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## In #FlatEarth We Trust: The Danger of the Self-Representation of Flat Earthers on Twitter

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In #FlatEarth We Trust:  
The Danger of the Self-Representation of Flat Earthers on Twitter

By

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## ABSTRACT

The Flat Earth movement has gained substantial online publicity over the last few years as demands for the ‘truth’ in an era of post-truth are increasingly centered on anti-government and anti-expert regulations of knowledge. More individuals are self-identifying as Flat Earthers, or those who believe the earth is flat, on social media applications, such as Twitter. Flat Earthers self-represent on their Twitter accounts as ‘truth seekers’ or uncorrupted by knowledge authorities endorsed by the government, but in representing themselves this way, they mislead the public and further aggravate the public mistrust of the government, experts, and science. Flat Earthers claim to deconstruct the structures of authority governing knowledge production by producing their own, but in doing so, simply pervert, replicate, and recreate the very structures they are attempting to dismantle. The way Flat Earthers represent themselves and their beliefs on Twitter have greater implications for society, particularly trust in science and related government institutions.

**Keywords:** Flat Earth, conspiracy theory, truth, knowledge, representation

## Introduction

On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, SpaceX launched a spacecraft transporting two NASA astronauts into space with a mission to dock on the International Space Station (ISS). In doing so, SpaceX successfully reinstated NASA and the United States as a contender within the international human spaceflight arena, while also becoming the first private company to deliver humans to the ISS (SpaceX, 2020). The launch was broadcasted on various media sources, as well as trending on social media sites, such as Twitter. SpaceX gained substantial media attention on Twitter with the trending of hashtags #ElonMusk and #SpaceX. Consequently, the media coverage also triggered a response from the Flat Earth community, with #FlatEarth trending in the United States. Although some of the tweets featuring #FlatEarth seemed to parody the trend, there were some tweets from dedicated supporters. Many of these tweets by supporters displayed hashtags denouncing the launch as fake with #FakeX, #FakeSpace, and #NASALies.

As harmless as these tweets may seem, the dissemination of misinformation has dangerous side effects on society. Anti-science conspiracies are considered dangerous to society, but some have questioned the supposed ‘danger’ of the Flat Earth community over other anti-science beliefs like that of anti-vax or climate change denial. The danger associated with Flat Earth beliefs derives from their general distrust in authority and power, a common characteristic of those who possess conspiratorial tendencies. This general distrust accompanied with other factors such as a lack of scientific understanding, political orientation, religious affiliation, or populist ideology, are identified in previous research as potential influences in adopting anti-science attitudes (Gauchat, 2008; Rutjens et al, 2018; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Those who harbour anti-science attitudes often search for alternative avenues for information and knowledge with the most common source being conspiracy theories. Furthermore, individuals who submit to one

conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others, as they are often interrelated with the same general skepticism of government, science, experts, and the ‘elite’ (Douglas et al., 2019). These individuals exhibit a level of skepticism that surpasses ‘normal’ and induces an extreme distrust of all societal structures. Conspiracies have always existed, but with the emergence of the Internet and online social media applications, conspiracy theories are more accessible and able to reach a wider audience. Although not all conspiracy theories are harmful, those that involve the rejection of established knowledge, scientific information, and the dismissal of empirical evidence impact the trust of government, experts, and science in general, which in turn affects public safety.

On Twitter, people are free to represent themselves in any way they wish as long as they adhere to Twitter guidelines. One can present themselves as reflective of their personal reality or an alternative persona. How users self-represent affects how individuals interpret the content of the account and how they interact with it. Accounts that are dedicated to Flat Earth-related content represent themselves in ways that target individuals with a similar mindset, as well as those who are seeking simplified answers or the ‘truth’. The accounts that focus on Flat Earth often have the universal goal of uncovering the ‘truth’ and do so by advocating and sharing information that supports their beliefs. The way in which these accounts represent themselves and demonstrate their beliefs can mislead others and further aggravate the public mistrust of the government, experts, and science. Previous research has addressed questions regarding who is more likely to adopt these conspiratorial beliefs and why people believe them, but there is a lack of literature on the subject of how they represent themselves to others. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature by analyzing the Twitter accounts of Flat Earth believers to

explore how they represent themselves and their beliefs to a broad online audience, while also addressing the dangers that these representations have vis-a-vis society.

## **Context**

### *Distrust in Authority: The Government, Politics, and Science*

Flat Earthers, or those who believe the earth is not a globe but a flat terrain, and other science-denying conspiracies all have one thing in common: a general distrust of authoritative structures and institutions. This general distrust is focused on the authorities in knowledge production and dissemination, such as the government, politics, and the scientific community. Distrust in government in the United States and other Western countries is not a new phenomenon. There is legitimacy to the questioning of authoritative powers and government as more scandals and stories of corruption are covered in mainstream media. The issue with the distrust in government is that it contributes to the distrust and skepticism of other governmental institutions and organizations that have power and influence over the public. Consequently, distrust in science is influenced by a general distrust of the government due to unpredictability, uncertainty, or overall low political trust (Douglas et al., 2019). Anti-science attitudes are increasingly common in the United States, with many speculating that the current political climate is a motivating factor particularly the election of Donald Trump as president (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). With the proliferation of alternative facts related to Trump's presidency, the current political climate has exploited pre-existing distrust in government by misrepresenting or denying scientific information, particularly about climate change and vaccinations. This pre-existing distrust for government accompanied by politically motivated media distortion has played a role in the increase of anti-science attitudes in the United States. Contrary to previous understanding of the phenomenon, one study found that growing distrust of

the scientific community and scientific information can be attributed to the rise of misinformation in the media, particularly on the Internet, perpetrated by individuals or groups with underlying political motives rather than communication issues from science experts and the scientific enterprise (Iyengar and Massey, 2019, p. 7656). Although faulty communication of scientific information was previously thought to be the core issue for science-related misinformation, now it is evident that the media perverts scientific conclusions, that would otherwise be clearly represented, through online campaigns aimed at distorting and falsifying information (Iyengar and Massey, 2019, p. 7656). These issues are attributed to the increasing divisions and changing nature of American political environments and the media (Iyengar and Massey, 2019, p. 7656). In the United States, scholars have seen a rise in ideologically biased content in the media where science is more likely to be skewed for political interests (Iyengar and Massey, 2019). Some argue that this is due to the polarization of science between political ideologies, conservative and liberal (Gauchat, 2012; Scheitle 2018, Rutjens, Sutton and van der Lee, 2018). Previous research concurs that political conservatives are more likely to distrust science and have anti-science attitudes (Gauchat, 2008; Gauchat, 2012; Rutjens et al., 2018; Iyengar and Massey, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019). As a result, conservatives have gradually experienced increased distrust in science, while overall public trust in science has remained static since the 1970s (Gauchat, 2012, p. 182).

