

Holm Gero Hümmller
Ulrike Schiesser

Fact and Prejudice

How to Communicate with Esoterics,
Fanatics and Conspiracy Believers



Springer

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How to Communicate with Esoterics,
Fanatics and Conspiracy Believers



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Foreword

Holm

Ulrike, what made you decide to write a book with a complete stranger from Germany?

Ulrike

I knew you from skeptics' conferences as the guy who gives lectures on the weirdest conspiracy theories. For me you were inseparably connected with Hitler's UFOs, Nazi fortresses in Antarctica and the "Face on Mars." It wasn't until you asked me if I'd like to write a book with you that I read your books on conspiracy myths and quantum nonsense and saw how long and intensely you've been involved with many topics of pseudoscience. I was very happy about your offer, because my work in the Austrian Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen (Federal Office for Cult Affairs) revolves around exactly these topics: why do people believe irrational things, how does one succeed in changing a worldview, and how do I promote this in conversation? Apart from perhaps the book *Starrköpfe überzeugen* (*Convincing stubborn people*) by Sebastian Herrmann, there are hardly any books that offer concrete help here. So, I thought, "Well, write one yourself."

How did you come up with the idea to write this book?

Holm

Honestly, I have to say, through the publisher. I didn't want to do it at first. As a natural scientist, how could I write a book on a psychological topic? Then they said, find a co-author, but we want this book – and in retrospect I am very grateful for that. That was before the COVID pandemic, and I didn't expect then that soon, after really every one of my lectures, I would be

confronted with the question: “But what do I do when my uncle talks nonsense?” And that is indeed not an easy question.

I have the impression that you can find a lot of things online and in books that are supposed to help you – but these are mostly argumentation guides from philosophy, which first assume that the other side has any interest at all in a factual, substantive discussion. Some of the recommendations that one comes across in this way also seem quite manipulative to me. If I were on the opposite side and, for example, someone constantly asked me to justify my position by asking questions, but was not prepared to take a stand himself, then I would very quickly break off the conversation.

Ulrike

I am also often asked for a recipe, a trick to get someone to see the error of their ways, to turn their worldview upside down, and to behave in a way that the inquirer thinks is right. This is usually well-intentioned, and there is sometimes pure desperation and frustration behind the request, but it doesn't work that way. People are complex and not so easily manipulated into a direction they don't want to go. My wish with this book was to build up a buffet of different suggestions and ideas for self-service, to give food for thought. Most important to me, however, are not the methods, but the attitude with which I communicate. We need more understanding and mutual respect instead of outrage and denigration.

Holm

At the same time, especially in the environment of right-wing extremist conspiracy myths, I repeatedly come across statements where one can only be outraged – or at least has to draw a clear line. So it really is not easy.

So how do you approach a topic where there can be so many and sometimes contradictory answers? We decided to talk to very different people who have a lot of experience in such discussions, on social networks, in blogs, in the comment columns of newspapers, or quite directly, in the doctor's office or in youth work. But it was especially important for us to talk to people who have been on the other side themselves, who believed in conspiracy myths, alternative medicine, or ghosts, but then fundamentally changed their worldview. What made a vaccine-critical mother change her mind, what made a YouTube guru, a homeopathic doctor or a conspiracy believer change theirs? And what can we learn from this for discussions with such people?

Ulrike

In my field of work, the direct care and therapy of people who have been harmed by gurus and charlatans, there are only a few experts, and it is easy to feel a little lonely. This made the input from the interviews with people who also work in their professional field with issues such as extremism, superstition, anti-science, and toxic spirituality all the more enjoyable for me. It was interesting how often we had similar experiences and represented similar approaches. And then there was the small group of researchers who approach the topic with the tools of science.

Holm

Just being able to interview all of these insanely exciting people was worth writing this book, and it's a bit of a shame that we couldn't just quote a lot more from the interviews. But it was supposed to be a book that would help you very directly in discussions. So, we had to structure it a bit more.

