

#1583 Alluring Conspiracy Culture: The Driving Forces that are Attracting People into Conspiratorial Thinking About Trump, COVID, Economics, Military Affairs and More.

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [00:00:00] During today's episode, I'm going to be telling you about a show I think you should check out. It's *The Politics of Everything* podcast from my friends over at The New Republic. So take a moment to hear what I have to say about them in the middle of the show, and listen wherever you get your podcasts.

And now, welcome to this episode of the award-winning *Best of the Left* podcast, in which we shall take a look at the world of conspiracy theories, because we are all wired to believe misinformation to some degree, but not all to the same degree. So with help from Naomi Klein and other experts, discover why people are drawn to conspiracies, the psychology behind belief, and ideas about the best ways to prevent conspiratorial thinking.

Sources today include *The Guardian*, *Big Questions* from Penguin Books UK, *Leija Miller*, *Democracy Now!*, *The University of Chicago Institute of Politics*, *Speaking of Psychology*, and a TED Talk, with additional members-only clips from *The Daily Show* and the [00:01:00] *PBS NewsHour*.

Why we are all attracted to conspiracy theories - The Guardian - Air Date 3-10-21

JOSEPH USCINSKI: If the question is why do people believe conspiracy theories, the question you're really asking is why do people believe anything? And the answer is, for a lot of reasons. There isn't just one factor. And it would be easy if we could pin it on one thing, like, oh, it was Twitter made everyone believe this. Or they were dropped on their head. Or they happen to fit a particular demographic. Or they have some psychological problem. But that's not going to explain most beliefs for most people.

JFK CLIP: My eyes have opened. And once they're open, believe me, what used to look normal seems insane and now keen. Don't you think, don't you think this has something to

do with that?

RICHARD SPRENGER - HOST, THE GUARDIAN: The reality is that we all share certain hardwired evolutionary traits that help us navigate the world. One such trait is how we verify information without direct personal experience.

DAVID BARRON: We only have a certain knowledge. Normally it's what's all around us. I know my Hyundai car, but I [00:02:00] do not know another car.

We've been in that situation where we'll step into a new car and then you can't release the hand brake because it's some strange setup. It's the same idea as in, how we navigate the world. There's gaps in our knowledge that we have to fill. That knowledge that we bring in... It can be flawed.

RICHARD SPRENGER - HOST, THE GUARDIAN: We readily assign truth to new information in part because so much of the information we receive is true, and also because it's easier to process.

But these useful shortcuts are vulnerable to being hijacked by misinformation. Studies have shown that when we are repeatedly exposed to a piece of false information, we become more likely to believe it.

ARCHIVE CLIP: One. One. The subject denies the evidence of his own eyes and yields to group influence.

NADIA BRASHIER: We fall for repetition even when we know better. We see it months after [00:03:00] exposure, among intelligent people, and even after we give strong warnings.

RICHARD SPRENGER - HOST, THE GUARDIAN: This illusion of truth can have a powerful effect.

NADIA BRASHIER: It's really difficult to correct misconceptions once we accept them.

The brain data suggests that myths are never erased. So we're concurrently storing both the original misinformation and its correction.

That correction might fade from memory faster, and that leaves us with that original myth.

ANCHORMAN CLIP: They've done studies: 60 percent of the time, it works every time.

That doesn't make sense.

RICHARD SPRENGER - HOST, THE GUARDIAN: Humans are storytellers, and our tendency to create narratives and find patterns has served us well throughout history, allowing us to predict, react to, and change the world around us.

DAVID BARRON: Human beings crave logic. Human beings crave understanding. They need to know why something has happened.

SHAUNA BOWES: It makes total sense that we [00:04:00] want to find patterns in our environment. The abnormal part is I see random patterns as meaningful in almost everything that I do. If I over-rely on this strategy in seeking out information in my environment, or if I'm over-confident in this process, then I'm not going to think to question it.

RICHARD SPRENGER - HOST, THE GUARDIAN: The propensity to seek patterns in unrelated information can result in finding ominous meaning where there is none. But because the world is so complex and the sheer amount of information within it is infinite, random coincidences are not just likely, but inevitable. Though both useful and natural, these cognitive processes we all experience present a huge challenge to those attempting to stem the tide of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

SHAUNA BOWES: How do we communicate this to people, that entropy and [00:05:00] randomness and disorder and chaos, in a way that isn't gonna push people away? And I don't think we have a good handle on that because we can be preachy, we can be overly complicated, or just inaccessible, and a lot of people don't trust scientists to begin with, so I think we've found ourselves in a very challenging place.

NADIA BRASHIER: We can't know everything, and so we have to trust that some people are sharing high quality information. And we definitely don't want people becoming so skeptical that they're throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Conspiracies do sometimes occur, but it's important to remember that

those are typically revealed by investigative journalists or whistleblowers, not anonymous Reddit and 4chins..

How did conspiracy theories become mainstream? | Naomi Klein | Big Questions - Penguin Books UK - Air Date 9-12-23

NAOMI KLEIN: I worry about the the way algorithms are changing us. It's just the currency of the attention economy, of likes, of retweets. They're value-free measurements, in the same way that money is.

And the question is not, was this insightful? [00:06:00] Was it correct? It's, how many? How much? So that's sometimes referred to as clout online. And what clout measures is not, is it good? Is it bad? Is it true? Is it false? It's, how much bulk "youness" there is in the world? I say in the book if influence sways, clout just squats.

And I think that what that does is, if that's the currency of the online economy, it selects for a certain type of personality that really needs a lot of attention, for whatever reason. The attention economy rewards the part of ourselves that wants the attention, that wants to see our name, that wants that validation. And it changes us. I think it does change us. I think we all know people who have been changed. I've been changed; I've watched it change my research habits.

The reason why I did this study of my doppelganger is I think she's emblematic of something that's happening much more broadly in the culture, which is [00:07:00] people are changing. My doppelganger is very different than she used to be. And I know lots of people who have changed a lot. And everybody I talk to about this is " Oh God, I can't talk to my uncle anymore. I can barely even talk to my sister. My grandmother won't get off Facebook." .

So we're all having this experience of not just the world changing, but people we know and love changing and seeming almost beyond the reach of love or reason.

And so I thought it would be interesting to try to figure out, what are the mechanisms that are leading to this huge change?

Conspiracies have been mainstream at various points in history. I don't think we are in entirely new uncharted territories. I think that conspiracy theories play particular roles in our mental architecture and in our social relations.

And the one thing that conspiracy theories do is distract us from unbearable reality.

