

Why doesn't data change minds? Shouldn't hardcore facts, visuals, and statistics be enough to provide truth to everyone? Shouldn't these tools be enough for individuals to shift through information critically and to correct misunderstanding? Well, not quite. In this digital age, it is no surprise to most users active online that conspiracy theories and the like abound on the internet. The key difference between those who believe in conspiracies and fact are those who hold subjective perception and belief as core to their viewpoint versus those who are able to look at the data objectively and put aside individual perceptions of life. In this paper, I will look at two TedX talks: *Why Data Doesn't Change Minds* by Andrea Olson, and *Why some conspiracy theories just won't die* from Elise Wang and decipher why factual data insights in this day and age don't provide unity to individuals with different viewpoints and what's needed to initiate change.

Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician who proposed that handwashing with chlorinated lime solutions could drastically reduce the incidence of puerperal fever, a deadly infection affecting women after childbirth. Nevertheless, at the time his idea was revolutionary, and he was shunned by not only his colleagues, but also his wife, claimed Andrea Olson. So why was his data shunned? Well, it was not because his data supported his beliefs, but because the public perception at that time was resistant to accepting the idea that doctors' unwashed hands could transmit disease, leading to skepticism and rejection of his findings. It is easy to claim that that humans were less evolved intellectually at the time, but the fundamental problem with that claim is the overlooking of the core of human and information behavior and how humans interpret and digest new information.

There are numerous conspiracy theories which seem to abound online. There are harmless beliefs, such as claimed UFO sightings and arguments that the moon landing was

faked, to more harmful ideas, like white supremacy which Elise Wang mentions in her talk. So why do individuals go looking for these fringe theories, or dive deeper into patently false claims? Wang argues that the answer is twofold. One, human nature is bound to find patterns where there is a lack of data. Various media groups, extreme or not, take advantage of these “data voids” to push ideas that may or may not be grounded in reality. Two, many individuals today prioritize personal experiences over objective facts. Elise Wang states, “If the facts don’t match our experiences of things, we will find a story that does”.

So, what connects these two cases between Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis and conspiracy theorists, and how does that fit into my career as an information science professional? There are a few significant themes. But I believe the most important takeaway is that fancy visualizations, impressive reports, and experience in media literacy are essentially useless when there is a perception gap between the data and the individual. Rather than focusing entirely on empirical data, Andrea Olson claims that we should also focus on the “where” a person disagrees with the facts. In the case of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis, the scientists didn’t reject his data, they rejected the idea that would greatly change their understanding of medical knowledge. Similarly, Elise Wang points out that many conspiracy theorists are not ignorant or uneducated like we imagine them to be. Rather, they reject points based on internal hurt somewhere that they experienced in their lives or when subjective beliefs overrule objective reality. As an information professional, it is crucial to recognize and address the perception gap of others while striving for understanding. Professionals must not only disseminate information but also actively engage with individuals to comprehend the underlying reasons for their divergence from factual data. By fostering open dialogue and empathy, we can then bridge the gap between differing perceptions and facilitate informed decision-making.

## References

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