

ESCAPING THE RABBIT HOLE

*How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories
Using Facts, Logic, and Respect*

MICK WEST



Skyhorse Publishing

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PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

Overview

Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, "Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking." I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an "aha, eureka!" moment, like "wait a minute." Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This "aha" moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as "Chemtrail" barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of "the news," and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He'd made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I've been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I've adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it's definitely changed my life.

I don't really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with "who killed Kennedy?"—there's these new documents just released, and there's no smoking gun, so I just don't give it much time or energy. I'm pretty satisfied with the official story. There's some weird stuff, but I'm pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn't do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I'm entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, "Are you a Republican now?" Because I don't believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can't quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

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Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

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But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

Overview

Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

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the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

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PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, "Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking." I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an "aha, eureka!" moment, like "wait a minute." Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This "aha" moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as "Chemtrail" barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of "the news," and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He'd made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I've been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I've adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it's definitely changed my life.

I don't really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with "who killed Kennedy?"—there's these new documents just released, and there's no smoking gun, so I just don't give it much time or energy. I'm pretty satisfied with the official story. There's some weird stuff, but I'm pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn't do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I'm entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, "Are you a Republican now?" Because I don't believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can't quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

Introduction

death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl—Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

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What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

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So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

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Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

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Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

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PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

Introduction

These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, "Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking." I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an "aha, eureka!" moment, like "wait a minute." Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This "aha" moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as "Chemtrail" barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of "the news," and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He'd made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I've been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I've adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it's definitely changed my life.

I don't really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with "who killed Kennedy?"—there's these new documents just released, and there's no smoking gun, so I just don't give it much time or energy. I'm pretty satisfied with the official story. There's some weird stuff, but I'm pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn't do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I'm entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, "Are you a Republican now?" Because I don't believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can't quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

ESCAPING THE RABBIT HOLE

- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

Overview

Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, "Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking." I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an "aha, eureka!" moment, like "wait a minute." Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This "aha" moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as "Chemtrail" barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of "the news," and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He'd made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I've been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I've adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it's definitely changed my life.

I don't really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with "who killed Kennedy?"—there's these new documents just released, and there's no smoking gun, so I just don't give it much time or energy. I'm pretty satisfied with the official story. There's some weird stuff, but I'm pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn't do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I'm entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, "Are you a Republican now?" Because I don't believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can't quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

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Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

ESCAPING THE RABBIT HOLE

- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

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Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

ESCAPING THE RABBIT HOLE

- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

Introduction

Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

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Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, “Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking.” I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an “aha, eureka!” moment, like “wait a minute.” Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This “aha” moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as “Chemtrail” barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of “the news,” and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He’d made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I’ve been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I’ve adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it’s definitely changed my life.

I don’t really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with “who killed Kennedy?”—there’s these new documents just released, and there’s no smoking gun, so I just don’t give it much time or energy. I’m pretty satisfied with the official story. There’s some weird stuff, but I’m pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn’t do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I’m entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, “Are you a Republican now?” Because I don’t believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can’t quite figure me out.

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

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Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

Overview

Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

PROLOGUE

Willie – Rabbit Hole Escapee

When Willie first discovered the conspiracy theory rabbit hole he was a young man living in the Pacific Northwest. His hometown was, as he puts it, “a very liberal, hippy-dippy kind of community.” He listened to Art Bell, an apocalyptic conspiracy theorist on short-wave radio, and he’d “wake up every morning thinking the world was going to end.”

Willie got his information about what was going on in the outside world from a variety of sources. The most significant was What Really Happened, a website with the tagline, “The history the government hopes you *don’t* learn!” Here’s Willie:

So I started every morning, reading “the news” on What Really Happened. It was all just that kind of conspiracy thing, and every once in a while they would link to one of those other sites, like Alex Jones’ Infowars . . . And, as with a lot of people, I was just like, “Oh my God! Look at all this news that no one else has ever seen before, and I’m seeing it!”

