

A note from Yuval



Yuval Noah Harari

To: Bill Gates; Rashida Jones

Reply

Reply All

Forward



Tue 9/8/2020 7:42 AM

Dear Bill and Rashida,

It was a pleasure to speak with you yesterday - thanks for having me on the podcast. After we said goodbye, I kept thinking about one salient point that should be made crystal clear. It is a key to understanding human history in general and conspiracy theories in particular.

When speaking about conspiracy theories, it is vital to distinguish lies from fictions. When you lie, your intention is to deceive. But fictions are often spread in good faith. Suppose you see a Youtube video explaining that Bill Gates created the coronavirus in a secret laboratory in order to take over the world, and you then forward this video to all your friends and relatives. The people who created the video in the first place might have deceived you intentionally. But you send the video to your friends and relatives because you sincerely believe it. You are not trying to deceive anyone.

It is vital to make this distinction, because otherwise we cannot understand the popularity of conspiracy theories, nor can we combat them effectively. If you tell people who believe in some conspiracy theory that they are lying, it will only anger them – and for a good reason. They may not know much about viruses, but they do know what’s going on in their own minds, and they know for a fact that they are not lying – they have no malicious intent of deceiving anyone.

Quite often, even the leaders who create the conspiracy theory really believe in it. A case in point is Nazism. When we think “conspiracy theories” we usually think small – things like “who murdered JFK?” or “who was behind 9/11?”. But Nazism too was basically a conspiracy theory about a cabal of Jewish financiers that rule the world behind the scenes and orchestrated Germany’s defeat in the First World War. This particular conspiracy theory has earned the more respectful name of “ideology”, because it has managed to take over an entire country and launch the worst war in history. But it was still a conspiracy theory.

In the case of Nazism, all the evidence indicates that even Hitler and most of the Nazi leadership sincerely believed in the conspiracy theory. They were of course happy to lie about many other things, but they honestly believed in the core tenets of Nazism. It is important to acknowledge this, because dealing with fanatics who sincerely believe in a ludicrous story requires very different methods than dealing with cynics who deliberately deceive their followers.

Yours,

Yuval