

Thanks Andrew, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on your work because, like you, I think the topic—the danger—is immense and I share your overall impression of a population in denial about the gravity of the situation. Where I have a different take is on how to communicate on the issue in a way that will give them room to change their minds.

As you mentioned, telling people that they're delusional will likely trigger a defensive reaction. After that initial defensiveness, you believe that people will be forced to face reality. It's my belief that people can't be forced to believe anything and that the more we try to force them, the more entrenched they become. People respond to information that threatens their world view, identity or sense of belonging, in the same way they respond to a physical attack – fight or flight. They become preoccupied with defending against attack, and their logic and reasoning abilities shut down.

As you say, it's very uncomfortable for people to come face-to-face with a contradictory reality embraced by others they love and respect. It would be wonderful if they would relieve their cognitive dissonance by embracing reality but I believe—and there's research to show—it's more likely that they will seek out more (dis)information and people who will reaffirm their priors. This is how people slip deeper and deeper into disinformation rabbit holes.

I've also seen some research coming out of the world of climate change communication that suggests that fear is not a good motivator – a few people might be wired to react productively to fear-based messages (especially if they're explicitly given a call-to-action), but most people freeze up and tune out.

When it comes to communication about authoritarian attacks on democracy, which target audience do you have in mind – hard-core Trump loyalists, casual Fox News viewers, moderates and/or passive liberal bystanders? As for the latter group, I think the task is less one of persuasion than of giving people something constructive to do about it. As politically engaged—and terrified—as I am, I feel myself sliding into passivity for lack of knowing what to do about it. And then, in order to avoid drowning in anxiety, my mind coaxes me away from thinking about it too much. This group—my group—needs to feel empowered to act with a clear call to action. And we need to feel inspired because we're exhausted and filled with despair and dread.

As for those who are in some degree of factual denial, I don't have a fleshed-out strategy for how to prompt people to embrace reality, but I think there are some lessons to be drawn from the worlds of cult deprogramming and from public health education campaigns. What I see as key here is defusing conflict, building trust and meeting people where they're at, not where we wish they were at.

Public health educators ask people what their concerns are about getting vaccinated, acknowledge that it can be a hard decision especially when there's a lot of conflicting information out there and they don't know who to trust. After the vaccine skeptic has had their say, the educator then offers to give them information and leaves it to the person to make their choice. They know that, as soon as they start strong-arming the person into getting vaccinated, using fear, shame or social pressure, the trust will be broken.

Cult deprogrammers, from what I understand, take a similar approach of trying to build trust and to demonstrate that their motivation stems from their caring about the person's well-being rather than a desire to control or coerce them. Cult followers are getting something out of being in the cult – a feeling

of belonging and/or a sense of being “in-the-know”, the satisfaction and sense of superiority in seeing the reality the “sheeple” are blind to. Those who deny the Trumpist coup may be coming from a place of distrust of the mainstream media sources and partisans who are sounding the alarm. Or, as you note, they may feel like they have too much to lose by acknowledging reality.

As for coup deniers, I don’t think there’s a one-size-fits all way of communicating with them. I believe it begins with hearing out where they’re coming from and then responding accordingly. Each conversation will be different based on what is motivating the denialist. Once we’ve heard them out, we can share our perspective but—and here’s the hard part—subjectively. No matter how absolutely certain we are that we see Reality and the other person is delusional, as soon as we frame it that way, their defenses go up. If I present myself as someone who can predict the future—versus someone who has concerns about the future—then I’m inviting an info-war of me versus the other person + all of the propaganda they’ve consumed. But if I simply share my concerns and my analysis, as an ordinary person trying to make sense of things, then there’s no power struggle, and the other person can walk away with something to think about. When they’re mulling it over in a non-defensive state of mind, they might come to a new understanding.

So what I would do is ask them questions about what they believe and why. I would ask them if they have any degree of concern about losing democracy, or none. I would ask them if they think our democracy is strong enough to withstand any kind of authoritarian pressure or if they see any weak spots. I might ask them if they think it’s a good idea for state legislatures to be able to override the popular vote and, if so, what would have to happen in order to make it okay for the legislature to do this? If their concern is voter fraud, I might ask them if they believe it’s equally important to make sure everyone who wants to vote can vote and that every vote is counted.

I would also ask questions that take them out of the mental and into the emotional realm: What are your biggest worries about the future? Do you feel like you as an individual can do anything about that or do you feel powerless? Is the 24/7 news cycle overwhelming? Do you feel like it’s hard to know who to trust? Is it stressful to dwell on all the bad things that are happening? How do you cope with the stress?

After asking a few questions and listening to their answers, I would say that I hear their concern about xyz. If I can connect their concern to anything analogous in my personal life, I would tell that story, which would create a connection between us. If not, I would try to validate or relate to their concern in some way, even if I don’t share it. For example, if someone is reluctant to buck their peer group, I could say that I see how it would be incredibly hard to do something that seems like it might risk losing friends over. And then I might ask if they’ve ever been in a situation where they believed something different from their friends and how they managed that. I might share my personal strategy for dealing with clashing beliefs with friends and family.

Then I would ask them if I could share with them what I’ve been seeing and why it has me worried. I would spell out the chain of events and the conclusion I draw from it. I would explain what makes me trust certain sources and not trust others – again, subjectively, not saying that anyone who trusts Fox News is gullible or delusional. I would acknowledge how badly I don’t want this to be true, why it’s hard for me to contemplate how democracy could end, what life would be like without it and what I worry an unaccountable leader could get away with. I’d avoid getting too over-the-top here (no Nazi death camps!) because of the tendency of fear to immobilize. I would share what I do to manage my anxiety (i.e. take action and then—keeping it real—watch Netflix).

These kinds of conversations can be tricky because there’s no script, we’re feeling our way through, and we’re not doing what we as activists are wired to do – convince people that there’s a major problem, and urge them to take a prescribed action. During the conversation, we’re more likely to be heard if we drop our agenda. This is incredibly hard to do when the stakes are so high and, at the same time, it’s the high stakes that make it so important to communicate effectively.

There's some research I'm not super-familiar with yet but it sounds important—that the identity of the messenger can affect the outcome of the communication—people are more likely to listen to someone they already identify with politically or spiritually. Second-best is someone adjacent – e.g. a center-left-liberal will do better than an anarcho-socialist in talking to a moderate. This makes me think that leveraging the moral authority of trusted messengers could be of key importance in this effort.