

Writing about conspiracy theories

Noora Mattila
journalist/fellow
11.4.2025

“The Awakened”

“I’m not going to tell you whether or not to vaccinate your kids. These are private matters in the family. All I’m saying is this: before you make any decisions, you need to do your research very carefully. *Go deep.* Things have been removed from the internet.”

Susan, my mother-in-law



[Vaalit](#)[Liikenne nyt](#)[Paikalliset](#)[Uusimmat](#)[Näköislehti](#)[Katso](#)[Kirjaudu](#)[Tilaa TS](#)

OLIVIER HOSLET

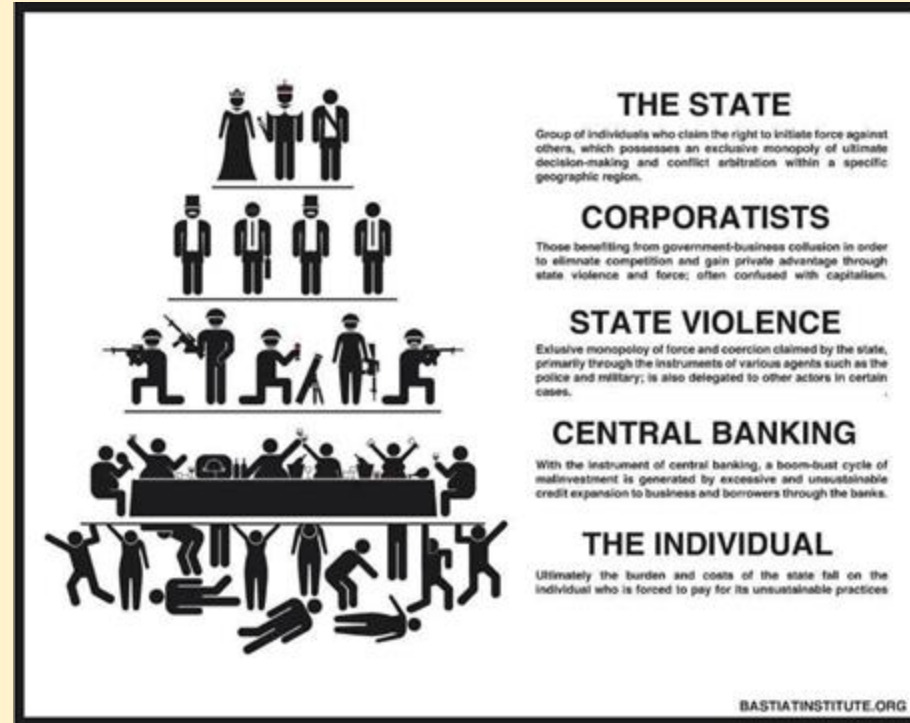


The starting point of the book

- the demonstrators weren't usually interviewed by the media, and the articles that were written didn't help with understanding them or the conflict
- so I wanted to:
 - discuss the topic differently: to break down the strange "beliefs" into life stories and world views and discussion
 - examine the interaction between the mainstream and the fringe
 - see what happens in the conversation with my mother-in-law
 - document the moral divide and the public discussion during the pandemic
- method: long video calls, demonstrations, research

What is a conspiracy theory?

- A theory of a big, hidden plan that is morally questionable and intentionally kept secret
- A moral story of power: that power is used wrong, too much or in secret
- Aimed at the power elites: the state, banks, corporations, media, science
- Populist by core: people vs. the elites
- Examples
- A conspiracist worldview: extreme distrust

