

PULLING THE T H R E A D

UNRAVELING CONSPIRACY THINKING



DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE

The filmmakers for this series are:
Kristin Pichaske and Danny Alpert

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Pulling the Thread is a digital documentary series and engagement campaign that unravels some of America’s most popular conspiracy theories and reveals the emotional, cognitive and social forces that lead rational people to believe irrational things. The project doesn’t tell people what to think, but pushes us to examine how we think — why conspiracy theories are so alluring, how baseless rumors and “fake news” undermine trust and democracy — and what we can all do about it.

While experts across the country scramble to create tools to help us separate truth from fiction, *Pulling the Thread* attacks fake news at the source by exploring the very roots of human belief and the cognitive vices that make us vulnerable to disinformation. The project reveals how our brains are wired to make common errors and gravitate toward baseless but comfortable fictions that reinforce our values, our self-image and our social status. By unraveling our own psychological, biological and social webs, *Pulling the Thread* pushes us to think critically about how we think, provides strategies for managing our cognitive shortcomings and helps make facts matter again.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This discussion guide aims to support critical dialogues about concepts presented in the Pulling the Thread video series. Pulling the Thread challenges viewers to use personal experience to understand the spread of conspiracy theories, and probe at our own susceptibility to believing, and propagating — false information. Supporting students to combat the spread of conspiracy thinking, the guide also offers three media literacy-focused one-off lesson plans that lead students in fact-checking Internet search investigations, and unpacking the dramatic three-act structure in facts-based news. Turning the lens on their own social media feeds, students assess their personal information sharing habits. In addition, the guide offers website and organizational resources to continue the learning journey.



SECTION ONE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

EPISODE ONE: CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE FOR LOSERS

- **Pre-viewing mini-exercise:** Stage a brief, informal debate around the results of the 2016 election: do you believe it was a fair process, or was it rigged?
- **Post-viewing discussion:**
 - Were you surprised to learn that all political parties equally engage in conspiracy thinking as a response to losing an election, rather than a representation of factual truth? In what ways does this challenge the narrative you previously believed?
 - Connect this emotional logic — scapegoating as a response to loss — to your own experience: have you ever failed at something and felt like it was someone else’s fault? Or suffered a loss and suspected that the other side cheated? Did your experience fit the pattern presented in this episode?
 - How and why do you think social media contributes to the spread of conspiracy theories?
- **Prepare for next episode:** Do you believe human beings are mostly rational? Why or why not? What makes conspiracy theories so alluring to the masses, and why are we drawn to them?





EPISODE TWO: THE FIVE TRIGGERS OF CONSPIRACY THINKING

- **Pre-viewing mini-exercise:** Share the photographs of discernable images in clouds featured in this Daily Mail article. Invite participants to shout out what they see in the clouds — all will be in agreement, as the images feature instantly recognizable shapes. After viewing the photographs, pose the following questions: Where else has your mind seen recognizable shapes in otherwise meaningless “noise” (wood grain, etc.)? And why do you think everyone could so quickly and easily spot the same pattern in cloud noise?

[VIEW ARTICLE](#)

■ Post-viewing discussion:

- Which conspiracy theory trigger was at play in the “before viewing” activity? (Triggers: fear and loss, proportionality bias, confirmation bias, patternicity, the kernel of truth.)
- Have you ever thought of someone just as they called? Or perhaps you have a story about meeting someone special where magical forces felt at play? What conspiracy trigger is at work in these instances where we assign the supernatural to random occurrences?
- Can you think of an example where you have been affected by one of the 5 conspiracy triggers in your own life? Consider a time when...
 - You had a hard time believing a small cause produced a large effect
 - You sought out the facts you wanted to support your belief
 - You found patterns in meaningless noise
 - You hooked to a kernel of truth, rather than seeing the full picture

Reflect on the emotions that accompanied those moments. What were you feeling in each moment? Were you able to overcome the trigger, or did you succumb to it?

- **Prepare for next episode:** If there is a kernel of truth in most conspiracy theories, drawing the line between being prudent and paranoid can be a difficult task. What strategies can you use to better inform your own ideas and opinions?