Willie was an avid consumer of this special type of news, reading about all kinds of conspiracy theories. He read the theory that TWA Flight 800 was shot down by a missile, and conspiracy theories about the Waco siege and the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ He read how the government was planning to shepherd people into concentration camps, and how they added fluoride to the water to keep us weak. He read about the JFK assassination being a CIA plot and how the attacks on 9/11 were an “inside job.” He read and believed many theories in the years he spent down the rabbit hole.

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He'd heard about the Chemtrail theory early on, but he didn't pay much attention. Generally speaking, the theory says that the trails that planes leave behind in the sky are not, as science tells us, just condensation clouds, but are actually some kind of deliberate toxic spraying. These theories date back to 1997 when the focus was on the health effects of the supposed chemicals. These concerns didn't resonate much with Willie, a healthy young man, so he didn't really look into it.

What eventually drew him deep down the Chemtrails corner of the rabbit hole was a photo of "Chemtrail tanks" on a plane. A popular example of evidence used by promoters of the Chemtrail theory is photos of suspicious looking metal barrels on planes with tubing coming out of them. These are actually just photos of the interiors of test aircraft. The barrels contain water, used as ballast to simulate the weight of the passengers for flight testing. But if you don't know this then these photos could easily look like evidence of some kind of spraying campaign.

The Chemtrail theory was in the background for quite a long time; I believed that 'they,' the government, or somebody, was capable of something like that. But I never said, "I'm feeling health effects from Chemtrails" or anything like that. The smoking gun for me, [in support of] Chemtrails, was the barrels thing. When I saw that I was like, "Oh well, that proves it, oh my God." I was somewhat devastated because it confirmed that it was true.

Willie stayed down the rabbit hole for years, consuming all the information he could find about conspiracy theories, and occasionally sharing the information in the comments section of his local newspaper. We often think of conspiracy theorists as ardent campaigners for what they think is the truth—evangelical proselytizers who harangue everyone with their alternative ideas. But many of them largely keep their theories to themselves.

I didn't really go around proselytizing, but I did sign my comments on the local newspaper website with a little blurb about 9/11 being an inside job. But it wasn't like I was standing with a microphone. I was in a band, and I never said this onstage or anything like that.

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When I asked Willie how he dealt with people around him who tried to dissuade him from his conspiracy beliefs, it turns out the situation was remarkably infrequent. He was living in something of a cultural bubble.

No, no one argued! Where I live there's a lot of people who believe in this stuff; I guess that says a lot about how I have a limited group of friends, or whatever. But I never really got any pushback. It was like I got radicalized online.

Maybe one time someone challenged me, and I gave them the [sarcastic] line, "Sure, governments always tell the truth." He came back to me with, "Well, no that's not true. Yes, governments lie, but in this case, there isn't really convincing evidence of what you say." The people on the local newspaper website comments section who were always commenting to me, I thought of them as way too rational. Not enough "feeling," you know? They were just too data-driven, mostly Apollonian in thinking rather than Dionysian, you know?

Apollonian and Dionysian refers to two Greek gods. Apollo is the god of rational thinking, prudence, and purity. Dionysus is his opposite—irrational, chaotic, a risk taker, driven by emotions and instincts. He's the fun guy. The devil-may-care Dionysian worldview was more appealing to the hippies of the Pacific Northwest.

Not only did Willie get very little critical pushback from the people around him, he wasn't even really aware that there *were* any places he could go to get information that countered the conspiracy theories he was hearing from his own "news" sources.

No, I wasn't aware of debunking websites in the beginning. In the beginning I was looking at my local news and eager to discuss world views with people, but I didn't know about Snopes, or . . . what others are there?

But, years later, it was the very same evidence that pulled him down that helped him escape: the ballast barrels.

One day, I was on Above Top Secret [a conspiracy forum], and somebody debunked the ballast barrel thing. When they gave me the information, a link to

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the aviation site where the image was from, I looked at it and thought, "Oh my God, the other thinking was the wrong thinking." I immediately recognized that the person who was doing this debunking on ATS was way smarter than me, more intelligent than me, way closer to being an expert on this subject than me. It was like an "aha, eureka!" moment, like "wait a minute." Somebody has been lying about these ballast barrels, to make it seem like the whole Chemtrail thing is real.