So a lot of my work [00:08:00] has been about the climate crisis. And if I look at climate change denial, which is a conspiracy theory, the reason that conspiracy has gotten traction is a combination of the fact that there are very powerful vested interests in our society that don't want us to focus on the real causes of the warming because it would threaten their entire business model, that being the fossil fuel companies that have underwritten that conspiracy theory. But also just the reality that, like Al Gore said back in the day, it is an inconvenient truth, in that it does require change from us. It's always easier to take a flight into fantasy than it is to confront a difficult reality.

And so I think that COVID was also a difficult reality, and it asks difficult things of us. We also live in a society that tends to turn to individual responses as opposed to more difficult collective responses. So our neoliberal governments were more likely to tell us to wear a [00:09:00] mask and get vaccinated than they were to say, let's make sure that every worker has sick leave, has enough money to stay home if they need to, let's make sure that our kids go to schools with lots of great ventilations. These are all possible responses our governments could have had to COVID. And we still would have needed to wear masks and get vaccinated. But they put everything onto those individual responses and really neglected those collective responses that would have made it easier.

Many people weren't supported by the programs that were supposed to support people to stay home. And a lot of people chose fantasy, and just chose to believe that COVID was a conspiracy.

What's interesting about studying COVID conspiracy theories is that they're not really theories. They're just a range of plots, most of which contradict each other. One of them is COVID is a biological weapon developed in a lab by the Chinese in order to wipe out the West. Also, [00:10:00] don't wear a mask, which is weird, because if it's a biological weapon, you'd think you would take precautions. And then also the vaccines are a bioweapon. So is it COVID that's the bioweapon? Or is it--? It doesn't matter. It's just generally the moral of the story is you don't need to do anything. You don't need to stay home, you don't need to wear the mask, you don't need to get vaccinated.

Conspiracy theories get the facts wrong, but they often get the feelings right. And the feeling is: something's being hidden from us, something doesn't add up. There is impunity for the powerful. Rather than seeing a system -- and I'm somebody who's been studying the system of capitalism through all of my books that's really what they're all about -- conspiracy says no, it's this: it's Fauci, it's Schwab, it's this meeting in Davos.

And so this is the other reason why conspiracies are spreading now and becoming so mainstream. Even though conspiracy theorists always talk about "the elites, they're after you", the people who conspiracy theories benefit most are the elites, [00:11:00] because it deflects attention away from the system that has made them billionaires. And it says, "No, it's not the system. It's just those three guys. We just have to get those three guys." It's a system-protecting framework, conspiracy theories. That's why conspiracy theories often play on racial and ethnic stereotypes. They break apart potential coalitions from below.

Why Do Conservatives Fall For Fake News? - Leeja Miller - Air Date 6-28-23

LEEJA MILLER - HOST, LEEJA MILLER: While so many people purport to be concerned about the prevalence of fake news, relatively few indicate having ever seen or shared it. That math ain't mathin', friends. However, this is not an equal partisan split. Republicans who consider themselves further to the right tend to be much more likely to spread disinformation through social media sharing than Democrats who consider themselves farther to the left.

A recent Politico study identified these individuals as "low conscientiousness conservatives," or LCCs for short. These low conscientiousness conservatives are conservative and [00:12:00] fall on the low end of conscientiousness, defined by the study as the tendency to regulate one's own behavior by being less impulsive and more orderly, diligent, and prudent.

So there are low conscientiousness liberals, high conscientiousness liberals, high conscientiousness conservatives, and low conscientiousness conservatives. And of those four groups, Low Conscientiousness Conservatives, or LCCs, were far more likely to believe in and share fake news and disinformation.

The only factor that this study was able to determine as the reason for why LCCs were so much more likely to share fake news was their "specific proclivity for chaos," which the study defined as "a motivation to disregard,

disrupt, and take down existing social and political institutions as a means of asserting the dominance and superiority of one's own group."

Indeed, multiple other studies have confirmed that conservatives have a lower ability [00:13:00] to distinguish truths and falsehoods. This is due in part to the fact that a vast majority of the disinformation out there tends to reinforce conservative ideologies, while the corresponding truths tend to favor liberal viewpoints. But this can also be explained by the fact that conservatives tend to generally be less trusting of established institutions, news media, and democracy itself.

And with the growth in partisan siloing, meaning the lives of Republicans and Democrats look vastly different, comes the growth in one very significant factor: liberals tend to go to school for longer than conservatives. Education level is another factor that strongly predicts whether an individual is able to distinguish between fact and fiction.

But this truth, that liberals tend to be better educated than conservatives, also reinforces another commonly held right-wing belief, that elites and academics are controlling the narrative and can't be trusted. And their distrust of academics and elites makes sense. Because partisanship has led to severe distrust in the other [00:14:00] side, because we've internalized our politics to the point of them becoming personal identifiers of morals and worldviews, and the vast majority of people in academic and research institutions are liberals, because liberals are the ones obtaining higher education at a larger rate. So their distrust is self reinforcing and also indicative of their ability to distinguish facts from fake news, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle that seems impossible to stop. How do you convince a group of people to believe facts when those facts were discovered by academics who tend, on average, to skew liberal and are therefore the enemy? And, according to conservatives, probably bought out by Big Pharma or George Soros or something.

On top of this, the past seven years have seen the accumulation of multiple different events that culminated in the perfect storm that led to January 6th and the stolen election conspiracy theory. Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, as if any of us could forget. And with his election came a president who was quick to share whatever information, whether true or false, [00:15:00] furthered his cause or increased his power.

We also had a president with an unprecedented connection to the news media, specifically, Fox News, and fringe, far right newspapers and fake news creators like Steve Bannon. A president who regularly called in to *Fox & Friends* and made wild statements that had no basis in fact or reality, knowing that Fox had a

direct line to his base and would do very little to fact check him or really stop him from doing and saying whatever he wanted.

Add to that, a global pandemic which left people feeling isolated, afraid, confused, and looking for answers. And we have a perfect storm wherein disinformation can spread. And we saw this first with the pandemic itself, leading to what the CDC termed an infodemic, where so much information is available and being spread online that it crowds out the information that the experts in the field are trying to communicate to the public, leading to widespread distrust in the authorities and experts, and causing people to do drastic and risky things because of that fear and [00:16:00] distrust. So you have people injecting themselves with bleach and horse medicine because there's just so much disinformation floating around that the actual truth seems wrong to them, especially because the type of person willing to believe that ingesting bleach is medically a good idea is also probably somebody who's a conservative with a low conscientiousness and a proclivity for chaos, making them the perfect consumer and purveyor of fake news.