EPISODE THREE: PRUDENT PARANOIA

- **Pre-viewing mini-exercise:** In pairs, or in a journal, share about a time you trusted someone with private information, and they used the information to hurt you. This could be a friend, family member or a trusted authority, such as a teacher or counselor. Did this experience change your behavior with them in the future? In what ways?

- **What about experts or leaders?** Is there a category of people — (i.e., teachers, scientists, elected officials, police, etc.) that you don't trust? Why or why not?

- **Post-viewing discussion:**
 - Do you trust doctors? Why or why not?
 - Discuss the historical events in this episode, that led African Americans to be more likely than white Americans to be suspicious of doctors. What were some of the root causes named in this episode, and can you think of others that led to widespread mistrust of medical professionals?
 - Why do you think facts alone do not hold the power to change most people's minds? Think about examples from your own life. What did it take for you to finally make a change in the way you think or behave?
 - Think back to your personal example of being betrayed. Were you able to save the relationship? What did it take? In the episode, examples of repairing trust between the African American community and medical professionals included acknowledging the wrongs of the past, and becoming a trusted member of the community you serve. What do these methods look like in lived action?
 - What would it take to restore your trust in experts/leaders (i.e., scientists, elected officials, etc...)?

- **Prepare for next episode:** At a time when Americans are experiencing deep fractures along party lines, why do you think our nation is so politically divided?





EPISODE FOUR: INTUITIONISTS VS. RATIONALISTS

■ **Pre-viewing mini-exercise:** Take a group poll: would you rather stab a photo of your family 5 times or stick your hands in a jar of cockroaches? Invite participants to move to one side of the room or the other, depending on their answer (left for jar of cockroaches, right for stabbing photo), and give share outs about the reasoning behind their choices. Invite the group to gather back in the middle of the room and pose the following questions, with instructions to move to the right or left side of the room depending on their answer. If you have the time, you might invite participants to share out their why or why not:

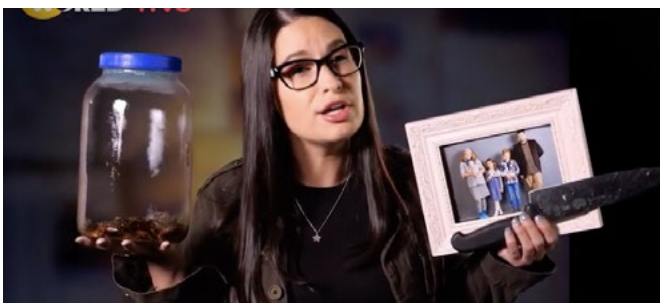
- Would you rather go straight to the doctor's office (right), or first try an herbal remedy (left)?
- Do you believe in love at first sight? Yes (left), no (right)
- Do you believe in any superstitions? Yes (left), no (right)
- Would you rather wear pajamas worn by Charles Manson (right) or pick a nickel off the ground and put it in your mouth? (left)
- When making a decision, do you tend to rely on your gut (left) or on hard facts (right)?

Invite students to take a guess at what each side of the room represents. Review the questions once more, pointing to each side of the room as you dictate. After engaging a brief discussion, reveal that each side of the room represents a different form of thinking, intuitionist (left) and rationalist (right), concepts explored further — and in relationship to conspiratorial thinking — in episode four.

■ Post-viewing discussion:

- After watching the episode, would you consider yourself an intuitionist or a rationalist? Can you think of someone you interact with often who is the opposite? Can you think of a time when you've had to change your approach to sharing information when trying to convince them of your belief?
- As expressed in the episode, the conundrum of humanity is having to make room for empirically-based verification, but also the mystery of life. In what ways could you open up more to the opposite approach — if you're an intuitionist, what could you borrow from rationalists and vice versa?
- Considering the example that Hollywood helped to explode interest in extraterrestrial life, can you think of other ways the media has propelled popular narratives or conspiracy theories?