In the first part, we bring some order to the problems one faces in such a discussion. What psychological effects are at work when we (yes, all of us!) believe nonsensical things? What could we learn about the process of changing one's mind from the interviewees who were once on the other side? What are the options for approaching a discussion? There are more than you might think. What role do the situation and your relationship to the otherside play? What can and do you realistically want to achieve in a discussion?

Ulrike

In the second part, we go through different situations in which conflicts can typically arise. Depending on whether the conversation is with my grandpa, my boss, my midwife, my 8-year-old nephew or in a discussion forum on the Internet, there are different recommendations. The third part is a collection and summary of the most important tips, but also an argumentation aid for frequently used phrases.

Holm

The fact that this book actually came about and that we wrote it together is largely thanks to Alexander Waschkau from the Hoaxilla Podcast. He, a psychologist himself, was the first person from the skeptical environment I talked to about the project, and it was he who said, "Why don't you talk to Ulrike?" Even though the two of them were not among our actual interview partners, ideas from my conversations with Alexander and Alexa Waschkau have also been incorporated into the book in many places. I am also grateful to my

partner Theresa, who not only accompanied the writing process with patience and understanding, but also provided many insights into the world of thought of the “other side.”

Ulrike

Thanks to our patient and competent contacts at Springer-Verlag, Lisa Edelhäuser and Carola Lerch, and to our wonderful illustrator Frances Blüml, who conjured vivid images out of complex content! Thanks to all the people who have given me important insights and perspectives in conversations, whether as interview partners for this book, clients, or colleagues, especially the colleagues of the Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen German Müller and Sylvia Neuberger. Thanks to my test and proofreaders Wolfgang and Irmtraud Suntinger, Ingrid Mayer, Michael Mikas, and Stefano Falchetto. To Günter Mandl and Blake Sclanders, my writing hosts. To Stefan, Timon, and Kilian, who have tolerated this book as a time-consuming adopted child in the family.

About the Interview Partners

This book would not have been possible without the interview partners who shared their knowledge and experiences with us. Some of them have regular professional or volunteer experience with discussions of the kind considered here; others were once believers themselves and have told us about their own transformation processes. In part, their stories are briefly presented in Chap. 3; in part, they are quoted at various points in the book. In many places, their experiences and assessments have been incorporated into the text. We would like to thank all the interview partners and introduce them briefly below.

Florian Aigner

The physicist Florian Aigner is responsible for science communication at the Vienna University of Technology. Active in the skeptic scene for years, he is the author of two non-fiction books on the basics of scientific thinking, a science blogger and columnist. In his work, he regularly participates in online discussions with believers, appears in the media and speaks at events.

Florian Albrecht

Physician Florian Albrecht has incorporated alternative medicine methods into his work in various positions. After a fundamental change of mind, he is now established as a family doctor and vigorously advocates a strictly science-based medicine in his work and beyond. After being active in the skeptic scene for some time, he has since distanced himself and considers large parts of the organized skeptics to be half-hearted and inconsistent.

Sebastian Bartoschek

The psychologist Sebastian Bartoschek researched conspiracy beliefs in his doctoral thesis and was simultaneously active for many years as a journalist and author. In doing so, he repeatedly interviewed prominent esotericists and conspiracy believers such as Erich von Däniken or Axel Stoll. In the meantime, he has his own company as his main occupation, which mainly offers expert assessments and diagnostic expertise.

Lydia Benecke

Psychologist Lydia Benecke has been working with sex offenders and violent criminals for years and advises police and media on criminal psychology issues. She has written several books on crime and mental disorders and is active against right-wing extremism, for scientific education and the rights of discriminated social groups. In the process, she has been the target of aggressive campaigns by right-wing extremists and conspiracy believers on several occasions.