This "aha" moment, triggered by a friendly poster online, led Willie to my debunking forum, Metabunk, where I have a long thread that discusses and explains all the photos of ballast barrels that get passed off as "Chemtrail" barrels.² After this experience, Willie gradually shifted away from his unquestioning belief in alternative accounts of "the news," and began along a more skeptical, Apollonian path of questioning both sides of what he was being told. After he figured out that Chemtrails were not real he started to question other theories he had assumed were true, like explosives being used to destroy the World Trade Center. He'd made a U-turn deep down in the rabbit hole and was finally returning into the light. It had taken nine years.

About 2003 is maybe when I started believing all the weird stuff, until about 2012 or so. I was into all that stuff for a long time. Now I check out Metabunk all the time, just to see what the new thing is. I've been posting stuff on Facebook for my friend. I've adopted this skeptical frame of mind when looking at anything. I really . . . it's definitely changed my life.

I don't really think any conspiracy theories are really plausible. Even with "who killed Kennedy?"—there's these new documents just released, and there's no smoking gun, so I just don't give it much time or energy. I'm pretty satisfied with the official story. There's some weird stuff, but I'm pretty satisfied with it. Even the global warming hoax theory doesn't do it for me. I put it this way: I used to be entertained by conspiracy theories, but now I'm entertained by seeing them debunked.

In my circle people are confused by me now, they are like, "Are you a Republican now?" Because I don't believe 9/11 was an inside job now people can't quite figure me out.

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“Are you a Republican now?” his friends asked him when he stopped thinking 9/11 was an inside job. Conspiracy theories often have a distinct partisan flavor, which we shall discuss later in the book.

And, you know, I really do appreciate the politeness aspect of Metabunk, there’s so many debunking resources out there that belittle people and call them stupid and stuff.

The conspiracy thing was a worldview. I was testing that worldview out. It was entertaining. It also feels good because you think you have the truth and nobody else does . . . But yeah, that’s how it happened for me, and then one day, it might have been you on Above Top Secret, the ballast barrels, totally changed my life. Thank you.

If it was me on Above Top Secret I was probably one of several people who posted the correct information. There were many skeptical types on ATS back then, debunking Chemtrails, unaware at that moment that they had changed someone’s life just by showing them some information they had been missing.

Willie’s story demonstrates that people deep down the rabbit hole can still escape. But it also shows us just what a different world it is down there. Willie did not simply reject the conventional explanation of things. He was, in many cases, simply unaware that a conventional explanation existed, except as some kind of abstract, too-rational lie that he instinctively stayed away from. For Willie the first step was not being persuaded that his position was wrong, it was being shown that other positions even existed and that good, intelligent people actually took them seriously.

Willie stayed down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole for so long because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Exposure to missing information gradually altered his perspective on the world and helped him escape. He found this missing information piecemeal via online interactions, but people get out much quicker if they are helped by a friend, someone who could introduce them to new perspectives in ways a stranger on the internet never could.

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Conspiracies are very real, of course. The fact that powerful people make secret plans at the expense of the general public should come as no surprise to anyone. Nixon conspired to cover up Watergate. The CIA staged “false flag” operations in 1953 to bring down the Iranian government. Powerful men in the Reagan administration conspired to illegally trade arms with Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. Enron conspired to shut down power stations to raise the price of electricity. Executives from Archer Daniels Midland conspired to fix the price of animal feed.¹ People within the second Bush administration conspired to present sketchy evidence as conclusive proof of WMDs to justify the invasion of Iraq. Politicians tacitly (and sometimes overtly) conspire with wealthy individuals and corporations, helping pass favorable legislation in exchange for campaign contributions, or sometimes just bribes.² The prison industry conspires to get those politicians to incarcerate more people simply to maximize their profits.³

Nobody sensible is denying that conspiracies happen. These are well documented and undisputed facts. Conspiracies very clearly have happened and will continue to happen. Nobody is asking you to trust that the people in power always have your best interests at heart, because they clearly do not. Nobody is asking you to blindly trust the government, or big pharma, or any large entity with a gross amount of power, wealth, and influence. A key aspect of a well-functioning democracy is that the government should be subject to scrutiny.