### *Anti-science Attitudes*

Anti-science in the context of this study refers to the rejection, denial, or opposition of science, scientific inquiry, and scientific methods. Anti-science attitudes are attributed to political orientation, particularly those who have conservative beliefs. Although, researchers have found that anti-science sentiment cannot be solely explained through political orientation

and belief but rather the result of multiple explanations (Gauchat, 2008; Rutjens et al., 2018).

The most common factors in predicting anti-science attitudes are religiosity, political orientation, and scientific literacy (Gauchat, 2008; Rutjens et al., 2018). Other factors identified are morality, referring to one's moral convictions (Rutjens et al., 2018), and social embeddedness, referring to one's embeddedness in various social groups, networks, and obligations (Gauchat, 2008, p. 352).

All of these factors should be studied together when trying to explain anti-science attitudes as most are intercorrelated. For example, political affiliation and religiosity are associated as research has found that more conservatives submit to evangelical beliefs than liberals and are more likely to distrust science (Rutjens et al., 2018). One's moral stance on particular issues of naturalness or purity may impede on their willingness to accept existing or new scientific information (Rutjens et al., 2018). Morality may be correlated with one's religious affiliations as well as how deeply they are connected and embedded in those religious obligations. Social embeddedness refers to one's values and perceptions of society, as well as their social commitments and how embedded they are with respect to a particular view of the world (Gauchat, 2008). Being socially embedded in a particular ideological group can affect one's view of science. Those who are "more cosmopolitan," or urban, are less likely to report anti-science sentiment, whereas those who are "over embedded" in social groups, institutions, and obligation are more likely to express anti-science sentiment (Gauchat, 2008, p. 352). Moreover, scientific literacy is thought to be tied to the social embeddedness of an individual into the scientific community, as well as how exposed one is to scientific information (Gauchat, 2008, p. 352). Education is also a factor for predicting acceptance, rejection, and trust in science (Gauchat, 2012, p. 182). One study found that those with higher levels of education are more likely to have greater trust in science, while uniquely, educated political conservatives were more likely to



experience a decline in trust (Gauchat, 2012, p. 182). This finding indicates that education and scientific literacy may not affect those who are ideologically rooted (Gauchat, 2012, p. 182). Development of anti-science attitudes is contributed to a variety of factors that should all be taken into consideration when studying the phenomenon as it can be associated with regard to one's social context, political orientation, religiosity, morality, understanding of scientific information, and level of social embeddedness into particular social groups.

### *Epistemological Populism*

Today, especially in the era of the Internet, there is a clear “linkage between populism and the production and communication of knowledge” (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 357). As more people adhere to anti-science beliefs, the more people begin to question where knowledge is produced, who produces it, and what is deemed ‘truth’ or legitimate knowledge. This type of populism is called epistemological populism (Saurette and Gunster, 2011). Epistemological populism takes the same structure as populism as a political ideology that emphasizes the interests of ordinary, everyday people while criticizing elites. The difference lies in the focus on the knowledge of common people by challenging the knowledge of elites. Epistemological populists assert that knowledge elites have become estranged from the practical knowledge acquired from everyday life and common sense. Epistemological populism is characterized by

the assertion that individual opinions based upon firsthand experience are much more reliable as a form of knowledge than those generated by theories and academic studies; the valorization of specific types of experience as particularly reliable sources of legitimate knowledge and the extension of this knowledge authority to unrelated issues; the privileging of emotional intensity as an indicator of the reliability of opinions; the use of populist-inflected discourse to dismiss other types of knowledge as elitist and therefore

illegitimate; and finally, the appeal to “common sense” as a discussion-ending trump card (Saurette and Gunster, 2011, p. 199).

The concept of counterknowledge is used by populists as a means of countering the elites (experts) “by advocating alternative knowledge authorities” through the rejection of past knowledge authorities and the creation of new alternative options based on common sense and practical experience (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 358-359). Individuals typically resort to populist ideologies when they are uncomfortable with the notion that not everything is understood and cannot be easily explained leading them to try to fill the void with ‘common sense’ or any means necessary (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This can cause individuals to resort to believing in claims that support their particular worldview rather than knowledge claims that are not substantiated with empirical evidence or have any sort of truth value (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). These forms of populist ideology are argued to come from the anti-expert movement. We, as a society, rely on experts to provide the rest of us with information, therefore belief in alternative knowledge authorities “is not mere irrationality, but something that results from the realities of modernity, particularly ‘ontological insecurity’ (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 361).

### *Conspiracism*

Conspiracies are identified as an elite scheme based on secrecy involving powerful actors while conspiracy theories are a method of explaining certain political and social phenomena that are associated with beliefs of secret plots involving powerful actors (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). Conspiracism, also referred to as conspiracy mentality or mindset, is an ideology where one believes that all people in authority are involved in a conspiracy to hide things from the general public (Cassam, 2019). Not all people who believe in conspiracy theories are conspiracy theorists. There is a distinction between conspiracy theorists or producers who are the producers

of the conspiracy theories, and conspiracy consumers, who simply consume, support and share pre-existing conspiracy theories (Cassam, 2019). Both tend to be amateurs in regard to understanding complex scientific information and research methods (Cassam 2019; Douglas et al., 2019). Despite this, conspiracy producers and consumers may be educated and have post-secondary credentials, which may be used as a legitimizing factor when making claims and constructing arguments (Cassam, 2019). Those who have a conspiracy mentality are more likely to believe in a variety of conspiracy theories as they have a particular world view that predisposes them to believe (Douglas et al., 2019). Individuals who adhere to populist ideologies are likely to adopt conspiracy beliefs, as conspiracy theories are the most prevalent form of counterknowledge used by populists (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Three motives are identified as potential explanations for the creations of conspiracy theories: epistemic, existential, and social (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 7).

