



PHOTO BY ALEXI REIBMAN

# A PSEUDO- INFOTAINMENT MACHINE

Abbie Richards made a name for herself on TikTok by debunking far-right conspiracy theories.

By JUNO KELLY

Abbie Richards is the doyenne of conspiracy-theory debunking. The 26-year-old comedian and misinformation researcher, whose online moniker is *@tofology*, boasts over 528k followers on TikTok, which has become a hotbed of far-right disinformation.

Richards began making TikTok videos at the dawn of the app, using it to express comedic takes on issues important to her: feminism, climate-friendly urban planning (Richards has a master's degree in climate studies), and her staunch hatred of golf—the courses of which are notoriously bad for the environment. Gradually her content shifted toward attacking conspiracy theories at a time when her comments section—as well as the rest of the app—were being flooded with them.

In 2018, paralyzed by procrastination while attempting to write a college essay, Richards began doodling a conspiracy theory chart

on the back of a coffee-stained chest X-ray. At the base of the pyramid she positioned proven conspiracies, like #FreeBritney, to show that “the belief we have as a society in conspiracy theories is not based on nothing; our distrust in authority is not baseless.” The chart then ascends to increasingly outlandish disinformation campaigns before reaching the “anti-Semitic point of no return,” beyond which live the likes of QAnon, Pizzagate, and the flat-earth theory. Richards took a video of the pencil-sketched chart and uploaded it to TikTok and Twitter, where it promptly went viral. It's since become a cornerstone in our understanding of disinformation and is Richards's maestro moment.

In the interview below, which has been edited for length and clarity, I speak to Richards about the human inclination toward conspiracy theories, their ties to anti-Semitism, and why they won't dissipate until we remedy America's capitalism-bred inequalities.

# “The TikTok algorithm is very good at knowing what will keep a user watching.”

JUNO KELLY: *Why do people gravitate toward conspiracy theories?*

ABBIE RICHARDS: Misinformation appeals to our desire for certainty and understanding and meaning. When you are experiencing internal discomfort, emotional discomfort, when you feel like your value and your significance are threatened, then not only is it satisfying to blame an outside group, but it also eases a lot of the anxiety that you might be feeling. It can provide meaning for you. [Conspiracy theories] can provide a sense of community.

Conspiracy theories in general are not very useful when it comes to challenging authority. They purport to be, but they aren't. But they do capture that energy and give people, I think, the sense of feeling like they're very challenging of authority.

JK: *Do you think life under capitalism incites our belief in conspiracy theories?*

AR: Yes. We've built our societal structures around profit—constantly profiting off individuals' attention and trying to capitalize on as much of their brain space as possible, and the more that we do that, the less we think about community and our social needs and our emotional needs. Especially if you're talking about white men, who have been promised to inherit enough wealth and success to thrive in the world and have whatever they want—to have their wife, have their children, have their little personal at-home hierarchy and then also be close to the top of the societal hierarchy. And then, when they don't actually receive that treatment, they have to ask why, and they can either reckon with the fact that there are major inequities in society and they can start working to remedy those, or they can grasp onto their remaining privilege and insist that they still deserve that sort of treatment and then require a return to a romanticized and fantasized past that never existed, like, 'Why can't we go back to regular gender roles?' as if trans people only started existing in 2015.

JK: *So conspiracy theories serve as a means of deflecting blame?*

AR: Yes, they're very effective scapegoats. There's some great social psychology research into this. Conspiracy theories serve as a means of system justification. So essentially blaming massive societal problems on just a few bad apples is a great example of this. A good one is QAnon with #SaveTheChildren and the sex-trafficking panic that reemerged, I think not coincidentally, shortly after #MeToo. There was a societal reckoning with the fact that there is a tremendous amount of sexual violence that particularly occurs toward women, and instead of really grappling with the fact that overwhelmingly, the people committing that violence, statistically speaking, are the men in their lives, they instead turn toward a conspiracy theory, which attributes it to a kind of nefarious evil. They have this cognitive dissonance around not wanting to accuse all of the men in their lives as well as not wanting to deal with the fallout from that kind of accusation.