Conspiracies are real, but with every one of these very real conspiracies and plausible potential conspiracy there’s a slew of *false conspiracy theories*.

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These theories are efforts to explain some event or situation by invoking a conspiracy. They are theories that are either very likely false because they lack the significant evidence needed to improve over the conventional explanation, or are simply demonstrably false.

There are conspiracy theories like the idea that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed with pre-planted explosives, or that the Moon landings in the 1960s were faked, or that planes are spraying toxic chemicals to deliberately modify the climate. There's less extreme, but still false conspiracy theories, like the pharmaceutical industry covering up how well homeopathy works (it doesn't), or the car industry covering up motors that can run on water (they can't). At the far end of the conspiracy spectrum there's the claim that the Earth is flat (it's not) and the government is somehow covering this up (how would that even work?). There's old conspiracy theories, like the idea that Jewish bankers rule the world, and new conspiracy theories, like the idea that the government stages shootings of children in schools to promote gun control.

The premise of this book is very simple. These false conspiracy theories are a problem. They hurt individuals by affecting their life choices, in terms of money, health, and social interactions. They hurt society by distracting from the very real problems of corruption and decreasing citizens' genuine participation in democracy. False conspiracy theories are real problems and we can and should do something about them. This book discusses the nature of the problem, why people get sucked in, how they get out, and what pragmatic things can be done to help individuals escape the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

The key themes of this book are:

- Understanding the conspiracy theory rabbit hole
- Realizing that conspiracy theorists are just normal people
- Developing a clear understanding of what they are thinking and why
- Fostering trust and mutual respect
- Finding areas of agreement and recognizing their genuine concerns
- Identifying mistakes in their beliefs, or areas where they lack information
- Exposing them to new information to help them gain a more fact-based perspective

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- Doing it all with honesty and openness
- Giving it time

In this book I will draw on three sources of information. Firstly and primarily, I will draw upon my personal experience. I run the website Metabunk, which is a site for discussing, investigating, and debunking a wide variety of false conspiracy theories and unusual beliefs. With my previous “Chemtrail”-focused site, Contrail Science, and other sites, I’ve been debunking as a hobby for over fifteen years. During that time, I’ve met hundreds of people on both sides of the fence, heard their stories, and seen them change over the years. Many of them I’ve helped, usually indirectly, like Willie with the Chemtrail barrels, but sometimes directly. I’ll include the stories of more of those people in later chapters.

Secondly, I will draw upon the writings of other skeptical-minded people doing the same thing. In fields ranging from global warming conspiracy theories to 9/11 conspiracies, there are others who do similar things to myself, people who have researched both why people believe conspiracy theories and how they can be helped out. Many individuals have shared their experiences and thoughts about which debunking and communication strategies work, and which do not.

Thirdly, I will draw upon the academic literature in the field of conspiracy theories. Since the 1950s with the conspiracy theories of the radical right, through the 1960s with the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, there has been a steady growth in interest in why people fall for unfounded beliefs and what strategies are scientifically effective in bringing them back to a more realistic view of the world.

The fundamental technique outlined here is maintaining effective communication and presenting your friend, the conspiracy theorist, with information that they are lacking, and doing it all in a manner that will encourage them to look at what you are presenting without rejecting you as an idiot or a government shill. Given time, this additional information will help them gain enough genuine perspective to begin to question what they thought they knew and to start their journey out of the rabbit hole.

What Is the “Rabbit Hole”?

The normal definition of the metaphorical rabbit hole is something like:

*A bizarre world, a time-consuming tangent or detour, often from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.*⁴

In the modern conspiracy culture this rabbit hole is an obsession with a bizarre world of books, websites, and YouTube videos that claim to reveal hidden truths about the world. It’s a detour from regular life, one that is certainly time-consuming, and definitely one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

The phrase comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice enters the bizarre Wonderland by following a white rabbit down a hole.