Susan Blackmore

Psychologist Susan Blackmore has spent many years in research on parapsychology and paranormal experiences. After initially approaching the topic as a firm believer, in the course of her own work she became more critical and finally an active skeptic. Later, she quit active parapsychological research, became active for humanism and wrote several books on the concept of memes, ideas that reproduce and evolve similar to genes.

Thomas F.

Thomas F. is a pediatrician who works in a hospital, where he is primarily involved in the intensive care of newborns. During his studies he was convinced of the effectiveness of homeopathy and was a member of a corresponding working group. In the course of his professional career he became aware of the ineffectiveness of this method. In the meantime, he has become a committed advocate of science-based medicine and attaches great importance to providing appropriate advice to the parents of the children he cares for.

Krista Federspiel

Medical journalist and author Krista Federspiel has been one of the most vocal critics of alternative medicine and esotericism in Austria for decades. In the wake of her retirement, she has withdrawn from the forefront of skeptical activism, but maintains a presence and reports on her many years of

experience in discussions with believers, the media, and politics. In 2020, she was awarded the “Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art” for her commitment.

Christopher French

Chris French is a professor of psychology at Goldsmiths College of the University of London and head of the anomalistic psychology research department. His most important areas of research are the belief in paranormal phenomena and the psychology of unusual experiences, on which he himself has turned from a believer to a skeptic. As part of his research he also regularly tests people who believe they have supernatural abilities.

Natalie Grams

Natalie Grams, a physician, had her own private homeopathic practice for several years until, in the course of research for her own book, she realized the pharmaceutical ineffectiveness of homeopathy. As a result, she gave up her practice and became the figurehead of German homeopathy critics. She was repeatedly subjected to fierce, even personal attacks by her former colleagues. After several career changes, she took up employment at the German agency for disease control and prevention in early 2021.

Bernd Harder

Bernd Harder is a journalist and has been active in the skeptic organization Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften (GWUP) since the 1990s. At the same time, he has written numerous books on skeptical topics, especially in the field of popular culture. As the person in charge of the GWUP’s blog, he regularly has to intervene in the blog’s commentary discussions as a moderator. He also has discussions about science and belief systems in connection with his lectures and readings, and in projects at schools.

Britt Marie Hermes

American Britt Marie Hermes has a degree as a naturopath and worked for 3 years in an alternative medicine cancer clinic. She then turned her back on alternative medicine and began publicly denouncing the dangers of such practices. When she was sued by an American natural healer because of a critical article in her blog, she received a lot of support, including financial help, from the international skeptic scene. She now lives in Kiel and is doing her doctorate on the genetics of microorganisms.

Lisa L.

Lisa L. grew up in a family of followers of Jehovah's Witnesses. As a child, she was firmly integrated into the faith community, but later developed increasing doubts about the faith and, as a young adult, managed to break away from Jehovah's Witnesses with the help of her older sisters. She is now studying and supporting other dropouts.

Christian Lübbers

Ear, nose, and throat specialist Christian Lübbers gained national notoriety in 2017 when he had to remove homeopathic globules from the ear of a 4-year-old child. As a leading figure of the Informationsnetzwerk Homöopathie (INH), he is one of the most prominent critics of homeopathy in Germany and established the term #Globukalypse for the decline of the belief in homeopathy in Germany, especially via Twitter.

Sophie Niedenzu

Molecular biologist and publicist Sophie Niedenzu worked for more than 8 years as a journalist specializing in science, education, and medicine and in community management for the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard*. There she moderated, among other things, the discussion forums of the online edition. Later, she worked as an editor for a medical publisher. She currently works in the public relations department of the Austrian Medical Association, where her responsibilities include health policy reporting in the affiliated journal.

Andreas Peham

Andreas Peham is a political scientist specializing in research on right-wing extremism and anti-Semitism and works for the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance in Vienna. He has written books and contributed to anthologies on the far-right scene in Austria and beyond, and regularly appears in the media as an expert on these topics. Especially in political education in schools, he regularly experiences discussions with students who are inclined towards conspiracy beliefs or political extremism.

