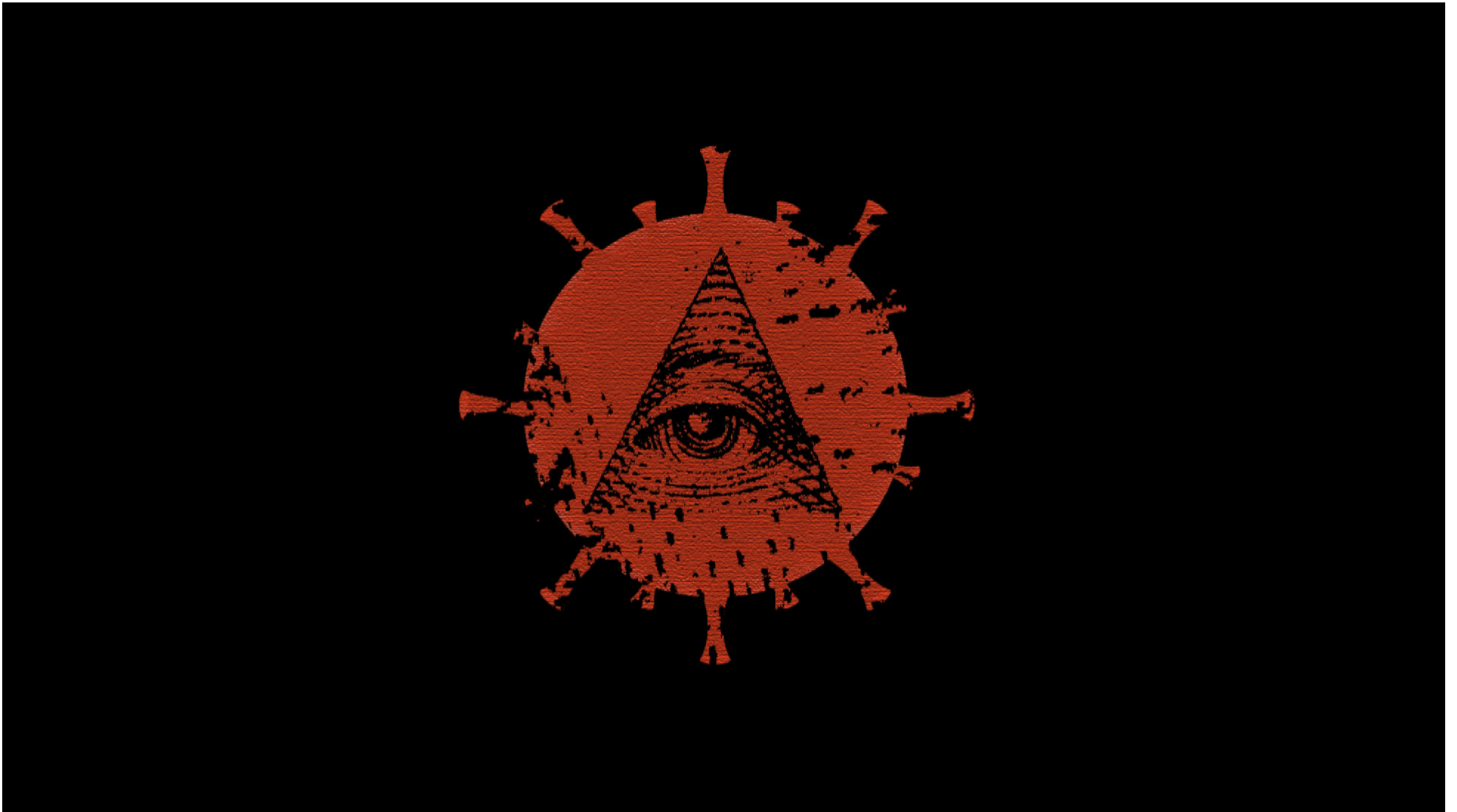


FAMILY

If Someone Shares the ‘Plandemic’ Video, How Should You Respond?

Experts provide scripts to help you push back as effectively as possible.