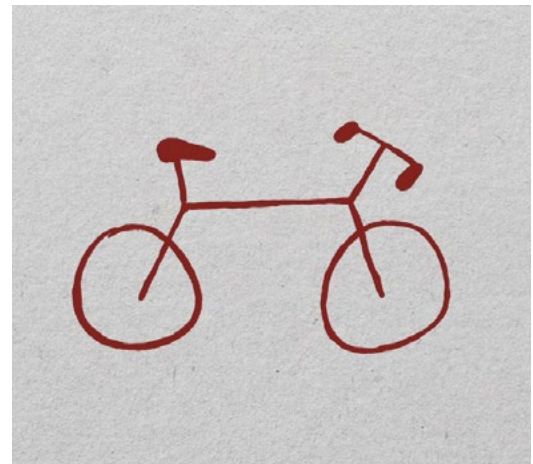
■ **Prepare for next episode:** In a world saturated with citizen journalism, personal hottakes and social media influencers, how does one separate experts from amateurs and fact from fiction?





EPISODE FIVE: THE ILLUSION OF UNDERSTANDING

- **Pre-viewing mini-exercise:** How well do you understand how a bicycle works? Rate your understanding on a scale of (little knowledge) 1 to 5 (very knowledgeable). After rating yourself, complete the bicycle diagram located at the bottom of this page. Where do all the missing parts need to be for the bike to work? Once you're finished drawing, take a look at the correct bicycle diagram at the bottom of page 8. Briefly discuss the process of drawing. Did you find you knew more or less than you'd originally thought?
- **Post-viewing discussion:**
 - Did you encounter your own illusion of understanding while attempting to render the bicycle? How did it feel to meet limitations where you imagined knowledge? Did you laugh it off or was it embarrassing?
 - In the episode, we learned the public are more interested in bizarre or outrageous fictions designed to catch attention than the truth. Open your phone and take a quick survey of the headlines on a news site or on Facebook. Which headlines are most compelling, and why?
 - Raise your hand if you've ever shared an article on social media without reading the entire article — just the headline.
 - Where do you get most of your news/information? Why do you trust those particular sources? What qualifications do they have to report on the topics they are reporting on? What sort of vetting or fact-checking process do you think they have to go through before publishing their content?
 - What are some best practices you could implement to be sure you aren't operating out of your illusion of understanding when inspired to share information?
- **Prepare for next episode:** What makes a great story? Discuss an example of a story that has moved you emotionally, and identify the elements that made it so powerfully resonant.





EPISODE SIX: THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

- **Pre-viewing mini-exercise:** Invite participants to recall their favorite childhood fairytale, retelling it in 5 brief bullet points. Listen to a handful of examples from the group. What do the tales have in common? Participants will likely point out the villain, the protagonist (hero), and the act of overcoming an obstacle. Invite a brief discussion: why do these elements feel necessary to crafting an effective fairytale? Where else do we see these elements appear in other kinds of storytelling (movies, novels, television, news, etc.)?
- **Post-viewing discussion:**
 - Discuss the Sandy Hook conspiracy theory presented in the episode. Why were people willing to believe the radical lie that Sandy Hook was fake? And what were the layers of damage this conspiracy caused?
 - Think about a recent conflict in your life through the basic formula for fictional storytelling presented in this episode, “the hero fights villain, struggle, triumph.” In your story of conflict, who played what role? When you pause to think about the tale you’ve created from the conflict, is it possible there is a more nuanced view to hold?
 - If we can’t get rid of biases, what measures can we take to remind ourselves that there may be another side to the story?
- **Deeper dive reflection:**
 - Read [Complicating the Narrative](#) after completing all episodes of *Pulling the Thread*. Consider how and why journalists should learn to complicate narratives. What are some key takeaways from the article? How would you summarize what you’ve learned to share with a friend or colleague?

[VIEW ARTICLE](#)





SECTION TWO: ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY ONE: FOCUSING IN ON FACT CHECKING

Using this [New York Magazine conspiracy theory chart](#) (or by doing your own research), find one conspiracy theory you are drawn to. Even more ideal is a theory you have a personal belief or stake in. Run an Internet search of the phrase (for example, “911 was an inside job” or “Oswald didn’t kill Kennedy.”)