*Down went Alice after [the White Rabbit], never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very steep well.*⁵

In recent times a more specific usage has arisen, derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where at a crucial point Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a choice. He can either take the blue pill and return to a normal life, or take the red pill and “see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo, of course, “takes the red pill,” and the “rabbit hole” leads him to discover the true nature of the world. He “wakes up” from his programmed illusion of comfortable, bland monotony into a brutal yet genuine struggle for existence, a messianic battle against evil, manipulating overlords.

This terminology has been directly adopted by various conspiracy communities. The rabbit hole is seen as a good place to be, a place where the true nature of the world is revealed. Their red pill moment might be the first YouTube video they watched, a conversation with a friend, or a book. They wake up, take the red pill, and proceed deliberately down the rabbit hole into what they see as an incredible wonderland of truth.

I also want people to wake up to the true nature of the world. But the conspiracy theory rabbit hole is not the way to do it. It’s full of seductive

nonsensical theories, a bizarre wonderland of time-wasting and harmful falsehoods that are taking people further away from the real world, not closer. It's not a blue pill or a red pill; it's a poison pill.

This book is about helping people out of that rabbit hole of false conspiracy theories. More specifically it's about helping your friend.

Your Friend

This book is written mostly assuming that you, the reader, are trying to better understand or help someone who is down the rabbit hole. Perhaps it's a relative, maybe your spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Perhaps it's a friend, a close friend or casual acquaintance, someone you sit next to at work, or even just someone you know online. With this in mind I'm going to refer throughout the book to this person—the target of your concerns and your attention—as “your friend.”

Of course, they might not currently be your friend. Especially in family situations, a strong belief in something that another person finds preposterous can lead to frustration, anger, and possibly even to deep-seated animosity or disgust. Your friend might find it ridiculous that you think people landed on the Moon. He might consider you borderline insane for entertaining the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. He might grow angry when you refuse to watch all four hours of *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. He might turn his back on you when you refuse to be concerned about the white lines crisscrossing the skies.

But if you wanted a book for dealing with an enemy, a list of tricks you can use to annihilate someone in a debate, something that will make them look like an idiot, then I suggest you look elsewhere. I want to *help* people, not mock or belittle them. If you think you can only help someone by beating them in every argument and making them look stupid, then I respectfully disagree. Showing your friend their faults is only a small part of helping them out of the rabbit hole, and if you apply such a blunt tool to someone you consider your enemy, then you will probably achieve the opposite of your goal, only hammering them deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole as they harden their heart against you and their mind against your facts.

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So even if they are actually acting in some sense as your enemy, I will still refer to them as “your friend.” Try to think of them as such, a good person who means well, someone who is simply mistaken about certain things and rather set in their ways. As we will shortly see, the first stage of helping someone out of the rabbit hole is to understand them, and then to gain their trust. You cannot do that by waging a war of words against them.

There is a significant danger that I will reiterate throughout the book. The danger is that advice like “treat them like a friend” and “gain their trust” might be viewed as advice from a manual on brainwashing. Conspiracists are obviously suspicious of people like me who spend time investigating and refuting their theories. I get accused of being a paid government agent, someone trained in “disinformation,” someone skilled in implanting false ideas in people’s heads. They may look at this book, and my body of work on *Meta-bunk*, and decide I’m lying, trying to gaslight individuals away from the truth.

The best defense is to be as open and honest as possible. Yes, I think treating someone like a friend makes it easier to convince them of their errors. But the only reason they are acting like an enemy towards me is because they are mistaken in their beliefs. If I’m engaging with someone it is because I think they are a good person who is just stuck down a rabbit hole. If they think I’m the enemy, and they act as my enemy, then it’s only because they are in fact a friend who has lost their way.

Finally, “your friend” might in fact be *you*. Perhaps you are reading this book because you recognize you are a little lost down a rabbit hole and you want a little help out, or at least a look outside. Perhaps you don’t think you are down the rabbit hole, or you think that your beliefs illustrate you are wide awake to the truth. Perhaps you are reading this because you think I’m a government shill, and you want to get the lowdown on this new government shill handbook so you can help your friends avoid being tricked. Or maybe someone asked you to read this book as a favor, and you begrudgingly agreed, because they are your friend.