Epistemic motives refer to those that seek to understand and to uncover the ‘truth’ (Douglas et al., 2019). This is a common motivation in conspiracy producers and consumers as they believe that those in power are hiding things from the masses and they seek the truth. Existential motives refer to possible feelings of powerlessness and a need to control one’s social environment by believing in something that offers an alternative explanation for why things are the way they are (Douglas et al., 2019). Religiosity may be tied to one seeking an existential understanding of the world, rather than scientific explanations. Social motives refer to a need to feel important, unique, or to project a particular image of oneself (Douglas et al., 2019). One may want to distinguish themselves from the masses by identifying as a ‘truther’ or conspiracy believer. Another possible motive or explanation for conspiracy theories is that they are a form of political

propaganda, whether conscious or unconscious and believed or not believed, as most conspiracy theories have political roots and derive from some political phenomenon (Cassam, 2019).

Conspiracy theories are considered an alternative knowledge authority that ‘enlighten’ or ‘awaken’ the public through the knowledge of ‘true experts’ rather than the knowledge of elite experts (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This eagerness to be an alternative knowledge authority and demonstrates counterknowledge often leads to the cherry-picking of information and trying to justify or blatantly ignore conflicting evidence (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 377). By asserting themselves as an alternative source of knowledge and truth, conspiracy theorists only seek evidence, support, and information from other conspiracy theorists, creating a circular cycle of confirmation bias and belief perseverance (Cassam, 2019). This could also be a result of the kinds of people who are likely to adopt conspiracy beliefs, such as those who overestimate their capacities to interpret and understand complex scientific information (Douglas et al., 2018).

### *Truth, Knowledge, and Power*

If one were to analyze the current role of conspiracy theorists in society using the work of Michel Foucault on truth and power, one could argue that there is some legitimacy to them and their beliefs. The distrust in government and elites is not entirely unjustified. There are countless reports of governmental corruption, lobbying from wealthy individuals with personal interests, and political scandals, therefore one should be critical and skeptical of those in power and the decisions being made. Distrust and skepticism of authority become a problem when every decision is deemed to be part of some greater conspiracy or act of corruption. For Foucault, there could be some legitimacy to their skepticism of ‘truth’. Foucault argued that what is deemed valuable knowledge and ‘truth’ is controlled by those who hold power. Depending on who is in power, notions of ‘truth’ can change. Foucault called these ‘regimes of truth’ and they can vary

from one society to another (1980, p. 131). Power establishes what is ‘fact’ and who can produce those ‘facts’ (Foucault, 1980). What society believes is true is based on the process of normalizing what has been regulated to be ‘true’. This process of normalization is embedded in our social structures where it is reproduced until it is naturalized within society, such as with our universities or government.

Although the original principle of mistrust is justified and legitimate based on previous experiences with those in power, conspiracy believers, armed with a perverted sense of critical thinking and rationality, often construct fallacious arguments that ignore evidence, contradicting information and valid reasoning. Evidence for arguments by conspiracy theorists is often taken out of context and cherry-picked to support their claims. Often conspiracy theorists cannot answer the ‘why’ or the ‘how’ to their argument. Instead, conspiracy theorists will argue that we should not believe everything we hear or see because what is ‘true’ has been decided for us, instead we should question the information we are given and look into it ourselves. In this case, it is valid to claim that not all science is conducted in a rigorous, empirical, or ethical manner, therefore we should have a certain amount of skepticism for the information we are exposed to. Yet, another issue of conspiracies arises when this skepticism is fanatical where no piece of evidence or scientific information is accepted as ‘true’. Conspiracy theorists believe that what is ‘true’ is only true because the dominant power has claimed it as such. To counter the normalized regulation of truth, they develop conspiracies and alternative knowledge authorities as a method of deconstructing the role of power on knowledge. They wish to deconstruct the established regimes of truth by creating alternative knowledge authorities, but in doing so, they create their specific intellectuals and ‘experts’ who act as advocates and representatives of the movement. Foucault discussed the idea of ‘specific intellectuals’ as experts in their fields of study but who

question and intervene in the production of scientific knowledge through the assertion of their own “‘local’ scientific truth” (Foucault, 1980, p. 129). The goal for specific intellectuals is to separate the power of truth from the powers that control it (Foucault, 1980). In developing alternative sources of knowledge through conspiracies, conspiracy theorists and consumers engage in similar processes to the scientific community with their own experts and own conception of what is ‘truth’.

These processes of rejecting established knowledge and developing alternative knowledge authorities threaten the modern scientific epistemes that currently dictate what is deemed scientific or non-scientific knowledge. By producing their distinct sources of knowledge, conspiracy theorists are challenging the modern epistemes that unconsciously govern scientific discourse. Epistemes, according to Foucault, are “strategic apparatus[es]” that regulate what statements can be considered scientific and deemed acceptable within the scientific community (Foucault, 1980, p. 197). However, the ‘apparatus’ is not the scientific method but the overarching, unconscious essence of scientific discourse. It does not discern the true from the false but rather which statements “it is possible to say are true or false” (Foucault, 1980, p. 197). The modern scientist operates according to this apparatus, which is contingent on a certain society and period in time. According to the current episteme, statements regarding Flat Earth or anti-vaccination would be considered unscientific and unacceptable within the scientific community. Flat Earth specific intellectuals instead engage a new alternative episteme that acts as the apparatus that governs knowledge production and regulated truth and untruth: conspiracism. Conspiracism, motivated by epistemological populist ideation, functions as a new unconscious governing entity where scientific evidence and truth is not reliant on the scientific

method, but emphasizes the knowledge power of common sense, practical and lived experience of non-experts.

### *Flat Earthers and Twitter*

The Flat Earth community is made up of individuals who believe in the Flat Earth, which posits that the earth is not a globe but a flat terrain. Although the notion of a Flat Earth is not a new idea, it is been revived as a conspiracy theory that the government is hiding the truth of the world. The modern Flat Earth movement is fueled by conspiracy mentality, religiosity, and epistemological populism (Paolillo, 2018; Olshansky, Peaslee, and Landrum, 2020). Today, the Flat Earth movement has gained more stamina with the popularity of the Internet and social media platforms, such as Twitter. Flat Earthers often describe their ‘conversion’ to believing in Flat Earth as originating from being introduced to flat earth theories on YouTube (Paolillo, 2018; Olshansky, Peaslee, and Landrum, 2020). Videos introducing the subject to those with conspiracy mindsets and distrust for government appeal to gaps in existential narratives by supporting claims with ‘evidence’ from conspiracy theories and Biblical references (Olshansky, Peaslee, and Landrum, 2020). Flat Earthers claim to be on the search for ‘truth’ and debunking the globe model of the earth to prove that the world has been lied to. Flat Earthers, like most conspiracists, tend to use quasi-scientific methods, or pseudoscience, to support their claims. They typically “conflate observation with proof, and disproof for proof, suggesting a puerile understanding of scientific process and reasoning” (Paolillo, 2018, p. 3). Flat Earthers tend to emphasize the need for individuals to look into things themselves, or conduct their own research, and not to trust everything they hear until they test it themselves. They create their own sources of knowledge by claiming to be ‘awake’ and free of the brainwashing of elite experts.