[VIEW CHART](#)

Next, take stock of the first 3 pages of content that the search engine returns, and choose 5 sites — making sure to include a mixture of website you are both familiar with and have never heard of — to compare and contrast using the following guideposts to determine if the media site is credible.

CRITERIA	YES	NO	NOT SURE
Is the website an established institution with a long and proven track record, or is it new and/or hard to trace?			
Does this website specialize in the kind of information I am seeking?			
Is this site run by a business and/or trying to sell me something?			
Is this website run by a group that openly has a political bias?			
When was the website last updated? Is it current?			
Is the site poorly designed? This might indicate it was created by amateurs.			
Does the site feature clear, professional writing, free of typos and grammatical errors?			
Who wrote the article? Do they have credentials you can verify?			
Do the links point to other reputable websites?			

**Adopted from ThoughtCo. Article, 8 Ways to Determine Website Reliability*

How many articles passed your test? Knowing how to fact check a website will help you determine what sources are not only usable for gathering information about conspiracy theories, but will help you understand what sources are reliable for school work, and building opinions on political issues.

As a final step, bring your conspiracy theory to one of the following fact-checking sites and cross reference what you learned in the five articles: [snopes.org](#), [factcheck.org](#), [mediabiasfactcheck.com](#), [politifact.com](#) or [newsguardtech.com](#). Do they still hold up? Why or why not? Reflect on what you learned from this process.



ACTIVITY TWO: CONFRONTING COGNITIVE BIAS

If you are doing this exercise with another person, (or in a small group) take a look at a friend or family member's Twitter, Facebook or other social media feed. Take a survey of the most recent opinions they retweeted and articles they've shared and interview them about their choices using the prompts below.

Open your own Twitter, Facebook or other social media feed and take a survey of the most recent opinions you retweeted and articles you've shared. Conduct a self-interview that examines your motivations, emotional state and level of investment in the subject matter.

Choose 1-3 of your (re)shared articles or reshared opinions:

- What was your emotional state when sharing the post?
- Did you deeply consider the item shared, or was it a snap decision?
- Did you read the full article or research the opinion before sharing it?
- Was there an underlying message you were secretly trying to send someone when sharing? Were you trying to prove something, or be accepted by someone in sharing?
- What about the sentiment or headline appealed to you?
- If you reshared, who was the source of the original message? Do you know them? What do you feel about them?
- Is this a subject you know a lot about, or just a little?

After reflecting on your sharing, consider if you would reshare this article or opinion now, if you had the chance. You might decide to read the article in full if you hadn't already. You might discover the website is not one you trust, or the points made in the article do not reflect your true interests or investments. If you discovered you shared under a sense of pressure to share, wanting to fit in, wanting to be noticed or wanting to appear knowledgeable, informed or righteous, you are not alone. All of these motivations for sharing on social media are common, and contribute to the spread of inaccurate news.

Take a moment to reflect on how you'd like to use your platforms differently in the future. Create a checklist of what to consider before you share or reshare information on the Internet.





ACTIVITY THREE: THREE ACT STORYTELLING IN THE NEWS

Fictional storytelling often uses a three-act structure to build a compelling plot and keep the reader engaged. We learned in *Pulling the Thread's* Episode Six, "The Stories We Tell Ourselves," that life does not always mirror this Hollywood version of storytelling where there is a clear villain, hero and resolution.

However, many articles employ the three act structure towards a variety of both positive, and potentially negative, ends. Locate a news article from a reputable source that utilizes the three act structure, and using the rubric below, map it's contents. You might choose to take notes on the article, highlight each act in different colors, or write notes in an outline format in a separate document.