Along with this infodemic and the election of Donald Trump, arguably the most populist politician who's ever taken the White House, you have a general erosion of public trust in democracy itself. Plus, the very point of populism and a populist politician is to have followers of the populist politician -- in this case Donald Trump -- believe in the strength and truth of that central person, at the expense of belief in the system. Studies have shown that populism erodes democracy by requiring belief in the person or the nation, not based around specific issues or communities, but based around an organic, [00:17:00] undefined version of the nation state. Like, Make America Great Again. How? It's unclear. But if you don't believe in that statement, can you really call yourself a true American? A true patriot? Because another way that populism thrives is through the unquestioning adherence to belief in that nation and in that person, so that if you are not with us, then you're against us.

Populist leaders further erode trust in democracy by questioning the establishment, the media, and the elites, a theme we've already talked about, and that was the central touchstone of the Trump presidency. According to Stanford's Global Populisms Project, among most dangerous of populism's consequences is the erosion of formal democratic rules and liberal institutions. These destructive effects of populist rule include the takeover and taming of courts and oversight institutions, and new laws that limit the freedom of the media and civil society. These legal and formal maneuvers erode public criticism, transparency, and accountability.

Just as importantly, however, such governments have also made a [00:18:00] point of undermining informal democratic norms, such as conflict of interest laws, financial transparency, or respect for opposition. Here, the damage may go deeper, and be far less reversible. Such norms and informal rules are the product of decades of elite and popular interactions. Once such trust and consensus disappears, it is not easy to bring it back. And with all of this, the Trump presidency and the chaos of the pandemic, the election denial and eventual January 6th insurrection, becomes a very clear and obvious outcome.

Naomi Klein on Her New Book "Doppelganger" & How Conspiracy Culture Benefits Ruling Elite Part 1- Democracy Now! - Air Date 9-14-23

NAOMI KLEIN: I think we all know people who have changed dramatically in the past few years, who don't really seem like themselves. I think it's less interesting that Naomi Wolf is seemingly a doppelganger to a lot of people's eyes than that she seems to be a doppelganger of her former self. That she was a prominent feminist, she was involved in progressive movements, and now here she is on Steve Bannon's podcast, in some [00:19:00] cases every single day. Like there have been weeks where she has been a guest every single day that he has been broadcasting. I think probably *Democracy Now!* listeners would be surprised to learn that they published a book together, they put out t-shirts together. So, her role in Steve Bannon's media sphere is almost like a cohost more than a guest. She is a really important figure in this world.

But part of the reason we don't know this has to do with this what I call the "mirror world" and the fact that while they see us, we have chosen for the most part not to see them. And I think that that's very dangerous because these are really important political movements. Steve Bannon is a very able political strategist. He got Donald Trump elected once and he fully intends to do it again. And part of Steve Bannon's strategy is that he is very good at looking at issues and people who have been abandoned by the Democratic Party, or even by the left, people who have been [00:20:00] mistreated, ejected, and saying, "Come on over to this side. Come on over to this side of the glass. We'll take a little bit of truth"—you used that quote, that there's always a little bit of truth mixed in—"and we'll mix it up with all of these dangerous lies."

But to me, as a lifelong leftist, what concerns me about that is that many of the issues that they are co-opting and twisting are issues that I think the left should

be more vocal about. I had one of my most—I'd say like a moment in the research where I was listening to hundreds of hours of Bannon's podcast, where I would say I felt most destabilized was when I would hear Bannon cut together a montage, an audio montage and a video montage, of intros and outros of major cable news shows on CNN and MSNBC—"brought to you by Pfizer," "brought to you by Moderna." His point was to say, "You can't trust these corporate media outlets because they are bought and paid for by the drug companies that are trying [00:21:00] to get you vaccinated."

But for me what was chilling about that was that that was a doppelganger of the kind of media education that I grew up in. We all read *Manufacturing Consent*. We had these charts where we—and I mean, Amy, they sounded a little like you. They sounded like me. They sounded like Noam Chomsky. Except through a warped mirror. And what worried me about that is it really reminded me that I don't think we're doing that kind of systems-based media education anymore where we really are looking at these ownership structures. And if that doesn't happen, then it is going to be co-opted in the "mirror world".

So, Nermeen, thank you for your kind words about the book. I'm so glad that it resonated with you. It was a sort of risk but I think maybe by being specific, we're all thinking about the people in our lives and this phenomenon that has affected us all.

I think when I look at people who have made a similar political migration from liberalism or leftism over to [00:22:00] the Bannonesque right, I think we often see some economic forces at work. Naomi Wolf has quadrupled her following because of this decision, this political decision of hers. She is not the only one. I'm sure people are thinking of other people. It's actually a really smart business move. And this is happening within an economic system that has monetized attention. People are trying to build their personal brands because they've been told that they're not going to get a job, that this is the only way they can survive in these roiling capitalist seas. And there's a lot of clicks over there. So I think that's some of it.

What are the other forces that get magnified? Well, this is a little tricky to say, because I do write—I don't think this gives people a pass, but Wolf is one of these people who has experienced a lot of [00:23:00] shaming and kind of pile-ons on left Twitter, or liberal Twitter, or X or whatever it is called. She has really been, I would say, internet-bullied. People can say, "Okay, well, for good reason. She has spread conspiracies. She has made major factual errors in her book." But I don't think that's necessarily a justification for cruelty. So I think that's something else that gets magnified. Because I think when people have an experience that is very, very negative in left or liberal circles, where they really

get treated almost like they are not human—and that is partly because they’re performing themselves as a brand, which is saying, “Hey, I am out here, I’m a commodity, I’m a thing,” and then people start thinking, “Well, if you’re a thing, I can throw things at you, and you won’t bleed,”—I think that that’s part of what is magnified here, and that becomes a justification for I think an unjustifiable political alliance with extremely dangerous figures who are [00:24:00] building a network of far right political parties who take issues like rightful suspicion of Big Pharma, rightful anger at Big Tech, rightful anger at the elites, and flip it to transphobia, xenophobia, racism. Here I’m thinking about figures like Giorgia Meloni, who is a protégé of Steve Bannon’s.

How Conspiracy Theories Capture the Mind - UChicago Institute of Politics - Air Date 4-8-22

ELLEN CUSHING: Diane, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about, like, how journalists can cover conspiracy theories better, like, what should we be doing?

DIANE BENSCOTER: I think that journalists have such an important platform, and so you can educate people about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation.

You can speak about the fact that there are people who will try to take advantage of you. There are people that will try to lie to you because they make a profit from it. People need to understand why [00:25:00] and how this is happening. They need to understand that there's profit to be made, and there's weaponization that is to be made.