Martin Puntigam

The comedian and actor Martin Puntigam has been on stage for more than 30 years and has always been committed to the communication of science. He is widely known as the central figure of the science comedy group Science Busters, which brought this innovative means of science communication to unprecedented impact in Austria.

Fabian Reicher

Social worker Fabian Reicher is active for the Austrian Extremism Information Centre in the field of supporting distancing and exits from extremist groups. His areas of work include both right-wing extremism and jihadism. In his work, he is regularly in direct dialogue with radicalized or at-risk youth. He is the coordinator of the project *Jamal al-Khatib – My Way!*, a multi-professional, participatory peer-to-peer online film project with the goal of countering Islamist propaganda with alternative narratives from young people who have left the jihadist scene.

Jessica Schab

Jessica Schab made a name for herself as a young woman with spiritual messages in YouTube videos. Within a very short time, she amassed a following of over one million subscribers. Confronted with her own responsibility for her followers, she turned away from esotericism, tried to support others in leaving and is currently involved in the documentary “Confessions of a Former Guru” about her own story.

Theresa Stange

Theresa Stange became a mother at the age of 19 and was a convinced opponent of vaccination for several years. Critical of the alternative medical procedures often recommended within that scene, she remained uncertain for years, always seeking validation for her opposition to vaccinations. Finally, it was only after separating from the father of her two children and with a new partner that she found the confidence to make up the missed vaccinations.

Hayley Stevens

Hayley Stevens was the organizer of a British ghost hunting group at the age of 16 and then became a prominent critic of the ghost believer scene. After prolonged activity in the British skeptic environment, the psychology student has since distanced herself from the skeptic scene, which she perceives as contemptuous of believers and in parts misogynistic. Still, she continues to actively advocate enlightenment and scientific thinking.

Stephanie Wittschier

Stephanie Wittschier was a conspiracy believer for many years, which caused considerable tension within her family. After she found her way out of the scene, she and her husband founded the Facebook group “Nothing but the Truth” and the page “The Loose Screw,” which provide cuttingly humorous education about conspiracy myths.

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Part I

Basics

Ultimately, this book is intended to be a kind of guidebook that provides practical food for thought and ideas for discussions between fact and prejudice. First, however, we need to address a few very basic questions. In the purely fictional but quite common story of a young woman, we look at the situations in which we encounter such discussions and how helpless we can be in them, even if we actually have good arguments. We can't get past the question of why people believe in conspiracies, ghosts, or miracle cures. We can anticipate part of the punchline to this right away: It has a lot to do with the fact that we all like to believe such things, and that we find it very challenging to be dissuaded from what we believe. Anyone who tries to persuade other people away from esotericism, fanaticism or conspiracy beliefs is fighting against a whole arsenal of psychological mechanisms that actually serve above all to make our lives easier. Nevertheless, there are always people who manage to break away from such belief systems. We will illustrate this by looking at the stories of well-known and less well-known people who have talked to us about their experiences in changing their minds. Of course, the question of what role conversations with scientifically minded people played in this process is particularly exciting. Finally, we look at what basic possibilities there are for approaching these conversations – and there are more than one might think, just as such a conversation can take place under very different conditions. The goal cannot and does not always have to be to convince the other side. Accepting this can save you a lot of frustration.

1

Introduction



“You just can’t argue with Globeheads.”

Sophie is dismayed. Five minutes ago, she had no idea what a globehead was, and now she’s one herself – and she’s quite sure of it. Yet it all started out quite harmlessly.

Actually, she just wanted to present a few vacation photos from the first sailing trip she took with her children. In the Facebook group where she shared the pictures, there are mainly people who share her love for the Baltic Sea, who can name every lighthouse, every striking piece of coastline in the pictures. For the more well-known places, someone actually always has their own vacation memories to contribute. People give advice on how child-friendly the campsite in Heiligenhafen is and what to do on Usedom in bad weather. Krischan, who rides his motorcycle to Fehmarn every free weekend and whom Sophie and her husband are keen to meet in person, regularly reports on the weather on the island and on the atmosphere in the restaurants.