- **Act One: The Set Up:** What is The Setup in this article? The Set up often involves:
 - A) *Exposition* — or descriptive and informative writing that introduces the characters and setting.
 - B) *Inciting Incident* — The catalyst or call to adventure that sets the protagonist's (main character) journey in motion.
- **Act Two: The Conflict:** *What is The Conflict in this article? The Conflict often involves:*
 - A) *Rising Action* — The protagonist gets familiar with their surroundings, meets new challenges.
 - B) *Midpoint* — A significant event in the middle of the story. Usually, something goes wrong.
 - C) *Plot Point Two* — How the protagonist decides to act in response to the midpoint event.
- **Act Three: The Resolution:** What is The Resolution in this article? The Resolution involves:
 - A) *Pre-Climax* — The final clash between the protagonist and their antagonist. A sense of the protagonist's true strength hinted at.
 - B) *Climax* — The protagonist and antagonist "face off," and the protagonist defeats their nemesis.
 - C) *Denouncement* — The dust settles, goals are achieved, loose ends are tied up in the story.
- **Dramatic Question:** Now that you've reviewed the acts, what is the dramatic question — or the central conflict that drives the plot forward (Will Luke Skywalker defeat Darth Vader? Will Romeo and Juliet be together? Will Dorothy make it home?) — presented in this article?
- **Characterization:** Lastly, who is the protagonist in the story (the hero)? Who is the antagonist (the villain)?

After analyzing your news article for its use of the three act structure, reflect on the following:

- What are the benefits of structuring a news story in three acts? In what ways can it help a reader?
- What are the pitfalls or dangers of fitting a news story neatly into the three act structure?





SECTION THREE: RESOURCES

The descriptions for each fact checking resource in the list below are provided by the organization. Here are a few resources where you can learn more about fact checking organizations, from unbiased and neutral parties.

- [Rutgers](#)
- [Berkeley](#)
- [Edutopia](#)
- [Duke Reporters Lab](#)
- [Common Sense Media](#)

FACT CHECKING WEBSITES

- [AllSides Media Bias](#) Ratings help you identify different perspectives so you can know more, understand others, and think for yourself.
- [Fact Check](#) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit “consumer advocate” for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics by monitoring the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases.
- [Politifact](#) is a nonpartisan fact-checking website that aims to give citizens the information they need to govern themselves in a democracy.
- [ProPublica](#) is an independent, nonprofit newsroom that produces investigative journalism with moral force.
- [Snopes](#) is the internet’s definitive fact-checking resource. When misinformation obscures the truth and readers don’t know what to trust, Snopes.com’s fact checking and original, investigative reporting lights the way to evidence-based and contextualized analysis.
- [The Sunlight Foundation](#) is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that uses civic technologies, open data, policy analysis and journalism to make our government and politics more accountable and transparent to all.
- [Washington Post Fact Checker](#): In a busy 24-hour news cycle, it’s hard to spot the truth behind the rhetoric. The Washington Post is doing it for you.





NATIONAL MEDIA LITERACY ORGANIZATIONS

- **Action 4 Media Education** promotes and advocates for media literacy education, with special outreach to parents, teachers, and those who work with children.
- **National Association for Media Literacy Education** is a national membership organization dedicated to advancing the field of media literacy education in the United States.
- **Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood** (CCFC) works for the rights of children to grow up — and the freedom for parents to raise them — without being undermined by commercial interests.
- **The Center for Media Literacy** is an educational organization dedicated to promoting and supporting media literacy education as a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating and participating with media content.
- **Media Education Foundation** produces and distributes documentary films and other educational resources to inspire critical thinking about the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media.
- **Free Press** is a powerful nationwide movement to change media and technology policies, promote the public interest and strengthen democracy, advocating for universal and affordable Internet access, diverse media ownership, vibrant public media and quality journalism.
- **Project Look Sharp** is a media literacy initiative of Ithaca College that develops and provides lesson plans, media materials, training, and support for the effective integration of media literacy with critical thinking into classroom curricula at all education levels.
- **The News Literacy Project** (NLP) is an innovative national educational program that mobilizes seasoned journalists to help middle school and high school students sort fact from fiction in the digital age.
- **Skeptics Society** is a nonprofit organization that investigates extraordinary claims and promotes science and critical thinking.
- **First Draft**'s mission is to empower societies with accurate information in critical moments. They work to ensure the integrity of the world's information ecosystem, developing and delivering pioneering techniques, tools and training for how information is discovered, shared and presented to the public.