If you are actually a conspiracy theorist, then you can think of “your friend” in one of two ways. Firstly, you should be your own friend. You might start out reading this book to try to figure out my mind games, but I hope you end up with some better perspective on both where I am coming

from, and on your own view of how the world works. Maybe you'll find you've got something wrong somewhere. Maybe you will at least find this perspective helps you better communicate your own ideas. Maybe this book will confirm what you already knew. Whatever the outcome, I hope you find it useful.

The second way a conspiracy theorist might find this book useful comes about because conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. If you are a conspiracy theorist (and we all are to some degree), you consider yourself a reasonable person, and you believe only in conspiracy theories that you think are well founded, backed up by evidence and common sense. While you might disagree with my attempt to debunk your theories at wherever level you are at on the conspiracy theory spectrum, you might find common ground in trying to help those who are further along. I've had several 9/11 Truthers thank me for helping debunk Chemtrails, and I've had Chemtrail believers thank me for explaining to their friend why the Earth is not flat. Read this book to figure out how to help your friend who's down a deeper, darker rabbit hole. If it seems reasonable then maybe at some point you can see if anything in here applies to your personal beliefs.

Or, if you like, go ahead read this as a brainwashing manual for government skills. Try to figure out my tricks. I'm not trying to brainwash you, but if it will get you to read the book then go ahead and assume it for a while, but I invite you to check back again later.

What's the Harm?

"Why bother?" is a question I am asked a lot. Why should we care about people who believe in conspiracies, and why should we try to help them? This question speaks directly to the reasons why I wrote this book. I want to help people out of the conspiracy theory rabbit hole because *false conspiracy theories cause harm*. They do so in several ways.

Perhaps most significantly, there is harm at a direct individual level, the level of your friend. If they believe that the efficacies of natural remedies (homeopathy) are being covered up by large pharmaceutical companies then they might be tempted to avoid conventional treatments, and instead opt for herbal remedies that are not proven to work. In some cases this can lead to

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death.⁶ If they think planes are spraying poison in the sky then they might waste their money on Chemtrail detox pills.⁷

There is also harm for the individual in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. A common result of belief in false conspiracy theories is marginalization and social isolation.⁸ The rabbit hole becomes an obsession, and if one partner does not share that same obsession then significant relationship problems can develop, including divorce.⁹ These problems extend to family and friends, and even into the workplace.¹⁰

Beyond the harm that a belief in false conspiracy theories brings to the individual and those around them, it can also lead to harm to others. Scientists researching the climate have been harassed and threatened by people who believe that they are covering up a conspiracy, even to the extent of receiving death threats.¹¹ Politicians have been heckled by 9/11 “inside-job” conspiracy theorists.¹² The parents of murdered children have been stalked by people who think they are part of a hoax.¹³ One man fired a gun in a pizza parlor where he thought children were being held captive as part of a pedophilia ring involving the Clintons.¹⁴

Even more significantly, conspiracy theories can lead to major acts of terrorism, both domestic and foreign. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was a conspiracy theorist who thought a cabal of international Jewish bankers was taking over America.¹⁵ Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon Bomber, was part of a wave of radicalization of young Muslims, driven in large part by conspiracy theories spread via online videos.¹⁶

The practical harm is very real, very tangible. But there are less tangible aspects of the harm conspiracy theories leave in their wake. Truth matters in a society. The more that public discourse is based on falsehoods, the harder it is to make constructive progress. Science is harmed when there are millions of people who think that scientists are corrupt corporate shells. The democratic process is harmed when people vote based on their belief in conspiracy theories. The nation suffers when policies are enacted based partly on false claims. The international standing of our country is harmed when conspiracy theories are increasingly accepted by the general population.

So I bother, I debunk, to stave off and spare others from this harm. I encourage other people to do so, to help their own friends and, while it is perhaps just a drop in the ocean, to make the world a better place.

Can People Change?

Is it even possible? When I tell people that I debunk false conspiracy theories their reaction is sometimes, “But they never change their minds.” Indeed, conspiracy theorists do often seem remarkably entrenched in their beliefs, able to withstand countless hours of reasonable rebuttals without giving an inch.