Twitter is a multi-media online social networking platform that is focused on accounts that post 'tweets' to followers and share other accounts posts. Flat Earthers on Twitter use this platform as a means of disseminating their message to gain new followers and as a meeting ground for existing believers. Twitter allows users to depict themselves in any way they wish through their profile and account details. Each user has a profile picture, background photo picture, display name, username (features an @ symbol when people want to tag you in something), biography, and location. Flat Earthers may choose to directly identify themselves in their account details so that other believers can find them easily, well others may only discuss Flat Earth within the content of their tweets. Most accounts that interact with conspiracy related accounts are other conspiracy users (Bessi, Zollo, Del Vicaro, Scala, Caldarelli, and Quattrociocchi, 2015). Although with the outreach and use of hashtags (#), a function on Twitter that acts as a tag so that other users can find it easily, other individuals are susceptible to the misinformation and misrepresentation of scientific information.

Previous research emphasized the psychological and political aspects of anti-science attitudes and conspiracy theories. Lack of research has been conducted on the online Flat Earth movement (Paolillo, 2018; Olshansky, Peaslee, and Landrum, 2020). The current study aims to contribute to the literature on anti-science conspiracy theories by focusing on the subject of how Flat Earthers represent themselves on social media and how they demonstrate their beliefs through the use of the social networking platform Twitter. Furthermore, the present study will explore theoretical explanations for how Flat Earthers represent themselves and their beliefs using a Foucauldian analysis of truth, power, and knowledge production.



## Methods

The present study conducted a qualitative content analysis to explore how Flat Earthers represent themselves and demonstrate their beliefs on the social media platform Twitter. The present study addresses these three research questions:

1. How do Flat Earthers and related conspiracy believers represent themselves on their Twitter accounts?
2. How do Flat Earthers and related conspiracy believers demonstrate their beliefs on their Twitter accounts?
3. What makes these representations and the subsequent demonstration of these beliefs dangerous to society?

### *Data Collection*

The present study conducted a qualitative content analysis to explore how Flat Earthers represent themselves and demonstrate their beliefs on the social media platform Twitter. Thirty self-identified Flat Earth related accounts were included in this study. The sample was selected through purposive snowball sampling. An initial general search using the term ‘flat earth’ was conducted on Twitter, where three Flat Earth accounts were retrieved. Using those three accounts, more Flat Earth related accounts were discovered in their ‘following’ and ‘followers’ lists. This process continued until a total of 56 accounts were identified, of which only 30 were included in the study. Accounts were included in the final sample if they adhered to five criteria: (1) the account details and content were in English; (2) they had more than 1000 followers; (3) they mention ‘Flat Earth’ or related content in their account details (profile picture, bio, username, display name, or location); (4) they mention ‘Flat Earth’ or related content in their

tweets; and if (5) they tweet more than once a month. Twenty-five users clearly identified 'Flat Earth' within their account details.

The five users that did not identify as a 'Flat Earther' in their account details were included in the study if their account content (tweets) discussed Flat Earth and related topics. These accounts were also analyzed using a Text Search query on NVivo to review the content of their tweets to determine if they engage in Flat Earth discussions. Account details and tweets were collected using NCapture, a software extension on Google Chrome that captures data in a format supported by NVivo, which were then imported into NVivo for coding. Tweets from all thirty accounts were captured from June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 dating back to June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, totaling in approximately 10,800 Flat Earth related tweets.

### *Data Analysis*

For this study, there are two units of analysis: the account details and the tweets. Preliminary themes were identified after an initial examination of the Twitter data. The analysis was divided into two sections: how Flat Earth believers represent themselves on their account through their account details, and how Flat Earth believers demonstrate their Flat Earth beliefs through their tweets. The coding scheme for the first section of data analysis was developed through the examination of the data and informed by literature on anti-science and the factors that contribute to the adoption of conspiracy theory beliefs. In the first analysis, five characterizations of accounts were established. These characterizations included users that identified as a supporter of Flat Earth, that indicate status positions, that proclaim a religious affiliation, that displays a political orientation, and that signifies epistemological populist (Table 1). Accounts were coded based on these five characterizations of how they represent themselves, although they are not mutually exclusive as a user may exhibit attributes of more than one

characterization. The coding scheme for the second section of the analysis was developed through an examination of the data. Codes were created as new themes emerged within tweets of the Flat Earth accounts.

Table 1. Summary of characterizations of Flat Earth users on Twitter (Account Details)

Flat Earther (Clearly Identified)	Identified as a 'Flat Earther' or believing that the earth is flat
Use of Status (Education or Employment)	Indicated employment or education (credentials or highest level of attainment)
Religious	Stated religious affiliation or made reference to religious material
Political Orientation	Stated political orientation (Republican/Democrat or Liberal/Conservative parties; liberal/conservative ideology) or particular political beliefs
Epistemological Populist	<p>Use of phrases and terms that relate to 'truth' or 'truth seeking'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "the assertion that individual opinions based upon firsthand experience are much more reliable as a form of knowledge than those generated by theories and academic studies"</li> <li>• "the valorization of specific types of experience as particularly reliable sources of legitimate knowledge and the extension of this knowledge authority to unrelated issues"</li> <li>• "the privileging of emotional intensity as an indicator of the reliability of opinions"</li> <li>• "the use of populist-inflected discourse to dismiss other types of knowledge as elitist and therefore illegitimate"</li> <li>• "the appeal to "common sense"</li> </ul> <p>Criteria based on Saurette and Gunster's (2011, p.199) conception of epistemological populism</p>

## Results

The following sections outline the results of the content analysis of the Flat Earth conspiracy accounts on Twitter. The first section explains the five characterizations that have been identified as ways the users represent themselves on their account using their username, 'bio' section, profile picture, and location. The second section describes the various methods users employ to demonstrate their beliefs.

