



HUMANS AND TECHNOLOGY

How to talk to conspiracy theorists—and still be kind

Experts and r/ChangeMyView subreddit moderators offer 10 tips to debunk conspiracy theories convincingly—and kindly.

By [Tanya Basu](#) July 15, 2020

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On May 4, a slick, 26-minute video was released, alleging that the coronavirus was actually a laboratory-manipulated virus deployed to wreak havoc so that a resulting

vaccine could be used for profit. None of that was true, and *Plandemic*'s claims were thoroughly, repeatedly debunked. Still, [it went viral, getting liked on Facebook 2.5 million times](#). A central position of *Plandemic* is that Bill Gates created the coronavirus, and soon after, another conspiracy theory took hold: his plan was to control vaccination efforts that would include tracking people via implanted microchips activated by 5G cellular towers. Again, obviously not true.

But a Pew Research Center [survey](#) found that 32% thought these conspiracy theories were probably or definitely true. Perhaps some of those people are your family, your friends, your neighbors.

So how do you talk to a person who believes a conspiracy theory? This is something that the members of one of the internet's most vibrant communities, [r/ChangeMyView](#), deal with on a daily basis. This is the place on Reddit where people go to have their own beliefs challenged, and it is known as a calm, moderate place for debate.

We asked some of its most active users, as well as some conspiracy theory researchers, for their tips.

BEFORE YOU HAVE THE TALK, BEAR IN MIND:

It's very human and normal to believe in conspiracy theories. "Conspiracy theories resonate with us all, to some extent," says [Rob Brotherton](#), a psychologist who's written two books on conspiracy theories and fake news. It's a defense mechanism: we're primed to be suspicious and afraid of things that can't be explained.

No one is above conspiracy theories — not even you. Brotherton cites the "third-person effect," the hypothesis that people tend to think the average person will be much more influenced by fake news or conspiracy theories than they are themselves. But though you might think of yourself as smarter than your aunt on Facebook, and while there is [evidence](#) that education combats belief in conspiracy theories, the truth is that none of us are perfectly immune to them. Multiple members of [r/ChangeMyView](#) said they've been personally changed by this humility, and that it's helped them to talk to people who believe in conspiracy theories.

No single demographic is most prone to conspiracy theories. "I've seen plenty of

representation from white, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Indigenous people,” one Redditor, ihatedogs2, told me. “Plenty of women, LGBTQ+ people, and people with all kinds of careers. Many different countries, too. In terms of political leanings there is also a great variety, with liberals, conservatives, socialists, libertarians, communists, fascists, and more.”

Social distancing makes conspiracy theories more appealing. Joan Donovan, a disinformation expert at Harvard University, says coronavirus conspiracy theories offer a sense of community in the face of social distancing. “Images of sick people, empty shelves, ventilators — these are all things that have been serious traumas for us,” Donovan says. Without friends or family around, people have found social media especially engaging, and they have drawn comfort from the explanations that conspiracy theories provide.

They all contain a kernel of truth. “There’s something verifiable in there somewhere — some information that’s layered with dangerous speculation,” Donovan says. For example, the 5G conspiracy theory can be traced to a [paper](#) published in December in Science Translational Medicine about “quantum dots,” particles emitting near-infrared light, that could be embedded in skin to record vaccinations. But the lead author of the paper, Kevin McHugh, [told](#) NPR that there was no tracking or microchips involved: “I don’t even know where that comes from. All the quantum dots [do is] produce light.” A kernel of truth, stuffed in a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories tend to involve a dangerous “other.” Donovan says a common underpinning of these theories is racism. “Disinformation falls into ‘What *they* don’t want you to know about,’” she says. And who *they* refers to “tends to be racialized.”

Everyone is an influencer. And that’s good and bad. The anti-vax movement found its strength in celebrities like Jenny McCarthy, who were able to use their platform to magnify their cause. Now, YouTube and podcasting have been able to take what were once fringe views into the mainstream, says Donovan. But that also means that there are lots of debunking sources at your disposal.

