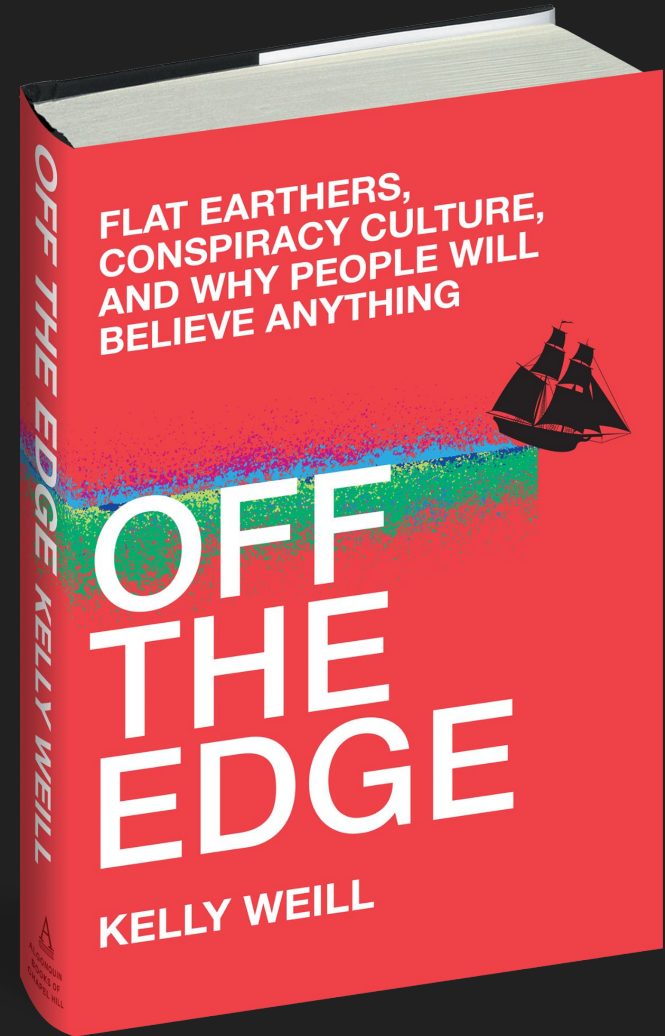


Early Adopters

How Flat Earthers and Conspiracy Movements
Exploit New Communication Technologies

About me:

- Journalist covering disinformation, extremism, and the internet
- Most recently at New York Magazine and The Daily Beast
- Author of “Off The Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, And Why People Will Believe Anything”



What makes a conspiracy theory?

- Explains correlations between events and actors
- Perpetrators must have acted deliberately
- Multiple people involved in the plot
- Plot must be nefarious
- Ongoing cover-up

*sometimes conspiracies are real!

Why do people believe false conspiracy theories?

- Explain events in moments of uncertainty
- Offer alternate explanations for uncomfortable realities
- Improve perception of personal or group identity

Flat earthers usually believe:

- Earth is a flat disc
- Earth is surrounded by an ice wall
- Earth is enclosed in a dome
- Nothing exists outside the dome





What flat earthers tell me about YouTube:

- "I spent like three nights wide awake and then I was hooked."
- Flat earth videos "immediately rang true and then later I proved it to myself."
- Flat earth videos "came on autoplay. So I didn't actively search for flat earth."
- "Maybe I would just watch one more video, and one more after that."
- "Since the first day I clicked on the first video, I couldn't take it off my mind."
- "It's popular. That's the only reason I use it. If people will let me put content on their websites, I'm going to do it."
- Before YouTube reduced visibility of flat earth videos "I was doing four hundred to five hundred new subscribers per day."

YouTube's flat earth algorithms (pre-2019)

- A 2017 study of 30 flat earthers found all but one to be recent YouTube converts
- Watch to debunk, fail to debunk, watch recommended videos
- Business model elevates intrigue and clickability—great for outrageous topics
- In 2017, 35% of YouTube search results for “flat earth theory” endorsed it
 - 90% of recommended videos deriving from “flat earth theory” endorsed it
- “It’s not trying to optimize for relevance. It’s trying to optimize for watch time.” - Guillaume Chaslot, former YouTube engineer

Perverse incentives for creators

- When conspiracy and flat earth videos overperform, creators join the trend
- Semi-credulous videos from big YouTubers like Logan Paul and Shane Dawson
- “There was a whisper that was being passed around content creators—not just ours but other people—that if you made a flat earth video, you would get more hits and you would get five hundred percent more comments, which track into the YouTube algorithm. When that happened, people started making more flat earth videos.” - Mark Sargent, flat earth YouTuber

Distrust and community

- Conspiracy theories thrive on us-versus-them sentiment (group identity)
- YouTube is alternative media, benefits from tension with mainstream media
- YouTubers elevated through parasocial relationships with viewers
- Viewership becomes a form of community and identity (in-group, out-group)
- "Truthers, because of the persecution that a lot of them have faced, can become very isolated. A lot of them will just pull down the blinds and be like 'all I need is me, myself, and I, and my friends on the internet.'" - Nate Wolfe, flat earth author who got fired from preacher job for flat earth advocacy