No one wants to play the fool. No one wants to be an ex-cult member, and no one wants to admit that they've been had. And so if we do it up front and teach people about how to recognize, like, what you were talking about, Abbie, is that journalists can do a better job of that, of educating the public about psychological manipulation, really.

ELLEN CUSHING: Abbie?

ABBIE RICHARDS: Yeah, I think that journalists, are doing much better than they were a couple years ago when we had a huge amplification problem, and they were writing and covering about conspiracy theories and hate groups in ways that just gave them more oxygen than they needed, and that was often

coming from White journalists as well, who have the privilege of not feeling as threatened by those groups and those beliefs and ideologies. I think that that [00:26:00] has gotten a bit better, but there's still room for improvement there, when it comes to how we give attention to hateful narratives and hateful people and groups.

JACQUELYN MASON: You know, to that point, you know, often, not always, newsrooms don't represent the communities that they're meant to serve, right? We saw during COVID-19 pandemic kind of a groupthink, right, for that lack of diversity, saying Tuskegee could be a reason not to get vaccinated. But, in reality, when you're talking to people, a distrust of, you know, the vaccines, how quickly they were formulated, right, a distrust of, you know, one type of vaccine in a different community. Access. At a time there was, you know, people going from other communities and taking up all the vaccine appointments, or a time you could get off of work to go and get a vaccine, or a time you could go across town in a bus to get a vaccine. That doesn't mean people don't want to be vaccinated. And to draw on something like conspiracy, like, uh, Tuskegee, which was a very large trauma [00:27:00] for Black folks, it still wasn't right, right? And that's that lack of diversity showing up, and that will show up with other things that emerge. So, I think that diversity is really important. If you don't have it in your newsroom, there's advocates, as I mentioned, working on the ground who can let you know what's truly happening.

DIANE BENSCOTER: And trusted voices again. Bring on the trusted voices onto your news shows, bring on the people that the community trusts, and hear their voices more.

ABBIE RICHARDS: Yeah, and one of the benefits, too, of just including more diverse voices in journalism is that when it comes to covering conspiracy theories, you also don't want to just say, This is fake. Like, that should not be the end of the coverage. And I think that when we look at how we should be understanding the world, it should be through that framework of, like, ecological literacy, not just, like, is this conspiracy true or not, but also what purpose is it serving? Why does it exist? What source of power structures is it upholding?

**Naomi Klein on Her New Book
"Doppelganger" & How Conspiracy
Culture Benefits Ruling Elite Part 2-
Democracy Now! - Air Date 9-14-23**

AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!: I wanted to talk to you [00:28:00] about Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. In July, the Democratic presidential candidate spoke at a press event in New York City and claimed the COVID-19 vaccine is a genetically engineered bioweapon that may have been ethnically targeted to spare people who are Jewish—Ashkenazi Jews—and Chinese.

ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR.: COVID-19, there is an argument that it is ethnically targeted. COVID-19 attacks certain races disproportionately. COVID-19 is targeted to attack Caucasians and Black people. The people who are most immune are Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese.

AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!: So, that's Robert Kennedy. Naomi, you wrote an article before these comments in *The Guardian* headlined "Beware, we ignore Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s candidacy at our peril". Now, [00:29:00] you write extensively in this piece about his background. It was not just COVID-19 vaccines he was concerned about. He goes way back in his antivax attitudes and activism. Talk about the significance of this and what you continually say throughout the book in that we ignore these views at our own peril.

NAOMI KLEIN: I think in a way he is a doppelganger of his father and uncle. I see it as kind of a counterfeit politics. I'm sorry for RFK Jr. supporters who are listening, don't know how many there are. I think that what he is doing is tapping into a lot of real fears, angers. There are times when I listen to him when I can't help nodding along when he is talking about regulatory [00:30:00] capture of government agencies by the corporations they're supposed to be regulating. That is something I have covered for a long time. Or when he's talking about the military industrial complex.

I think it's really important—the reason why I call it a counterfeit politics is that although he is calling this out, if you look at what he's running on, this is not Bernie. He is not actually running on a platform of significant regulations that would address the crises that he is talking about. It is kind of a libertarian platform. He isn't even running on universal public healthcare. If you are worried about Big Pharma and profiteering, how about running on pharmacare, that we shouldn't be leaving life-saving drugs to the market? But you will never hear him say something like that.

I think for leftists who are frustrated with the centrism of the Democrats it can seem like this [00:31:00] is really an alternative, and I would really, really caution against it and look at what he is actually running on. Is he running on raising the minimum wage? No, he is not. He is tapping into these real critiques, these real issues like an inflated military budget, but then his position on Israel,

for instance, is just more militarism. Same thing with Steve Bannon, by the way. He talks a great game about the military-industrial complex. He is absolutely obsessed with China and positioning the U.S. for a Third World War with China. If you are serious critic of the military industrial complex, you wouldn't be as focused as Steve Bannon is on China-bashing.

RFK, obviously that clip that you played is extraordinarily disturbing, dangerous. A lot of conspiracy culture starts ending up in this kind of anti-Semitic [00:32:00] territory. It's the oldest conspiracy theory in the world. I make the argument in the book that part of what we are dealing with the rise of conspiracy culture—and I call it conspiracy culture, not conspiracy theories, because the theories so wildly contradict each other. It's just a posture of mistrust and just throwing wild theories at the wall. So, one minute COVID is a bioweapon perhaps and the next minute it's just a cold so don't even wear a mask. You really would need to choose, if you had a theory, between whether or not it was a bioweapon or whether or not it was a cold. If it were a bioweapon, presumably, you would want to do pretty much anything you can not be infected.

But they never attempt to resolve these glaring contradictions because the point of it is to throw up this kind of a distraction so that we aren't focused on what I would describe as kind of the conspiracies in plain view. The fact that the pharmaceutical companies turned COVID into this profit center, that despite the [00:33:00] fact that the vaccine development was funded with public dollars all of the initial orders were from the government. That there are these outrageous patents on these vaccines and they should never have been patented in the first place. And I think we need to be really wary of being overly credulous.

We know that there are real conspiracies in the world. You've been covering the 50th anniversary of the overthrow of Salvador Allende, and new documents come out every week that show us these behind-the-scenes meetings. But if we look at that conspiracy, it's a good example. What you see in the documents about the U.S. destabilization campaign of Salvador Allende, it wasn't that there was some nefarious goal about depopulating the Earth or draining kids of adrenochrome or whatever the conspiracy culture is claiming. It was to protect U.S. copper interests, U.S. telecom interests. It was just capitalism doing [00:34:00] its thing. And sometimes it takes a plot to do it, is the way I put it in the book.