The administrators of the group rarely intervene in the conversations. There is a harmonious, family atmosphere among the regular participants. They agree that the Storebælt Bridge is a magnificent structure, but that a bridge across the Fehmarn Belt would be a crime. Some swear by the Danish island of Lolland for their vacations; others find neighboring Falster more beautiful. Occasionally there are discussions about whether Timmendorf is really overpriced or whether Kühlungsborn is not actually much more overpriced. As a rule, however, people quickly agree again – the main thing is that they don’t go to the North Sea.

So Sophie didn’t think anything of it at first when, in response to a picture of the chalk cliffs on the island of Rügen, the question arose as to whether Bornholm, which is about 100 km away, could be seen from Rügen. After all, the Alps are similarly far away from Munich and are easily visible in good weather. With her scientific education and her experience in navigation while sailing, she was able to quickly calculate that from the highest point on Rügen, the 161 m high Piekberg, one should be able to see the equally high Rytterknægten on Bornholm in good visibility. From the chalk cliffs, however, Bornholm should be completely hidden behind the horizon under normal atmospheric conditions. In a comment to the picture she briefly described the result and the basic idea of the calculation. She did not expect any contradiction. Occasionally in such a calculation someone does not understand that refraction of light in the atmosphere increases visibility under normal conditions, but she would have been prepared to explain that. What she didn’t expect was the comment, “You actually believe that shit, right?” “What do you mean? What shit?” she inquired, half unsure, half annoyed. “Well, the

nonsense about that globe. That the earth is a sphere with a circumference of 44,000 km and all that.”

Klaus, from whom the aggressive interjection came, has not been in the group for long. He occasionally attracts attention with odd comments, but is otherwise an asset with his profound knowledge of the geography and history of the Baltic coast of Mecklenburg. His views may be strange, and Sophie has long felt that discussing politics with him would not be a good idea, but he is definitely not stupid.

Sophie has never met a person who seriously claims that the earth is flat. Her first thought was that someone was probably making fun of her. In a group of people she only knows from her online profile, but many of whom she considers friends, she doesn't want to embarrass herself or risk a pointless argument. So she made a conscious effort to be factual in her initial responses. She explained her calculations once again, but, as Klaus immediately noted, on the basis of what he considered the completely absurd assumption that the earth is a sphere. Her remark that navigation in seafaring has been based on the curvature of the earth for centuries, if not millennia, impresses him just as little as her remark that at the sea the curvature of the earth can be seen easily with binoculars after all.

“Have you ever seen anywhere that the horizon is curved???”

The nature of the question seems so absurd to Sophie that she doesn't even want to respond to it.

“That's what you see, isn't it, that a ship moving away disappears behind the curvature of the earth?”

“You believe that because you've been talked into it. It just looks that way because of the perspective.”

“Klaus, that's nonsense!”

“You just can't argue with Globeheads.”

A few seconds later, Klaus links to an image with a straight horizon and a superimposed commentary about the stupidity of globe believers who have been persuaded that they are seeing a sphere when water surfaces are visibly flat. The image comes from a Facebook page on which similar depictions of the flat earth alternate with climate change denial, mockery of the allegedly fake moon landing, creationism and anti-Semitic agitation.

Sophie is stunned, horrified and captivated at the same time. Like a bystander who can't tear her gaze away from a particularly bloody accident, she clicks through more and more new images, articles and videos and the comments on them for over an hour. The arguments put forward as to why the earth cannot be a sphere seem almost touchingly naive to Sophie: it looks flat from the ground, so it is flat. Depictions of the southern hemisphere show

people standing on their heads, asking why they don't fall off the earth. The page has 4000 fans, and judging by the unanimity of the comments, apparently most of them actually believe in a flat Earth. After a brief search, Sophie comes across half a dozen other pages and discussion groups of similar content, all with thousands of followers. Finally, she can't hold back any longer, trying in her own comments to at least point out the most absurd errors in thinking. After 5 min, other readers ridicule her as a sleep sheep. After 10 min, she can no longer comment on the site: One of the administrators has blocked her.