## Section 1) Characterizations Through Display Name, Username, Bio, Profile Photo, and Location

### *Clearly Identified as a Believer in Flat Earth*

Of the thirty users in the sample, twenty-five clearly identified support for Flat Earth on their account details. The most common means of identifying the user as someone who believes in Flat Earth was through their username and biographical description. Only nine of the twenty users that included information related to Flat Earth in their bios had a username or display name related to Flat Earth. Additionally, the accounts frequently used words and phrases such as ‘truth’, ‘truth seeker’, ‘truther’ ‘unplugged’, or ‘awake’ to describe themselves and their content. Most of these users did not include any personal information that could be used to identify them, such as their name as their display name or a picture of themselves. Only five of the twenty-five identifiable Flat Earth accounts used a person’s name in their account details, although these could be pseudonyms. Rather, users chose usernames and display names that reflected the content of the account and their beliefs. For example, some users included references to religious beliefs and other conspiracy theories in their account details.

#### Display Name and/or Username

- Yep. Still flat. *@EarthIsFlat1*
- InFlatEarthWeTrust *@TrustFlatEarth*
- Not A Globe. *@faking\_space*
- Let God Be True, But Every Man a Liar.. *@earthisflat87*

#### Bio

- Just Wake Up *@JustWakeUp8*  
People are finally waking up to the lies of NASA and their astro-NOTs. It won't be long before the Mason's rule crumbles #No5G #FlatEarth #NASALies
- Reality Ninja *@faith4truths*

the reason people awaken is because they have finally stopped agreeing to things that insult their soul. #FLATEARTH #EARTHISFLAT

- DSL1984 @DSL1912  
truth seeker who knows Earth is flat and there's no debate. 🌍 is fake and part of the mass mind control of humanity

### *Representation of Status - 'Researcher', Education, Career*

Three of the thirty accounts had 'researcher' or a related phrase in their account bios. The statement was typically complemented with another form of cultural capital, such as citing past education, credentials, or their choice of career. In two instances, the users state in their biographical description to have graduate-level degrees, although they do not emphasize the discipline in which the degree was awarded. Alternatively, some accounts include their types of employment, such as a photographer, a data scientist, an emotional freedom technique practitioner, an artist, or a retired navy veteran. 'Scientist' is listed as a user attribute in two account bios, with both bios clearly advocating for Flat Earth. In most cases, users who mention education or employment in their bio also identify as a Flat Earther or a supporter of other conspiracy theories.

- H o l l y @hollyhaygood  
Photographer, Independent thinker. Research scientist. Obsessed with Ancient #Pyramids Intelligent debate is welcomed #FlatEarth is #Truth
- THE FLAT EARTHER @TheFlatEartherr  
Dr(PhD) | Researcher | Data Scientist | Earth is \*NOT\* a globe ✗ it's flat & stationary. Space is nothing but Photoshop & CGI ✗ Research Flat Earth.
- (((((SunDog)))))) 🌞 🐶 🌍 🔧 ↗ @flatearthohio  
••• Traveller ••• Seeker of Truth ••• Flat 🌍 er Star 🌟 🌟 🌟 Gazer •••  
Graduate Degree •••
- The 🇺🇸 Dome 🌍 🌟 🏠 @\_Gravity\_Man

Un-plugged from the world ||| Retired Navy And Pissed off | FLAT ROUND and NOT MOVING = EARTH || Satan is the Father of Lies ||

### *Religious Affiliation*

Eight accounts allude to or assuredly reference religious material in their account details. Four of these accounts allude to religious material in their display name, while the other four include religious statements within their bio. Of these accounts, five indicate a belief in Judeo-Christian traditions with references to ‘Jesus’, ‘Yahuwah’, and the Bible. One account expressed belief in Haile Selassie and Rastafarianism. Two of the accounts were not clearly identifiable as having a distinct religious affiliation but mentioned terms such as ‘Satan’ or ‘Luciferian’ which could refer to various religious faiths.

#### Display Name

- Our Creator
- Let God Be True, But Every Man a Liar..
- Gr8Believer

#### Bio

- Gr8Believer *@Gr8believer*  
Creationist & Bible defender. People say I’m a dogmatic conspiracy theorist. By all means prove me wrong. If U mis-quote me please make me say something awesome
- Everything Serious *@NothingSirius*  
Hail & Praise #RasTaFaRi <3 Earth’s Rightful Ruler! Study #BookofEnoch  
#EarthisFlat #FlatEarth # HaileSelassie #MandelaEffect ምስጋና እግዚአብሔር

### *Political Orientation*

Political orientation was difficult to discern from solely the user's account details. Only two accounts within the sample indicated some sort of political affiliation or support for a particular political ideology. Only two accounts clearly identified with a particular political orientation in their account details, although political orientation may become more apparent when analyzing the tweets and content of the account itself. Both accounts indicated a more conservative political stance, with one account that had a profile picture of Trump wearing a hat stating, "Make America Flat Again" and the other using #PRO-#BREXIT, #NODEAL, and #EUWILLFALL in their bio.

- Think2Know @jasdude  
Truth Seeker, Conscious. There is only OTG. No longer looking for curvature. #PRO-#BREXIT  
#NODEAL #EUWILLFALL Anti  
#SCIENTISM #MASKS are for fools



### *Epistemological Populism*

Twenty-two of the thirty accounts included in the sample alludes to having epistemological populist ideologies. As demonstrated in previous examples of accounts, a common trend is the use of 'truth', 'truth seeker', 'awake', 'unlearn everything', 'mind control' and similar phrases within their account details. The account details published by the user attempt to distinguish themselves from the general public through the use of this language. Seventeen out of thirty accounts reflect epistemological populist ideation while also identifying as a Flat Earther in their account details. The two accounts that identified their political

orientation both demonstrated having epistemological populist ideologies, while seven of the eight accounts that expressed religiosity also reflected epistemic motives. Additionally, two of the three accounts that stated ‘researcher’ in their bio were identified in this group as well as the two accounts who claimed to have graduate-level degrees.