But coming back to what I said earlier about an absence of basic political education, if people don't understand how capitalism works, if we don't understand that this is a system that is really built to consolidate wealth and it will always have a massive underclass, and instead people have been told that

capitalism is just Big Macs and freedom and rainbows and everybody getting what they deserve, then when that system fails them they're going to be very vulnerable to somebody going "Oh, it is all a plot by the Jews" or whatever the conspiracy of the day is. That's why doing that basic political education and economic education is so critical, because it's really our armor against this conspiracy culture.

Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories, with Karen Douglas, PhD - Speaking of Psychology - Air Date 1-13-21

KIM MILLS - HOST, SPEAKING OF PSYCHOLOGY: Is there any way to effectively debunk a conspiracy theory once it's out there? I mean, can you just present the facts? [00:35:00] Like, you talked about the anti-vaxxers, you know, the fact that the *Lancet* article that kind of led to a lot of beliefs that children were becoming autistic as a result of vaccines, and then it turned out that that article was bogus. It was based on faulty data and it was retracted, and yet some people are still hanging on to that. So is there a way to stop these theories from continuing to swirl?

KAREN DOUGLAS, PHD: Yes, there are ways to do this, but of course it's extremely challenging. It's very, very difficult. Once these conspiracy theories are out there and people believe them, then sometimes people can very, very strongly hold on to these beliefs and defend them very, very strongly as well. And once these attitudes are very, very strong, of course, from other areas of psychology, we know that attitudes that are very strongly held are difficult to dispute, I guess, difficult to change. It's very difficult to change these sorts of attitudes. And so, yes, it is a challenge, but there are things that [00:36:00] can be done, and a lot of research that, especially in very, very recent years as well, has started to come out in terms of how do you address misinformation? How do you address conspiracy theories?

And giving people the facts does work under certain situations. In some of our own research, we've actually found that it's quite effective to provide people with factual information, provide people with the facts - and this was particularly about vaccines - before they're exposed to conspiracy theories, and then the conspiracy theory sort of fails to gain traction. But once the people have been exposed to the conspiracy theory, then giving them misinformation - giving them the, I guess, sorry, the appropriate or correct information - afterwards doesn't really work.

So, others have sort of taken this information and have started to look at ways to inoculate people against [00:37:00] misinformation and to inoculate people against conspiracy theories and fake news and all sorts of other things, which seems to be working as well. So, in other words, you give people either the correct information or some piece of weak misinformation before they're exposed to the worst of it, then that helps them to be able to resist it.

There are other techniques that people have used, that researchers have used as well, and just to give you one other example, some researchers have looked at the idea of presenting people with a pre-warning or a forewarning that they might be exposed to misinformation. And if people believe that information that they might receive could be misleading, and they have that information upfront, then that can sometimes help them to resist the misinformation as well.

Now, I think these are all really, really valuable tools, but of course sometimes the misinformation is already out there. So, it's difficult to get to people beforehand, [00:38:00] so then you have to resort to, I guess, traditional debunking techniques, such as going in with consistent, strong counter-arguments. But I think that these other techniques provide real opportunities to help people to resist conspiracy theories in general that they might come across in the future. So if you give people these sorts of ways to critically think about information and and think, Well, you know, okay, I could be exposed to misinformation, that misinformation is out there, so I'm going to be on the lookout for it, then it might actually help people to resist it when they come across it next time, if that makes sense.

KIM MILLS - HOST, SPEAKING OF PSYCHOLOGY: Yeah, it sounds like the techniques that they're trying to use right now with the COVID-19 vaccines, you know, telling people up front that if you happen to be particularly allergic, you might have a reaction, this is what to expect. And yet it's kind of like a game of whack a mole because they talk about all of this and they're trying to be as transparent as possible. And yet along comes somebody who says the mRNA [00:39:00] that's involved in this is actually going to change the DNA in your body. And so, you know, how do you fight that?

KAREN DOUGLAS, PHD: Yeah, it's very, very difficult. And there are new conspiracy theories all the time. It is exactly like that game. You're constantly trying to, you've got one and then you constantly trying to hit another one away. It is very, very challenging. It's there's a lot, there's a lot out there, a lot going on out there.

KIM MILLS - HOST, SPEAKING OF PSYCHOLOGY: Of course, this is all complicated by the fact that sometimes conspiracies do exist, and sometimes

people may have deep seated, valid reasons to distrust authority. So, for example, public opinion polls have found that Black Americans are less likely to say they'll take the COVID vaccine and more wary of its safety because they have a long history of being abused and mistreated by the medical establishment. Is there a way for people to balance this awareness with a healthy skepticism of conspiracy theories?

KAREN DOUGLAS, PHD: Yes, again, this is extremely challenging and you're absolutely right that some people have very good reasons to be suspicious [00:40:00] of these sorts of things because of past events. And so the challenge becomes even greater. And so, and I don't know the solution to this, apart from the fact that people who are attempting to fight the misinformation will need to be sensitive to these concerns and perhaps be more targeted in their efforts to debunk the misinformation, being sensitive to these historical events as well. So it can't necessarily be a one size fits all approach to misinformation.

Birds Aren't Real? How a Conspiracy Takes Flight | Peter McIndoe - TED - Air Date 9-13-23

PETER MCINDOE: I do not actually believe that birds are robots. And everyone else in this picture is also in on the bit.

This is a character that I played for four years, the leader of a fake movement with fake evidence and a fake history. Our goal was to convince the public that our satirical movement was a real one. And see if the [00:41:00] media would believe what we were saying. To do this, I played this character that I just showed you.

We held rallies, put up billboards, we even sent the media a lot of fake evidence. We hired an old actor to pose as an ex CIA agent, confessing to his crimes. Uh, we sent them a historic email leak called PoultryGate that came out of the Pentagon, where we forged hundreds of fake emails, uh, exposing elites and government officials in the, in the Bird Drone Surveillance plot.

It didn't take much to convince the media. Uh, after just one summer holding rallies like this, it became nationally syndicated news on tons of local news stations that we were a real movement that had been around for 50 years. And there was a resurgence happening, where it was coming back, and there was a radical new leader, myself, uh, bringing the movement back as the rise of conspiracy theories swept the nation.

At this [00:42:00] point, I'm sitting on my couch, watching the media report on my fake movement as a real one. And third, it's probably time to come out of character. One, because we'd accomplished... What we came there to do, uh, but also I didn't want this to snowball into anything it was never supposed to. So in 2021, I broke character, revealed the movement was a farce, uh, on the front page of the New York Times.

