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and everybody else Israel doesn't like conspired to attack the US in 2001—were false or deceptive.

Well over 100 million people have been killed in the violence unleashed by these and other Official Conspiracy Theories. Had the passionate dissenters been heeded, and the truths they told about who really conspires to create war-trigger public relations stunts been understood, none of those hundred-million-plus murders need have happened.

Though *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* generally pathologizes the conspiracy theories of dissidents while ignoring the vastly more harmful theories of official propagandists, its 31 essays include several that question that outlook. In "What We Mean When We Say 'Conspiracy Theory' Jesse Walker, books editor of *Reason Magazine*, exposes the bias that permeates the field, pointing out that many official conspiracy theories, including several about Osama Bin Laden and 9/11-anthrax, were at least as ludicrously false and delusional as anything believed by marginalized dissidents.

In "Media Marginalization of Racial Minorities: 'Conspiracy Theorists' in U.S. Ghettos and on the 'Arab Street'" Martin Orr and Gina Husting go one step further:

"The epithet 'conspiracy theorist' is used to tarnish those who challenge authority and power. Often, it is tinged with racial undertones: it is used to demean whole groups of people in the news and to silence, stigmatize, or belittle foreign and minority voices." (p.82)

Unfortunately, though Orr and Husting devote a whole section of their article to "Conspiracy Theories in the Muslim World" and defend Muslim conspiracists against the likes of Thomas Friedman, they never squarely face the fact that the reason roughly 80% of Muslims believe 9/11 was an inside job is because [the preponderance of evidence supports that interpretation](#).

Another relatively sensible essay is M R.X. Dentith's "Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy," which ably deconstructs the most basic fallacy permeating the whole field of conspiracy theory research: the a priori assumption that a "conspiracy theory" must be false or at least dubious:

"If certain scholars (i.e. the majority represented in this book! -KB) want to make a special case for conspiracy theories, then it is reasonable for the rest of us to ask whether we are playing fair with our terminology, or whether we have baked into our definitions the answers to our research programs." (p.104). Unfortunately, a few pages later editor Joseph Uscinski sticks his fingers in his ears and plays deaf and dumb, claiming that "the establishment is right far more often than conspiracy theories, largely because their methods are reliable. When conspiracy theorists are right, it is by chance." He adds that conspiracy theories will inevitably "occasionally lead to disaster" (whatever that means). (p.110).

I hope Uscinski finds the time to read Nemeth's *In Defense of Troublemakers* and consider the evidence that passionate dissent is helpful, not harmful. And I hope he will look into the issues Ron Unz addresses in his American Pravda series.

Then again, if he does, he may find himself among those of us exiled from the academy and publishing in *The Unz Review*.

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