This is even an assessment conspiracists make about themselves. I joined a Facebook group called “9/11 Truth Movement” and announced I was looking for “Former 9/11 Truthers.” I got a few responses from actual former Truthers, but I also got a lot of replies like this one:

I'll tell you right now, I guarantee you will not find one “former Truther.” Guaranteed, or the person is lying. Period. There's no unlearning that a crime like that was committed and covered up. To be convinced otherwise would require a well below room temperature IQ, which means you probably never doubted the official story to begin with.

First they say I'd never find any. Then they say if I did, all that means is someone was lying. Then they say that you'd have to be really stupid to stop being a Truther in the first place and since stupid people don't become Truthers that would be impossible. This attitude was surprisingly common among the group. For a true believer, no true believer would ever change their beliefs; it was literally impossible. If you pointed out people who had changed their minds and spoken publicly about it, they denounce them as shills or “gatekeepers,” or say they never really believed in the first place.

But people *can* change, and I have found them (or they've found me). Over the course of several years, I've interacted with, spoken with, and met in person many current believers and many former believers. Some whom I helped get out of the rabbit hole. Conspiracy theorists may not think that change for themselves is ever possible, but it is, even for those who are the most convinced. The best way of illustrating that someone deep down the rabbit hole can get out is to consider stories of those who have done just that, people who were nearly as deep down the rabbit hole as one could go, and yet they got out. I opened the book with Willie's story as an immediate demonstration that change is possible. We shall meet other escapees in later chapters.

Why “Debunk”?

The word “debunk” is used throughout this book to denote the process of helping people understand why their conspiracy theories are not backed by good evidence. But the word “debunk” is sometimes interpreted to mean that the debunker has pre-judged the issue and is only interested in convincing others by whatever means necessary. So why use a term that might be perceived negatively?

I have discussed this with professional skeptic James Randi and veteran paranormal investigator Joe Nickell. Randi told me he thinks the term “debunker” carries too much of an assumption that the argument was presumed to be false, and as such he prefers to describe himself as a scientific investigator. Similarly, Nickell made the very compelling argument that what he does with each new case is not to set out to prove that it’s not ghosts, but instead to investigate the circumstances, to see what actually happened, and then to explain it.

But I use the term “debunk” for two reasons. Firstly, I see debunking as a two-stage process of both investigating and then explaining. Debunking is defined as “exposing the falseness” of an idea or belief.¹⁷ To expose a falseness you first have to find it, and then explain why it is false. When faced with a claim like “no plane hit the Pentagon on 9/11,” you first look at the proposed evidence behind the claim, and investigate for factual accuracy. If you find inaccuracies then you can explain these to people.

Secondly, most people, including conspiracy theorists, have no problem with the use of the term in the past tense, such as “Claim X has been debunked.” This is widely understood to mean that the claim has been investigated and conclusively shown to be incorrect.

But the focus of this book is not on investigating, it is on explaining. The majority of the conspiracy theory claims you will come across are not new claims that need investigating. They are old claims that have been investigated, and only persist in the minds of people like your friend because they are unaware of the most reasonable explanation or because they lack information that allows them to fully understand that explanation. Bringing those explanations and that missing information to your friend is what I mean by debunking.

Overview

Escaping the Rabbit Hole is arranged into three parts. In Part One, we take a detailed look at the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. Why do conspiracy theories exist? Why do people get sucked into them and how can you help them out?

Chapter One, “The ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Conspiracy Theory,” addresses the contentious usage of the term “conspiracy theory” by looking at its history. The usage predates the assassination of JFK in 1963, and while it does have some negative connotations, I use it because it is a term that is (mostly) well understood.

Chapter Two, “Conspiracy Spectrums,” looks at the range of conspiracy theories from the plausible to the ridiculous. I introduce the concept of a conspiracy “demarcation line” which is drawn on each individual’s personal conspiracy spectrum. On one side of their line are the “reasonable” theories, and on the other are “silly” theories and “disinformation.” I discuss how understanding and identifying this line is key to helping your friend.