By Joe Pinsker



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Writing in *The Atlantic* [late last month](#), the political scientists Joseph E. Uscinski and Adam M. Enders observed that the coronavirus has created an environment dangerously conducive to conspiracy theories. “We have a global pandemic, a crashing economy, social isolation, and restrictive government policies,” they wrote. “All of these can cause feelings of extreme anxiety, powerlessness, and stress, which in turn encourage conspiracy beliefs.”

This past week, a [widely discredited](#) video—a 26-minute clip from a slickly produced documentary called *Plandemic*—circulated online. It promotes a number of harmful and false ideas, including that wearing a protective mask

can make people sick and that the novel coronavirus most likely emerged from a laboratory. (Facebook, YouTube, and other companies are trying to scrub it from their platforms.)

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If someone you care about sends you a link to this video—or any piece of media that pushes a conspiracy theory about the pandemic—how should you respond? I put that question to experts on conspiracy thinking, public-health risk communication, and psychology, and their responses converged on some basic guidelines.

Uscinski, a professor at the University of Miami and a co-author of *American Conspiracy Theories*, made an important preliminary distinction: Some people are sharing links to videos like *Plandemic* because they are curious and uncertain about the claims being made, but others are doing so because they're already deeply convinced. If you know someone is a “true believer,” to use Uscinski's term, you probably can't do much to sway them. You'll have a better chance of getting through to the curious and the uncertain.

Whatever camp someone falls in, though, the general principles are the same. “It's always important to respond in a way that doesn't suggest that the other [person] is foolish, naive, or gullible, as much as you think they may be,” said Joshua Coleman, a psychologist with an expertise in family relationships. “So rather than saying, ‘I can't believe that you fall for this crap!’ better to say, ‘I have heard others talk about that as well. And I agree, these days there's so much information out there, it can be hard to know what to believe.’”

After setting an empathetic tone, Coleman suggested continuing with something like this:

That video might be right, but I've been reading a lot these days that

goes counter to that. Do you mind if I send you an article or video about that? It would be good for us to look at both and see what we think.

“In doing it that way,” Coleman said, “you’re saying you’re open to being persuaded even if that outcome is unlikely—but you’re also asking him or her to do the same.”

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“First validate” the fears people might have about the pandemic “and then pivot,” Rachael Piltch-Loeb, a fellow at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, recommended. Along those lines, she suggested something like “I’m glad you brought this up. Those are some scary claims in that documentary. I am skeptical, though, because a lot of the things mentioned don’t jibe with what I have been reading. Here’s an article that I found to be more helpful at explaining these issues, and I feel more comfortable with the science behind it.” If you send along more information, Piltch-Loeb suggested trying to find reliable sources that might still be familiar to whomever you’re talking with.

John Banas, a communication professor at the University of Oklahoma, advised avoiding the implication that the other person’s faith in the video is “a personal failing.” You could instead point out the flaws in the current information ecosystem, he said, maybe with a reminder like “During this pandemic, there are people who want to take advantage of people’s fears and all of the uncertainty surrounding the situation.”

“One thing I might do,” Uscinski added, “is to ask [about] the source of the information ... Often that [question] can point out very gently that sources matter, and that their source might not be reliable, especially if they have to repeat out loud that their information came from something like ‘Conservative Eagle News Punch.’”

The experts I reached out to also had plenty of suggestions for what *not* to do

in these situations: Don't lecture someone, don't get exasperated, don't insult them, and don't try to refute specific falsehoods. "It is likely ineffective to directly argue with someone on the merits of the documentary's claims," Piltch-Loeb said.

It's also important to know when to give up. "If they don't engage openly and in a way that suggests a willingness to compromise, then I would walk away and wish them well," Uscinski said of people with a strong belief in a conspiracy. "I would like all of the people I care about to believe the most authoritative information, but I don't control other people's minds, and attempting to do so might not work out in my favor."

If that feels like a defeat, Uscinski suggested some other places to channel your energy: "Support science and universities," "don't support politicians who lie all the time," and "push back hard" if a media outlet spreads a conspiracy theory.

You might also try, when having conversations with other friends and family members, to preempt any curiosity they may have about *Plandemic* or its ilk by warning them about the existence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. "People need to be prepared to resist harmful persuasion," Banas said, "just like our bodies need to be prepared to resist harmful viruses."

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Joe Pinsker is a former staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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