Over the next few days, Sophie is repeatedly annoyed that she got involved in such a pointless discussion in the first place and even ended up leaving comments on the Flat Earth page under her real name. Perhaps Klaus and his friends from this site are now laughing their heads off that she actually fell for their crude satire.

* * *

Between family and work, Sophie actually has neither the time nor the nerve to get caught up in pointless, annoying discussions. She is proud of the efficiency and single-mindedness with which she has managed to get back into work after her maternity leave and has even managed to secure a management position in her company on a part-time basis. In addition to the three employees from other functions who are temporarily seconded to her small team, she is now to hire someone herself for the first time. Over the past few weeks, she has read various articles on team composition and personnel selection, created a detailed requirements profile and coordinated it with the personnel manager, worked through folders full of resumes, and finally conducted interviews and observed the applicants in role plays and while solving case studies. Selecting her first permanent employee will be the most important decision in her professional life so far, and as uncertain as such a decision inevitably is, she at least doesn't want to make any obvious mistakes.

Sophie somehow imagined this decision to be easier. As well prepared as she has been, even after the interviews and case studies she finds it incredibly difficult to assess which of the applicants would be best suited for the job or even who she could work well with in the long term. In a way, she finds it a relief that Mr. Fischer, the company's longtime personnel manager, is involved in the selection process. With his patriarchal demeanor, rumbling voice and always somewhat intrusive sense of humor, Mr. Fischer seems a bit of a dinosaur in the company's young management ranks. Among colleagues, it is said

that he is still in his position primarily because he “keeps the labor union folks under control”. His unshakable confidence in his own judgment fills Sophie with a kind of comforting resignation: as long as he agrees with the new hire, she may not have found the most suitable employee, but in any case she will never have to justify her decision.

The decisive meeting, which is to propose the final candidate to the management, is attended by her three coworkers, each of whom has only participated in the interviews with individual candidates, as well as Mr. Fischer, who has only spoken briefly, but with all the applicants. Sophie first presents her evaluation grid, which she has drawn up according to the requirements profile and according to which she has already evaluated the candidates for herself. Mr. Fischer’s comment that one must also take into account the likelihood of an offer being accepted convinces her. She is shocked by his next comment, however:

“We also have to take the graphological assessment into account.”

“A graphological assessment?”

“Yes. The results for all candidates have been available since Friday. That always goes very quickly.”

“Yes, but – why?”

“We have graphological assessments done for all candidates for management positions. We’ve always done it that way.”

“That’s not very meaningful.”

“It was no different with you back then.”

“But I didn’t give you a handwriting sample.”

“The signature is enough for that.”

Sophie lets it go for the moment. She is sure that an applicant’s handwriting is not a suitable tool for personnel selection, but without preparation she simply lacks solid arguments to engage in a discussion with an experienced HR manager. Reluctantly, she adds the column in the evaluation grid – determined to enforce the lowest possible weighting for it later.

Then she presents her own assessments of the applicants according to the evaluation grid. For Sophie, two clear favorites emerge, although she tries to be aware of her subjective sympathies and to hold them back: One of her favorites is also a mother and is looking to start her career again after a long break for parenting, right away with a full-time position. She is highly qualified and has relevant experience, presents herself as very adaptable except for the obvious limits in working hours because of the children, perhaps sold herself a bit too modestly and reservedly in the interviews. Virtually tied in Sophie’s rating is a young man, very dedicated, with excellent degrees, who excelled in the case studies and role plays despite his lack of work experience.