## Section 2) Themes Identified in the Demonstration of Beliefs Through Content of Tweets

*‘They’– the system? The government? Those in power? The elites? Experts? All of the above?*

A common theme identified within the tweets of Flat Earthers is the use of ‘they’ to describe their opposition.

- *@FlatSmacker:* If Flat Earth is really so stupid, and anyone who can think for themselves can know that earth is not flat... Then why do they censor it so heavily? Why the censorship? THEY ARE SCARED!! #FlatEarth #ResearchFlatEarth #NASALies #SpaceIsFake #Truth #God #Bible #Creation #GodCreated <https://t.co/gE9KwqFRHu>
- *@Gr8Believer:* Hey !! While you're in lock down don't forget to watch Flat Earth videos and ask yourself, if they lied about the shape of the Earth what else would they lie about?

Some tweets include ‘they’ as a reference to the government or scientists, while others are not so clear.

- *@Gr8Believer:* Knowing about the flat earth makes you immune to government lies, because everything they say is heard by you with the understanding that it's the same government that lying about the shape of the earth, and outer space.
- *@Unlearninglies:* According to "Science" the Earth has a Liquid core of Iron. But the Earth core is magnetic. Metal loses it magnetism at about 500 degrees F. Just another Lie told to us by the gods of modern science. And man has never drilled into the earth but 8 miles. Research Flat Earth! <https://t.co/HJkTSJabip>



- @Lumineuse72: @Plushieluver17 @Er\_Nope Flat Earth has been proven many times, research it. This is why the #FlatEarth community is growing so fast, they can delete some videos, block Facebook pages and play with stats...but the truth will continue to awaken humanity.

### *Controlled Opposition*

A common theme amongst the Flat Earther tweets is that they refer to the Flat Earth Society and other Flat Earth accounts as controlled opposition and ‘shills’ who hide their true intent to discredit the Flat Earth community rather than provide ‘truth’. They believe the government has a role in representing Flat Earth in a particular way in the media.

- @derek99white191: @FontesSteven You may be right, the flat earth society is obvious disinformation and to turn people away from flat earth. He does seem to get all the attention, films made about him and guest on all the TV stations talking about the subject which is strange... I'll watch the link you sent.
- @ninjashoes: Exactly, because they have a very large group of paid trolls/shills guarding the Flat Earth hashtag. It wasn't always like this. They did this because we were waking up millions to the Truth. They print up money and hire from Craigslist! #FlatEarth #truth <https://t.co/cIu6JKMOQq>
- @Red\_Pill\_Monkey: @jostephan Exactly. Flat Earth has so much controlled opposition, why would they need to if it's so clear we live on a globe? Type Flat Earth into Google or YouTube and you get so many ridiculous channels and dis-info.
- @FlatSmacker: @mariahlinam We don't believe in the flat Earth society. They are nothing more than a disinformation campaign to get people to think that flat earthers are stupid. We are not. And we disagree with them on a large scale.
- @hollyhaygood: @p\_golinski But Flat Earth actually answers all questions correctly. I mean it had to. Because it is truth. But there is a huge disinformation campaign right now to discredit the truther and flat Earth movement. But the truth is still out there for all to find.

- *@MarkusBoyd: @hollyhaygood* It's called controlled opposition. Ever notice "Flat Earth Society" is used by MSM all the time and is the number 1 result in Google? That's because they are FAKE Flat Earthers. They make ridiculous claims that can be easily "debunked," to make us look stupid and hide the truth.

### *Distinguishing themselves from the general public*

Similar to how Flat Earthers represent themselves in their account details, many users refer to themselves as the only people who are free from indoctrination. Common terms used are untainted, clear-minded, or awake, as well as the use of 'truth' or 'truther'. Those who 'blindly' believe the information given by the government or experts are shills, sheep, indoctrinated, or brainwashed. Only those who open their mind to Flat Earth and research are 'awake'.

- *@Unlearninglies*: The flat earth subject has become boring to me. What's the use in discussing and arguing with people who are flat out cynical and will hide the truth at all costs?? True knowledge is there and unprejudiced seekers have total access to it. But it's the spiritual people need.
- *@Its\_Stationary:@TravelLightP1* I was a patriotic hoodwinked Zionist until Flat Earth came across my timeline. Everything unraveled in a matter of hours. I remember walking to work and thinking moon landing fake, space is fake, every false flag event in history, I'm 100% sure
- *@EarthisFlat1*: I love how globers smugly ask how you don't fall off the flat earth (a flat surface, mind you), all the while seemingly oblivious to the fact that they believe themselves to be standing on the side of a ball. #irony
- *@DSL1912*: The flat earth awakening is calling people from different religions, intellects, races, languages, gender etc, But it's only truth-seeking people from these groups that are responding positively. The rest are trying to save the broken ball.

### *The distinction between belief and knowing*

Some of Flat Earth users made it clear that there is a distinction between belief and knowing that the earth is flat. They claim that they know it is true based on research, evidence, and their own experience.

- *@derek99white191*: @Renior I don't believe in flat earth. I know Its flat. Water always finds its lowest potential and levels out, it doesn't have the ability to conform to the exterior of any ball, gravity is only a theory explained by density and buoyancy. @nasa lies. You're the one who believes.
- *@rob\_freddy*: I don't 'believe' flat earth. It's abundantly obvious and easily provable You can 'know' where you are, without having to 'believe' anyone <https://t.co/MB8GThdLIL>
- *@Spacehehehe*: I don't debate Flat Earth because I don't just believe it, I can feel it in my heart and soul. It's Flat! There is no going back for me. Research #FlatEarth
- *@MarkusBoyd*: I #know #TheEarthisFlat. I am not here to prove shyte, explain shyte, discuss shyte, or debate shyte> #FlatEarth. My 1st #RedPill was the #moonlandinghoax which led me to Flat Earth #Truth. #Researchflatearth and if you have a brain you will b a #FlatEarther 2. #Spaceisfake <https://t.co/CEKUeL8agV>

### *Flat Earthers are the truthers- everyone else is spreading misinformation*

A common perspective amongst the tweets is that anyone who does not believe in Flat Earth is engaging in the spread of more lies and misinformation. Many of the Flat Earth accounts encourage debate on the subject yet accuse the opposition of posting more lies.

- *@FlatArthur*:@raul1234587 One who doesn't know anything about the flat earth brings up this ultimate red herring non-argument meme. Also people with thousands of followers to spread misinformation. SPACE IS FAKE. There's no solar-system as we have been taught. It's not heliocentric. It's geocentric.