JK: *As your chart outlines, many of the most severe conspiracy theories hark back to anti-Semitism. Can you explain that link?*

AR: When we talk about the modern conspiracy, there is this shift that occurs in the early 1900s when people started talking about conspiracy theories in relation to the entire world—a group controlling the entire world. And this was rooted at a time of globalization. Then we get the protocols of the elders of Zion, which became this blueprint for the modern conspiracy theory. It's a piece of anti-Semitic disinformation that purported to be the notes from a secret meeting of Jews plotting world domination. Obviously, it was fake. But there were some areas in Germany that taught it as a piece of nonfiction, and it was also published and widely distributed by Henry Ford in the U.S. It became the structure upon which the modern conspiracy is built: the Illuminati structure, the pedophile ring, the QAnon structure, the secret-cabal-rules-the-world structure. The ones at the top [of the pyramid] kind of range in their relation to Jews. A lot of them are

just built on that same architecture. Some of them are much more explicit, like Holocaust denial, or Hollywood turning your kids gay—you often see Hollywood linked with Jews—Jews as these Machiavellian puppeteers controlling everything through their messaging that they create in Hollywood.

JK: *How does TikTok in particular lend itself to the spread of conspiracy theories?*

AR: Very efficiently. The Tiktok algorithm is very good at knowing what will keep a user watching. This is why you find articles about how well the Tik Tok algorithm can know a certain person, like, "Tik Tok's Algorithm Knew I Was Gay Before I Did." Those are fascinating because there's something very interesting there about the way that the algorithm pushes an idea to you and then tests out how you react to it. The recommendation algorithm is really what can get anyone exposure on TikTok, which makes for a really entertaining and oftentimes really informative platform, and then in other instances allows for these otherwise fringe theories to fill what I would call information vacuums, [becoming] this sort of pseudo-infotainment machine.

JK: *What can society do to stymie the spread of conspiracy theories? Do you think they should be censored?*

AR: Conspiracy theories exist in a sort of gray area that's difficult to moderate. But the genre itself doesn't necessarily warrant complete silencing. Nor is that necessarily the strategy that I

## “Conspiracy theories in general are not very useful when it comes to challenging authority. They purport to be, but they aren't.”

would recommend people take, because that would often just confirm the existing belief system that [conspiracy theorists] are being censored.

A crucial remedy to the problem is making sure that people aren't constantly feeling as though they are in crisis, or as though they might lose their city to rising sea levels, things that they have no control over—that's a great first step in helping to avoid conspiracy beliefs. We need someone who will give us the reforms that we require to make sure that people feel safe and secure, because when people don't feel safe and secure, they are going to turn to various ideologies and misinformation. So, first and foremost, making sure that everybody feels like they have a home, like they have food on the table, like they don't need to hate everyone just to channel that anger somewhere. Then on top of that, things like more transparency from the platforms and clear guidelines, as well as discussions about and changes to algorithms that are interested in driving profit rather than creating an educated and informed public. I would like to see the creation of some sort of digital bill of rights so that people have more privacy online, and so we start thinking about our online world as its own space that deserves to have high-quality information fed to it and not just whatever will drive as much ad engagement as possible.

JK: *Despite your understanding of the dangers of conspiracy theories, you seem to harbor empathy with those who promote them. Why is that?*

AR: That's the only way that I've found to approach this issue. It's really hard to put yourself in their minds and do the research that I've done and try to understand where they're coming from and why they have these beliefs without simultaneously having empathy, because you understand the world from their perspective. I would say that me and most conspiracy theorists have a lot more in common than we have not in common. We agree on a lot of things, we just disagree on solutions and the root cause. But we are experiencing a lot of the same pain and suffering and joy that everybody else is; we're linked in that way. You know, we have a lot more in common with each other than we necessarily do with a billionaire. I do try to stay empathetic.

You do this research and you can't help but realize that the biggest difference between me and somebody who has fallen deep down into the rabbit hole is overwhelmingly just where we were physically born. And that's not fair. I mean there's also room for accountability, and this is a discussion that's had when it comes to people who have left very hateful ideologies and have to take accountability for their actions. There's absolutely room for that while still creating a space with empathy, because if you're not offering empathy, then conspiracy theorists would have no reason to come back to reality. You just push them away further if you aren't even offering an emotional landing spot.

@abbieasr on Twitter