And I was very proud, as you can see. Allow me to reintroduce myself one more time. Uh, hi. I'm Peter. Can you say hi, Peter? Hey. Uh, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself. I grew up in Arkansas, in Little Rock. Where I was homeschooled on the outskirts of town. The community that I grew up with was hyper conservative and religious, and almost everyone that I knew believed in some form of conspiracy theory.

Whether it was that Obama was the Antichrist, or that there are microchips in the vaccines. During my entire life, I always felt like I [00:43:00] was on the fringes of normal society, uh, so as you can imagine, when it became time for me to play a character, the conspiracy theorist was a pretty easy one for me to tap into.

During the years in character, I used the same cadence, logic, and arguments as those I grew up around. Just with a different theory swapped in. I was really dedicated to playing this character as convincingly as I could, as method as possible. So I spent days, sometimes, in character. A lot of time out in public with the van there, just talking with strangers.

It led to hundreds of interactions with strangers who thought that I was a real conspiracy theorist. I'd often be out there, cowboy hat on, handing out flyers that said things like, uh, Like, if it flies, it spies.

We had another flyer that said, Birdwatching goes both ways. Uh, and during these times, as I'm handing out [00:44:00] flyers and talking with people, there were hundreds, maybe thousands of instances over the years where strangers would approach me. You know, they'd see me in public, and I'd see them notice me. They'd walk up to me with complete disdain on their face.

They thought that I was a real conspiracy theorist. And time and time again, they'd come up to me, look me right in the eyes, just as close as I am to you right here, and, uh, they would tell me how stupid I am. They'd tell me I was uneducated, that I was crazy, that I was the problem with this country. When this happened, I didn't feel the emotions of the character that I thought I would.

My out of character self may interpret these interactions as a funny response to someone that fell for the comedy project, but instead I felt the emotions of the character. I felt emboldened, and I felt sad and angry, like they didn't [00:45:00] even take the time to know me. Uh, they instantly condemned me, judged me, and othered me.

I found myself on the opposite side of this equation that I'd grown up around. And in those moments when those people were talking to me, they could not have been more ineffective at what I would assume they really want, less conspiracy theorists in the world. These experiences, hundreds of them over the years, watching how people interact with those on the fringes of our society, gave me an entirely new perspective on our approach to conspiracy theorists.

If our goal is to live in a shared reality with our neighbors, what if our current approach isn't bringing us any closer to that? What if by talking to conspiracy theorists like they're ignorant [00:46:00] and stupid, we're actually pushing them farther away from the truth that we want them to see? Because what happens when someone tells you that you're stupid, you're all wrong, you're the problem?

You'll feel judged and dismissed, and most importantly, you'll feel othered, which may lead you to look for safety in those who are like minded, to do what they have been doing for you. Affirm your selfhood, give you a sense of identity, belonging. These are some of the most basic human desires. We have to consider that conspiracy theorists are not just joining these groups for no reason.

They're getting rewards out of these, things that we are all looking for, a sense of purpose, community. I grew up with the internet, and during my time with this project, especially out of character, people have talked to me about the misinformation age and this, you know, terrifying problem of online echo chambers and conspiracy theorists, but I want to remind us [00:47:00] that there are humans behind a lot of these screens, uh, not just numbers.

Everyone's unique experience influences their own narrative about the world, and there's no blueprint for how to deal with this yet, but I do not think that online echo chambers of conspiracy theorists are this inevitable symptom of life online. The internet is about 30 years old and things are changing quickly, and I think it'll be very important that we develop new solutions for these new problems on a fundamental level.

What if, by addressing belief before belonging... We're starting the conversation at the wrong place. Instead of sitting in collective bewilderment and frustration

about how these people could believe these things, these crazies, what if we first looked under the hood and thought about what made them vulnerable to this information in the first place?

What might they be getting out of this that they're not getting in their everyday lives? How much does it [00:48:00] have to do with a different truth? How much does it have to do with the community that that truth brings? We need to think about people's circumstances and reference points to see them as fellow human beings who want to believe in something and want to belong, just like all of us do in this room.

Because if we continue with our current approach of arguing on the level of belief, it's not going to get us anywhere. We're going to end up with more echo chambers, more disinformation, and more polarization. Instead we can do the harder work of looking into what is fueling the need for an alternate truth.

Not only would this lend us more empathy for those who think differently than us, but I really think this might be the only actually productive means, productive means, of moving toward the shared reality that we all want to live in. Let's direct our energy toward the crisis of belonging, and then maybe we will understand the crisis of belief.

Conspiracies Around Trump, Military Leadership, and Militias - Jordan Klepper Fingers The Conspiracy - The Daily Show - Air Date 7-12-23

DR. AMY COOTER: U. S. [00:49:00] domestic militias are civilian militias.

They are intended to exist outside the military, outside the National Guard, and their members are people who really see it as their personal civic duty to kind of act in concert in some ways with the military, to be almost a civilian line of defense against. Potentially invasion, potentially natural disasters, anything in between.

A lot of the members actually have military training. And among the groups I studied, about two thirds of the leaders and about one third of the other members had some service experience. And many of the others who did not kind of felt like they had missed out. They had wanted to be in the service, but didn't qualify medically, or for some other reason, didn't get that service.

And this was almost like. A surrogate for them. Um, their experiences were really about trying to, in their view, stand up for their [00:50:00] country, defend the Constitution, um, and the American way of life in terms of how they specifically defined it.

JORDAN KLEPPER - HOST, THE DAILY SHOW: And as to a code name. Do you have a code name?

DR. AMY COOTER: Some of them actually did call me a renegade because I would study them at a time when it was not really popular for, uh, liberal academics to be dealing with more conservative topics.

JORDAN KLEPPER - HOST, THE DAILY SHOW: Well, I will say this. I was talking with Amy offline a little bit about this, but, uh, I, I read Amy's dissertation years ago because I'm, I'm fascinated about, uh, militias. I'm from Michigan. Which, if you're into militias, Michigan's a great place to be. We got some OG militia action happening there, um, and I think what is fascinating about it is, uh, there's been a lot of talk about the effects of militias and, uh, extremist groups, uh, uh, recently, but you've been doing this for quite some time right now.

What a lot of people I don't think look into is what is appealing about militias, Uh, the process of militias and the average militia goer. I think what I noticed with some of the time that I spent [00:51:00] with, uh, a few militia members, I spent some time with some Oath Keepers recently, uh, just hanging out, having fun, watching mailboxes, trying to save the election.