HOW TO TALK TO A CONSPIRACY THEORIST:

1. **Always, *always* speak respectfully.** Every single person I spoke to said that without respect, compassion, and empathy, no one will open their mind or heart to you. No one will listen.
2. **Go private.** Donovan says that when she sees someone post something problematic on social media, she doesn't pile on in the comments section. "I might send someone a text or reach out in a personalized way through DMs rather than post on their wall," she says. That prevents discussion from getting embarrassing for the poster, and it implies a genuine compassion and interest in conversation rather than a desire for public shaming.
3. **Test the waters first.** That way you save yourself time and energy. "You can ask what it would take to change their mind, and if they say they will never change their mind, then you should take them at their word and not bother engaging," r/ChangeMyView moderator ihatedogs2 told me. In fact, the subreddit has a [list](#) of behaviors that indicate if a person is not genuinely open to discussion.
4. **Agree.** Remember the kernel of truth? Conspiracy theories often feature elements that everyone can agree on. Establish those to help build trust and an "I'm on your side" vibe to prep for the stickier stuff to come.
5. **Try the "truth sandwich."** Use the fact-fallacy-fact approach, a [method](#) first proposed by linguist George Lakoff. "State what's true, debunk the conspiracy theory, and state what's true again," Donovan says. For example, if you're talking to someone who believes the 5G conspiracy theory, you could structure your argument as "Coronavirus is an airborne virus, which means it is passed by sneezing, coughing, or particles. Because viruses are not transmitted via radio waves, coronavirus, which is an airborne virus, can't be carried by 5G." It's repetitive, but it reinforces facts and points out where the conspiracy theory doesn't work.
6. **Or use the Socratic method.** In other words, use questions to help others probe their own argument and see if it stands up. Stuart Johnson, a mod on r/ChangeMyView, says that this is by far the most effective approach he's found, as it challenges people to come up with sources and defend their position themselves. "The best way to change someone's view is to make them feel like they've uncovered it themselves," he says. That means engaging in back-and-forth questions and answers until you hit a dead end, gently pointing out inconsistencies. [Studies](#) show that people often think they know more about a policy than they let on,

and the Socratic method can reveal those inconsistencies. [Research](#) shows this tactic can prevent one party from feeling attacked.

7. **Be very careful with loved ones.** Every single person I spoke to hesitated when asked how to confront a loved one, like a parent or sibling, who believes in conspiracy theories. Many said they back off if the relationship is extremely close. “You have to perform a calculation on whether it’s worth it to engage,” [ihatedogs2](#) told me. “How deeply do they believe it? How harmful is their belief?” It can be tough, but biting your tongue and picking your battles can help your mental health too. As another [r/ChangeMyView](#) user, [Canada Constitution](#), put it: “A harmonious Thanksgiving is preferable to fights over social media.”
8. **Realize that some people don’t want to change, no matter the facts.** In highly politicized areas, researchers have [found](#), some people rationalize their belief system—even if reality counters it—simply because it’s difficult to be in the wrong. [Canada Constitution](#) once ran into this in trying to talk to someone who thought psychiatric medication was a conspiracy: “No matter how many peer-reviewed studies I pulled up, they would not budge. Rather than get frustrated, I took the opportunity to ask them further questions to understand their beliefs.” Taking this approach not only helps you refine your argument but also is more compassionate.
9. **If it gets bad, stop.** One [r/ChangeMyView](#) moderator suggested “IRL calming down”: shutting off your phone or computer and going for a walk. Another put it even more simply: “If I am not enjoying the discussion and getting angry, then I simply stop.”
10. **Every little bit helps.** One conversation will probably not change a person’s mind, and that’s okay. “People aren’t going to have seismic shifts in beliefs all at once,” an [r/ChangeMyView](#) mod, [themaskedserpent](#), told me. “Sometimes you can shift someone’s perspective a little, like water eroding a rock. You won’t debunk a conspiracy theory but lay the path for someone in the future to do so.”