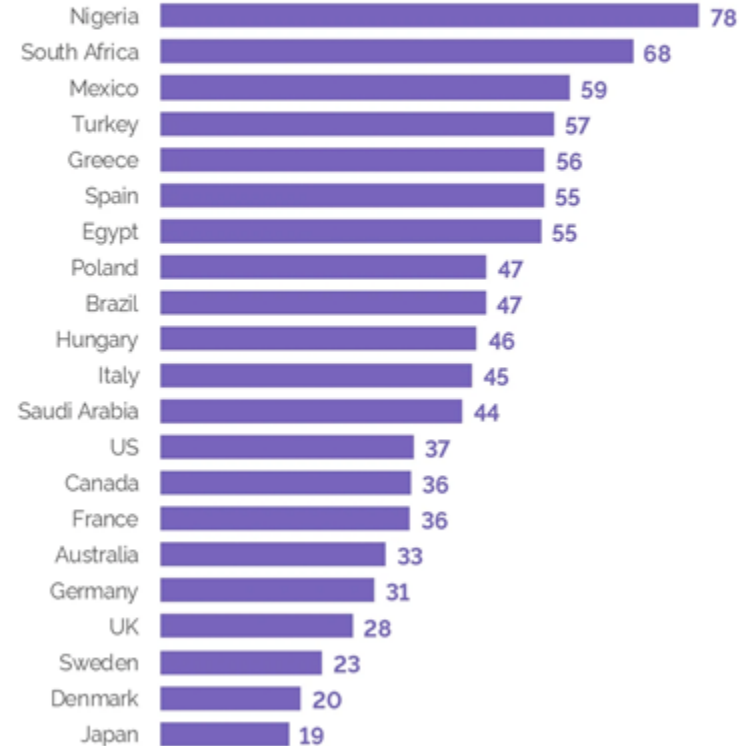


Who are conspiracy theorists?

- an unclear definition: spreaders or followers?
- polls show high support across the world, but maybe not accurate
- self-image: critical, independent thinkers, truth seekers
- appreciate “those who speak out”, outcasts of the establishment
- views on media and science: corrupt or too afraid

Over half of Spaniards and Greeks think a single secret group of people control world events

Would you say the following statement is true or false? (Answers for “Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together” shown % of adults in each country who answered either “definitely true” or “probably true”)





How it went: attacking and defending

“It is naïve to trust corporations. Nobody questions, who I’ve looked at, who believes in this, who are so fucking scared they all submit to this – it absolutely escapes me. Pick your expert, who do you wanna believe? To me it comes down to the mind of someone who would blindly believe in a religion. You don’t question! And medicine should not fall into the religious belief thing.”

The truth is just a surface

“Journalists and politicians are afraid of conspiracy theories, but they don’t talk about their fears. Journalists focus on facts and say that they are wrong, so we don’t need to listen to these people. I think the truth is just a surface of a deeper-lying moral framework that is under attack or in conflict with what is going on. You need to go deeper and find out what’s behind it. Then you can find other ways of dealing with these people. Because just proving that you’re right and they’re wrong is not gonna do anything. It’s only gonna cause more friction and societal polarization.”

Jaron Harambam, sociologist, PhD, University of Amsterdam

Moral polarization: people mix truth and justice

“It is difficult for people psychologically to think that moral justice and factual truth are different things. They seem intuitively so close: what is right and what is true. That’s what conspiracy theories are often about. If some YouTube influencer supports the right things, you believe their facts, too. And similarly, we think that we can argue moral outcomes with facts. That if we find the right studies, we can point to the right political decision, but that’s not how it works.”

Tuukka Ylä-Anttila, Doctor of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki

How do people become trusting or distrusting?

- Two schools of thought:
 - 1) Personal experiences (of institutions)
 - 2) Environment and culture, political language
- the level of trust is defined by personality, community, society
- Those who have wealth, education and political power tend to be more trusting

Trust is a privilege?

- But that doesn't mean that trust is ungrounded or blind

Why do people support conspiracy theories?

- my focus was on “the journey” rather than individual characteristics
- **pushing reasons:** the experience of losing trust, feeling of powerlessness, belonging to counter-cultural group with a low trust level
- **situational reasons:** freedom under threat, uncertain information, political recruiting
- **pulling reasons:** the identity of “truth-seekers”, community, political influence, puzzle-solving and information gathering

Writing about controversial views: what to consider

- becoming a megaphone for marginal views
 - platforming
 - boundary moving
 - false balance
- practical difficulties
 - they may not want to be interviewed
 - you may get harassed or targeted on social media
- psychological toll
 - fact-checking may be endless and confusing
 - your identity and worldview may become attacked
 - you will not change anyone's mind
- possible consequences
 - victims?
 - risk of polarizing conversation



Why I still did it!

- the core of journalism:
 - curiosity
 - freedom of speech
 - a critical attitude towards establishment
 - correcting false information
- maybe there is something to learn
 - in what they say
 - in how they arrived in their views
 - in the political patterns in society
 - I don't think any part of society should be treated as a "lost cause"
- you might change
- It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it



Some tools

- avoid exaggerating marginal phenomena
- approach people with genuine curiosity and be transparent about your intentions
- identify the core facts and check them fully; ignore misleading details
- don't repeat and reproduce hateful speech
- contextualize without diagnosing
- using a narrative voice may be helpful
- avoid name-calling, irony, strong emotional language
- be precise with identifying views
- respect people's right to disagree and accept difference