- *@hollyhaygood*: Notice the absolute vicious comments that I get on some of my posts. Where someone is deliberately seeking flat Earth posts just to troll and respond with insults and lies. Never giving a consideration or thought to debating the scientific possibilities.
- *@EarthIsFlat1*: @\_42\_\_\_\_\_ @LaurynHasIt These are the kinds of things someone would say if he hasn't investigated even one single argument for flat earth. Everything he said not only has an explanation, but makes more sense and works better on a flat earth. Smh

### *Reversal of roles with the scientific community*

Based on the tweets of Flat Earthers, there is a tendency to reverse their roles with those of the scientific community. Many of the tweets discuss the need to ‘research’, to look at the evidence, or to conduct experiments, all of which are relevant within science. They also discuss the denial of Flat Earth evidence by the scientific community.

- *@Its\_Stationary*: @PaulTheMartian @jeremiahk2017 @rhondaprell @Acadiansheperd @thegubtv @SamuelMbengu @shesfierce16 @king\_mjg @LegendaryEnergy @Urylle @risetoflyy @OpinionsMiOwn Reminds me of flat earth “debates.” Them: ask for evidence Us: present evidence Them: ignore evidence, ask another inane question
- *@EarthIsFlat1*: @mbsevans5 @ufotruther @IndianaOhmz @CharliePoet @jasdude @Andypalooza @L3N916 @eddiebravo @flatearthkitty @I\_mNotAComedian @JohnJohnawales @FlatStillEarth @Jack\_NoSpin @HaveNoSphere @Flatearthguild @ItsFlatFolks @flatasfuck @Marsweep @ericdubay @oddtv3 First, you make an argument from silence. "No flat earth pilots have been named". I don't see you naming "globe earth pilots", but that's not proof of their nonexistence. Second, there ARE pilots who believe FE. See Mark Sargent's subject matter experts, or @RobSkiba, pilot.
- *@NothingSirius*: Maps are representations Flat earth believers are regularly annoyed by folks who think “Err I can get them by saying they don’t have a

perfect map “ 🗺️ MOOT point since there is no physical evidence in nature of the mathematical creation designed with pseudoscience to deceive us

<https://t.co/OuvtT1wEXd>

- *@Gr8Believer*: *@AdamColeslaw @joe\_m26* You lot always talk about scientific evidence but when we ask you lot to show us, you can't. If they could've debunked the flat earth using science they would've by now.
- *@JustWakeUp8*: *@Dracomoth @flatmotionless* Independent experiments and consulting with experts across the earth, along with analyzing buried government documents verifying a flat earth. Far more research than the globe believers that just trust their textbooks

## Discussion

The five characterizations that were identified as representations of the users provide an insight into the beliefs, motivations, and overall mindset of Flat Earthers on Twitter. While the themes developed through the analysis of the content of tweets reveals how they express these beliefs. Numerous studies are conducted on the psychological aspects of conspiracy theory production and consumption, but there is a lack of literature on how conspiracy theorists represent themselves and how these representations affect the demonstration of their beliefs. Furthermore, Flat Earthers are an overlooked community of conspiracy consumers.

Flat Earthers adhere to similar motivations and mindsets of anti-science conspiracy believers. The results from the analysis of Flat Earth accounts resemble the findings of previous studies: some represented themselves as religious, politically orientated, educated, or epistemologically motivated (Gauchat, 2008; Cassam, 2018; Rutjens et al., 2018; Ylä-Anttila, 2018; Douglas et al., 2019). Some characterizations are easier to identify than others. For example, religiosity is apparent when the account makes reference to religious material, or epistemological populism is apparent when the user mentions the search for truth or being

'awake'. Only two accounts identified some sort of political orientation. Not being able to determine the political orientation of the users may be related to how the literature presents political ideology as a binary of two possible political positions, liberal and conservative. This binary presented in anti-science and conspiracy theory literature fails to acknowledge that there is a complex spectrum of political opinions. Conservative and liberal ideologies are not clearly defined and could represent a multitude of political opinions that are not mutually exclusive. Instead, a spectrum of political ideologies should be applied when discussing anti-science attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, such as far-right, right, centre, left, and far-left. Despite this, although it was difficult to determine a particular political ideology within the account details, it did not hinder the analysis as the conspiracies themselves and the other beliefs associated are political. Religiosity and political orientation are intercorrelated as potential factors for anti-science attitudes and epistemological populism is politically motivated as it is directly associated with distrust in government, experts, and elites. Therefore, political ideology is embedded within the motivations of the users and the nature of the conspiracy. The user's political ideology became more apparent in the analysis of tweet content, with many accounts emphasizing the role of 'the system' and the government in the truth of Flat Earth being hidden from the public. Although the direct motivation for their beliefs and subsequent representation of themselves on Twitter may not be political, the nature of the conspiracy and the quest to prove its validity is political. Thus, any discussion of these conspiracies will have a political element embedded within them, as well as acting as political propaganda against the government (Cassam, 2019).

The way Flat Earthers represent themselves on Twitter is a reflection of their motivation. The three motivations, as identified by Douglas et al., are existential, social, and epistemic (2019). Flat Earth believers want to distinguish themselves from the general public and elites.

They may be socially motivated by the distinction of believing or knowing something different than established knowledge, and also by the community aspect of conspiracy theory beliefs. Representing themselves in their account details as Flat Earther and within the content of their tweets distinguishes them from others while also acting as a means to seek out similar minded people to form a community of like-minded believers. Most of the individuals who interact with these accounts are fellow conspiracy believers (Bessi et al., 2015). Existential motives are reflected through the use of religious material within the account details and as evidence for believing in the Flat Earth. A common motivation for adopting conspiracy beliefs is the conflict between science and religion. Some people want to believe that we are more than just a living organism that evolved from an ape-like primate, they want to believe that there is purpose in life. Religiosity gives people answers to existential questions that science cannot answer or have yet to discover. The need to understand the origins of humankind and the world is also tied to epistemic motivations. These motivations are associated with questioning where knowledge comes from, how it is produced, who dictates what is important, and what is deemed 'truth'. Religious and epistemic motivations may relate to needing to prove that religion is the ultimate truth, rather than science. Epistemic motives are also associated with populism, where those who distrust the knowledge being produced reject established knowledge from experts in preference of common sense and practical experience of non-experts. The creation of alternative knowledge authorities as a response of epistemological populist ideations is where misinformation becomes a major issue for society.