And I hung out with some folks in, uh, Georgia way back when, and... I think the military side of it is fascinating, because there are some of those people, Oath Keepers in particular, who are ex military folks, ex cops, who see it as an extension of their service. They, they made an oath to this country and to the Constitution, and this is their extension of it.

There are other folks, too, who feel like, uh, just, uh, day players, who wanted the military, and perhaps some had very... Interesting stories about, uh, um, an inability to get into the military. Uh, like you had an astigmatism, so now you wanna be in the militia. It's good enough. Okay, fine. I get it. Seeing a lot of cosplay here.

There's military here and then there's a lot of these people who are pretending to be military here. You know how, you know? Because [00:52:00] they don't have badges. They just have notes from their wife that says you can go for the

weekend and hang out with your friends, but be back on time. But there's this funny balance of people wanting to serve, people pretending to serve, and I guess I'm curious too of how you see that aligned with their relationships to the, to, to actual military forces.

Did you find, is, is, is, do you often see it as in concert with the American, uh, military system or is oftentimes some of these militias looking to act in case the military in and of itself is something that turns on the American people?

DR. AMY COOTER: Yeah, the relationship that militias have with the military is frankly quite complicated.

It's something that they tend to like in the abstract, in theory, at least, because they believe that military and national defense are kind of the primary functions of what the federal government is supposed to do. It's one of the few legitimate functions of the federal government from their perspective, but they think that [00:53:00] in practice, the military is prone to corruption or other problems that they see as being kind of endemic to the government as a whole.

So, it tends to be the case, and there can be variation across units or even across sometimes individual militia members, but it tends to be the case that they really honor and revere veterans and service members themselves, but have a lot of distrust for the military as an institution, have a lot of distrust for military leadership.

JORDAN KLEPPER - HOST, THE DAILY SHOW: Paul, does that go both ways? You, you, you know, the military world and those circles. What, what is the feeling for those in service when they look at the modern militia movement?

PAUL SZOLDRA: There's military people in the militias, but also there are those people who are kind of, uh, you know, we kind of call it stolen valor.

Uh, if you're trying to kind of, um, you know, represent yourself as, as part of the military, you know, and you, you know, like some people will do it. A whole lot, you know, throwing medals on their [00:54:00] chest and stuff like that. Others will just kind of pretend and wear the gear and, you know, there's like, there's air softers and stuff that wear all the gear.

They look very military and represent themselves as if, you know, like, hey, I get, get your, your, thank you for your service free meal at Denny's or something. Um, but I, I think, I think, um, you know, military members probably looking at the militia, they think they're a bunch of geeks, you know,

like, you know, get a job, like, get a, do, do, uh, you know, if you want to join the military, then join the military, uh, it just looks like this kind of pretend defense thing, and it really ignores the, the reality of, of military operations and what the US military is capable of, you know, if you're looking at a militia, if you're in a militia and, uh, you're, you're there, you know, you're training to, uh, defend the Constitution, whatever that, that, that [00:55:00] idea they think they are doing, um, you know, bottom line is, is they're also thinking about potentially going up against the US military, um, and that's not a winning battle. You know, like, uh, uh, uh, guys with, uh, guys with, uh, small arms aren't gonna really do much against an army with, you know, drones and, and missiles and all kinds of stuff, uh, and so it, it, it seems a little bit lopsided, um, but I, I think, I think also they, they tap into the military legitimacy of, of wearing a uniform and, and looking like you're organized, um, and, you know, following some sort of chain of command, these are, these are military concepts, and they, uh, they make you look you know, more professional, um, and that's the reason why they seek out military [00:56:00] members and veterans because that lends them credibility and legitimacy among, um, among their, their followers and supporters, you know, even, even if you're not.

Even if you're, you know, if you're a, uh, uh, you know, some nerd who could never, could never get into the military, well, you can at least join the militia and be close to, you know, former military members and kind of, it kind of brushes off on you. Um...

JORDAN KLEPPER - HOST, THE DAILY SHOW: You are spilling that tea, spilling that tea on that militia.

Well, also, I do think it also plays off of also the public perspective of the military. As, as a civilian, I think there is a general misunderstanding of the ranks and the difficulties and the world of the military, and so somebody purporting to be a militia member who wears the outfit, talks the talk, um, in a public setting is almost treated as a person with law enforcement bona fides or has, has put in the time.

It's, it's like you, [00:57:00] if you buy enough T shirts with flags on them, and you have good enough posture, then liberal elites like myself are going to let you get on a plane before them, and they're not going to say anything about it. So, you can, you can steal enough valor to get you in certain positions.

Mother has Moment of Truth that leads to her rejecting conspiracy theories she

believed - PBS NewsHour - Air Date 9-27-22

JUDY WOODRUFF - HOST, PBS NEWSHOUR: Like millions of Americans, Karen Robertson of Iuka, Mississippi, believed in conspiracy theories, until, one day, she had an experience that convinced her to challenge her own beliefs.

She spoke about that moment with student reporter Makenna Mead, who is with Mississippi Public Broadcasting's Youth Media Project.

Their conversation is part of our Student Reporting Labs series on misinformation, Moments of Truth.

KAREN ROBERTSON: It was easier to believe that there was someone, something out there to get you, and that's why my life was as bad as it was.

[LAUGHTER]

hi. I'm Karen Robertson. I'm 30, [00:58:00] and I'm a single mom.

We're here to talk about the fact that I actually believed in conspiracy theories once upon a time ago.

MAKENNA MEAD: Can you tell me, like, a couple of the conspiracy, theories that you believed in?

KAREN ROBERTSON: There was one that I don't even know how to describe it.

Apparently, our birth certificates look like some type of like shipping things where we're selling stuff to China. Basically, China owns us.

And there's a movie called "Zeitgeist." They are trying to show you that, like, a lot of what you have been taught isn't factual. And then, at some point, they go on to 9/11 being an inside job. I kind of just straddled the fence on that one.

MAKENNA MEAD: What resonated with you about the conspiracy theories?

KAREN ROBERTSON: I was in an abusive relationship that I didn't realize at the time was abusive. I was trying to make the world make sense, and it was easier to believe that it was a bad place and [00:59:00] something was out to get you, and that's why my life was where it was at and as bad as it was than it was to realize I had made bad choices.

MAKENNA MEAD: Can you tell me why you kind of went off and researched all of the things that you believed in?

KAREN ROBERTSON: There was a very specific night actually that caused this.

This guy and I were talking, and he knew about all these different conspiracy theories that I did. Then, towards the end of the conversation, he was like, get this, flat Earth. And I was like, I thought he was joking. And he's like, dude, there's evidence that the Earth is flat.