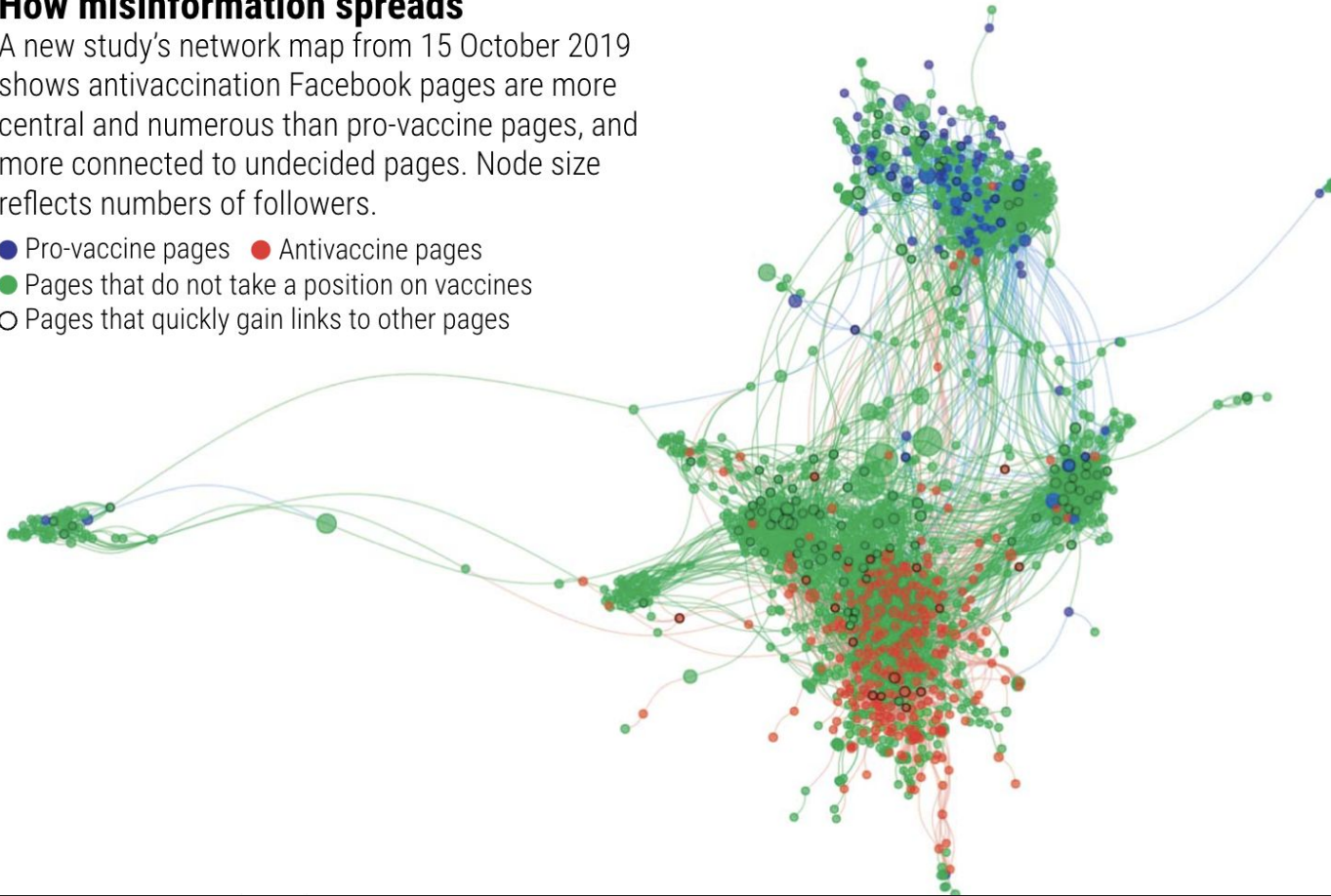
In Fairness To YouTube,

- Algorithmic updates in 2019 made it harder to find flat earth content
- “Now I’m lucky if I get 100 new subscribers in four months.”
- 2016 internal Facebook study found that 64% of people who joined extremist pages did so via Facebook’s recommendation tools
- Make a blank Facebook account and watch its recommendations radicalize
- Conspiracy pages on Facebook often prioritizing sharing and networking with non-conspiracy pages. (Pages for large institutions are less social.)

How misinformation spreads

A new study's network map from 15 October 2019 shows antivaccination Facebook pages are more central and numerous than pro-vaccine pages, and more connected to undecided pages. Node size reflects numbers of followers.

- Pro-vaccine pages
- Antivaccine pages
- Pages that do not take a position on vaccines
- Pages that quickly gain links to other pages



From “The online competition between pro- and anti-vaccination views” (2019)

Did conspiracism start with the internet?

- Always conspiracy theories, often riffing on recognizable themes
- Conspiracy theorists often pioneers of new communication forms
- Previous flat earth booms exploited new communication technology
 - Zion, Illinois, a religious settlement run by flat earth cultists c. 1920 established one of the first long-range radio stations
 - Samuel Rowbotham, the founder of modern flat earth theory c. 1840 reached mass audiences in England when new tax laws democratized publishing. Good for literacy and free expression, but also for profitable hoaxes