The Flat Earth accounts on Twitter acts as a form of an alternative knowledge authority where conspiracies are created, shared, and consumed by other users. The danger of these accounts can be linked to the use of the social media application itself, or social media in

general. Twitter allows individuals with similar mindsets to congregate in an online setting to share their beliefs, mobilize more followers, and disseminate their message to a larger audience. The community-based aspect of Twitter and other social media sites facilitates the congregation of conspiracy theorists and consumers and enables them to engage with each other to propagate their ideas, which only further encourages their emotionally and ideologically driven assessment of scientific phenomenon. Although there are guidelines, fact-checking moderators, and censoring of certain content, misinformation and anti-science propaganda is continuously shared online to millions of users each day. Those seeking alternative sources of knowledge can easily find them on Twitter or any other social media site. Another issue arises when conspiracy related accounts represent themselves in ways that validate them as a source of knowledge.

Moreover, the danger associated with Flat Earthers and their beliefs is that the way they represent themselves online can be misleading to the public. Having beliefs that are alternative to the majority is not the issue, but instead the blatant disregard for established knowledge, evidence, and experts. Skepticism of those in power is important to hold authority accountable and to ensure ethical practices of power. A problem arises when this skepticism is exaggerated to the point of extreme distrust of every governmental or authoritative function, institution, and practice. This extreme distrust is associated with anti-science attitudes, epistemological populism, and conspiracism. Flat Earthers create and enforce their own alternative knowledge authorities that are inherently anti-science and anti-expert. By representing themselves as educated or as a researcher, they attempt to add legitimacy and validity to their accounts and their beliefs. Those who appeal to their education, such as the users that indicate they have graduate-level degrees, often do not mention what discipline the credential is awarded under



(Cassam, 2019). Emphasizing credentials in the account details may make individuals more inclined to believe and support what the user is arguing.

Furthermore, they represent themselves as ‘truth seekers’ and as being conscious or awake to the apparent mind control and brainwashing of the public committed by the government, elites, and experts. They claim that experts are simply elites that spew propaganda regulated by the government, while they search for the truth. The issue is that these claims are hypocritical. In their quest to distinguish themselves from the system, they have simply reproduced the same structures and institutions they are attempting to deconstruct. Many accounts discussed how they research Flat Earth, conduct experiments, compile evidence, and disprove claims, all of which are functions of science. Flat Earthers reject academia, but also use elements of it to legitimate their claims. They feel the need to represent themselves as educated or as credentialed but reject others with them. They criticize experts who do not see the value in their evidence yet react the same way when confronted with evidence from scientists. Flat Earthers have reversed the roles of experts and non-experts. They deem themselves to be the real experts, the truth seekers, while scientists are simply oblivious to ‘real’ facts. Flat Earthers are recreating a perverted version of science by establishing an alternative knowledge authority focused on pseudoscience and religious doctrine as ‘truth’. In other words, Flat Earthers have created a new truth regime. Those with power within the Flat Earth community establish what is to be deemed ‘truth’, how knowledge is produced, what knowledge is valuable, and who can produce that knowledge. Many Flat Earthers on Twitter reference other Flat Earth believers that are thought of as ‘experts’, such as Mark Sargent or Eric Dubay who have a larger online following and have been featured on various news reports and documentaries.

Despite rejecting expertise, the Flat Earth community has created specific intellectuals of their own. These specific intellectuals are purported experts of Flat Earth and related conspiracies who actively question and intervene in scientific knowledge production by advocating their own experiences and acquired knowledge as ‘truth’. Flat Earth specific intellectuals attempt to separate truth from those who assert power over it. They believe that the government and elites dictate what is deemed truthful, therefore by removing and separating those powers from the production of knowledge, they claim that their truth is the only real truth, uncorrupted by scientific propaganda. As these specific intellectuals materialize, the modern scientific episteme that unconsciously governs the inquiry of scientific information is threatened. Flat Earthers and other conspiracy theorists are unconsciously governed by conspiracism, a new episteme that regulates knowledge and truth. Conspiracism challenges modern epistemes by deeming knowledge produced by scientists, elites, or through government as ‘untruthful’ and knowledge that emphasizes common sense and practical experience as truthful. One of the main aspects of Flat Earth theory and its’ movement is to deconstruct science and expertise, but in attempting to do so, they are simply perverting, replicating, and replacing the very structures they are trying to dismantle.

The replication and perversion of science is harmful to society in many ways. As belief in these conspiracies intensifies, specific intellectuals that operate through a conspiratorial episteme will continue to emerge with increasingly radical and extreme claims. Flat Earthers who represent themselves as knowing the ‘truth’, or as researchers, credentialed, and scientists are misleading the general public and promoting a source of knowledge that is based on opinion, common sense, pseudoscience, and misinformation rather than evidence and facts. As more people find themselves searching for alternative sources of knowledge due to a distrust of

authority, more individuals are susceptible to believe in conspiracies and alternative facts. Although the motivation may not be consciously political, Flat Earth theory and related conspiracies act as political propaganda that manipulates public opinion and plays on the growing distrust of politics and power. Mistrust of government transforms to complete distrust and lack of confidence in the government that stretches beyond just the content of the conspiracies (Einstein and Glick, 2015). Belief in conspiracies and representation of conspiracy theorists as ‘experts’ of their own sort also has public safety and health implications. Those who believe in one conspiracy are more likely to believe in others (Douglas et al., 2019) which is apparent in the accounts and tweets of Flat Earthers on Twitter. Many Flat Earth accounts discussed conspiracies regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the current COVID-19 pandemic. The more individuals believe these conspiracies, the more scientific institutions are at threat of losing public trust which could result in the defunding and termination of scientific research programs. The consequences of widespread belief in conspiracies are overtly political. Political parties may take advantage of the distrust in government, experts, and science by appealing to populist ideologies. This can already be seen in the current political climate in the United States with the Trump administration. Although skepticism of structures of authority is a healthy practice and encourages accountability of government, extreme distrust and conspiracism have immense political and social implications. Further research is needed on how to approach the widespread distrust in authority and belief in anti-science conspiracies and develop strategies for overcoming the spread of misinformation through conspiracies.

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