Chapter Three, “The Shill Card,” addresses the common accusation that some people who attempt to debunk false conspiracy theories are shills. The best way to combat this accusation is to be as honest and open as possible about what you are doing. To that end, this chapter contains a detailed explanation of how I ended up debunking conspiracy theories on the internet, why I do it, and how I can afford it.

Chapter Four, “The Rabbit Hole: How and Why,” examines how people get sucked into the rabbit hole. What is the contribution of psychological factors? How do people typically end up in a conspiracy spiral? I look at current research on the matter and the significant role of online videos.

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Chapter Five, “Core Debunking Techniques,” lays out a set of tools and guidelines for practical debunking. The focus is on effective communication of missing information.

Chapter Six, “Steve – A Journey through the Rabbit Hole,” tells the story of Steve, a conspiracy theorist since the 1970s whose story of escape exemplifies many of the concepts covered in the preceding chapters.

Part Two is the practical core of the book. Four different conspiracy theories are discussed in depth. The common false claims of evidence for those theories are described, and I explain how best to convey the explanations of those claims to your friend. Paired with each chapter is the account of someone who went down that particular rabbit hole and ultimately escaped.

Chapter Seven, “Chemtrails,” covers the surprisingly popular idea that the white lines that planes leave in the sky are not just condensation, but are part of a secret plot to alter the climate. The science of contrails (what these white lines actually are) is covered, along with the most common claims like “contrails don’t persist,” “aluminum is in the rain,” and “geoengineering patents.” This is my personal favorite conspiracy theory, and the longest chapter in the book.

Chapter Eight, “Stephanie – A Former Chemtrailer,” tells the story of Stephanie, a German Chemtrail believer who was helped out of the rabbit hole by her friend.

Chapter Nine, “9/11 Controlled Demolitions,” looks at the most popular aspect of the wide range of 9/11 conspiracy theories—the idea that the plane impacts and raging fires were not enough to bring down the World Trade Center, and that pre-planted explosives must have been used. It’s too large a subject to do justice in one chapter, so I focus on some key areas in which your friend might be missing information. These include: Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, nanothermite, the plane that hit the Pentagon, and a (not) missing \$2.3 trillion.

Chapter Ten, “Karl–Temporary Truther,” tells the story of someone who nearly fell deep down the 9/11 rabbit hole, but was caught in time by his friend.

Chapter Eleven, “False Flags,” covers the often emotive issue of claims that events like Sandy Hook were hoaxes. I take a detailed look at the often-cited historical evidence for False Flags, in particular Operation Northwoods and

the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I look at some ways you can bring perspective to people who have fallen down this particular rabbit hole.

Chapter Twelve, “Richard – Drawing the Line at Sandy Hook,” tells the story of a young man for whom the Sandy Hook hoax theory was the thing that ultimately helped turn him away from his conspiratorial thinking.

Chapter Thirteen, “Flat Earth,” covers what many consider to be the obviously ridiculous theory that the Earth is flat and the government is covering this up. Many people who claim to hold this view are just trolling, but what do you do if you meet people who actually believe it? I look at the history of the theory, the most common claims, and some very straightforward ways of showing people that the Earth is not flat.

Chapter Fourteen, “Bob – Escape from Flat Earth,” tells the story of someone who not only believed the Earth was flat, but had family members who believed it too.

Part Three takes a look at some of the additional complications that you may encounter while helping your friend and finishes with a look at the future of debunking.

Chapter Fifteen, “Complications in Debunking,” first examines the common problem of explaining a complex subject to someone who is simply (through no fault of their own) incapable of quickly understanding it. Further complications arise when your friend is a close family member, with a different dynamic from a friend and potentially more significant long-term ramifications. I look at the issues raised by the Morgellons theory and offer some brief advice on dealing with mental illness. I conclude with considerations and guidance on how to navigate political disagreements that cross over into the conspiracy realm.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Future of Bunk and Debunking,” is partly speculative, but is based firmly against the backdrop of the influence of disinformation in the 2016 election, and the repercussions that continue to this day. I look at how trolls and bots help spread conspiracy theories, and how it is probably going to get worse before it gets better.

I conclude on a hopeful note with a look at the tools being developed to fight online misinformation, and how this might help turn back the tide of conspiracism.

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