A little while later, I saw him use a very, very hard drug. It made me realize, if I am thinking like someone like that, that I should reconsider my belief system.

So, the very next day, I actually searched how to disprove a conspiracy theory. A month, maybe even less, went by [01:00:00] before my brain just kind of clicked, and I was like, all of this is a bunch of hogwash.

MAKENNA MEAD: If you could go back in time and you could talk to a younger version of yourself that believed all those years ago, what would you say to her?

KAREN ROBERTSON: I definitely would tell her that things are going to get better, because I think that was part of her problem. It's hard to change minds.

But that would ultimately be really cool if just a couple people could decide to go look up something and challenge their own beliefs. That's going to be the moral of my story, because, when I challenged my beliefs, it changed my world and it made my life better.

JUDY WOODRUFF - HOST, PBS NEWSHOUR: What a great conversation. And we salute Student Reporting Labs', our own reporter Makenna Mead.

Final comments on the importance of making connections while avoiding conspiratorial thinking

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: We've just heard clips today, starting with *The Guardian* explaining why we are all wired to believe misinformation. *Big Questions* spoke with Naomi Klein about how conspiracy theories obscure the real issue of capitalism. [01:01:00] Leija Miller broke down who is most susceptible to conspiratorial thinking. *Democracy Now!*, in two parts, spoke with Naomi Klein about the dynamics of conspiracy. The University of Chicago Institute of Politics discussed the role of journalism in spreading misinformation. *Speaking of Psychology* explained why prevention is the best solution to counteracting conspiracies. And we heard a TED Talk about a social experiment involving a fake conspiracy about birds not being real.

That's what everybody heard, but members also heard two additional bonus clips, the first from *The Daily Show* discussing the relationship between conspiracies and military militias and the *PBS NewsHour*, which featured a story of a woman who managed to pull herself out of conspiratorial thinking. To hear that, and have all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly to the new members only podcast feed that you'll receive, sign up to support the show at bestoftheleft.com/support, or shoot me an email [01:02:00] requesting a financial hardship membership, because we don't let a lack of funds stand in the way of hearing more information.

And now additional episodes of *Best of the Left* you may want to check out related to today's topic include #1371, "Why Even Seemingly Normal People Are Falling for the QAnon Conspiracy Cult". That's from October 2020, which obviously focuses more on the pro-Trump conspiracy cult of QAnon, explaining what it is and why so many people are getting sucked into it. And then also #1443, "Legacies of 9/11: War on Terror, Islamophobia, and Conspiracy Theories", from September 2021, which looks at the parallel legacies of 9/11, including the War on Terror, which ushered in the adoption of ever wilder conspiracy theories and the acceleration of the political divide in America. Definitely worth checking out. Those two, again, are #1337 and 1443.

Now, to wrap up, I must [01:03:00] say, I'm pretty amused at one of the bonus clips we just played for members. If you didn't hear it, the way the woman managed to snap out of her conspiratorial thinking was to have someone she trusted suggest that the Earth was flat, which made her think, Wait a second, am I thinking along the same lines as someone who believes the Earth is flat? I'd

better look up how to debunk conspiracy theories, which is presented as a positive and hopeful story about how people actually can recover from conspiratorial thinking, but I can't help but be disheartened by it because, obviously, the answer to the problem of conspiratorial thinking is not to present conspiracists with the wildest, dumbest possible theory in the hope that they think, now wait a second, that's ridiculous. Is that the kind of stuff I'm thinking of? I should really look into some countervailing narratives. Right? Because that obviously doesn't work most of the time. They're actually more likely to just add your ridiculous theory to their long list [01:04:00] of things to consider.

So it's a nice story, sure, but not one that's particularly helpful. Which brings me to the real issue of conspiratorial thinking that's important to understand. Well, maybe a couple of them. The first is that conspiratorial thinking is based on making connections. And making connections is something that's actually really important. In fact, for an example, you only have to go to the final comments of my very last episode, in which I talk all about making the connections and recognizing the patterns as it relates to how capitalism responds to disasters, with Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and then the fires on Maui, so being able to recognize patterns is actually extremely important to understanding the world.

Conspiratorial thinking is that same very healthy instinct turned up just a little bit too high, but not just too high, and this is the second piece that's important to understand. [01:05:00] It's not just that it's a good and healthy thought turned up to, like, too high of a sensitivity level. The people who fall into conspiracies also usually come with the wrong framework of how the world generally works. Now, the framework that I subscribe to is one of structural forces that are influenced by individuals, but can take paths that no individual particularly planned on it taking. The other framework lacks a structural understanding and sees the world only through the actions of individuals. Then if something terrible happens, particularly something that actually is the fault of people and not just a natural disaster, and you see the world through individual actions only, then it's all too easy to conclude that everyone's actions are actually intentional and that the terrible thing was brought about by people's actions intentionally. And this is why it's so important to understand the [01:06:00] connection with capitalism, as was described in the show today.

To take a recent example, when the safety of the community was at odds with the profitability of the electric company on Maui, the executives were faced with a decision between competing incentives. They may have genuinely wanted to do their best to protect the community by upgrading their equipment to protect against fire. I'm just giving them the biggest possible benefit of the doubt for this theoretical scenario. But they have the incentive structure of the

profit motive for the company pulling in the other direction, causing them to say that they couldn't take action until the state agreed to allow the company to pass on the cost of the upgrades to the citizens.

Now, in this thought experiment, the people had no ill intentions and yet acted in a way that was harmful. And that's a perfectly logical explanation that takes both individual action and [01:07:00] structural forces into account. Now, to jump to a conspiratorial conclusion about anyone intentionally starting the fire, or allowing it to start, even if they managed to profit off of the disaster, requires, or should require, a much higher standard of proof.

Thinking in structural terms doesn't preclude the possibility of nefarious individual actions or real conspiracies. It just recognizes that there is usually a simpler explanation for why things are the way they are, while avoiding falling into incorrect conspiratorial trains of logic by insisting that extraordinary claims be backed up by extraordinary evidence.

That's going to be it for today. As always, keep the comments coming in. I would love to hear your thoughts or questions about this or anything else. You can leave a voicemail or send us a text to 202-999-3991 or simply email me to [01:08:00] jay@bestoftheleft.com. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to our Transcriptionist Trio, Ken, Brian, and LaWendy, for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, webmastering, and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who already support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at bestoftheleft.com/support. You can join them by signing up today. It would be greatly appreciated. You'll find that link in the show notes along with the link to join our Discord community where you can continue the discussion.

So, coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington DC, my name is Jay, and this has been the *Best of the Left* podcast coming to you twice weekly, thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from bestoftheleft.com.