”Fringe” beliefs aren’t fringe

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Abstract

COVID-19 and the 2021 U.S. Capitol attacks have highlighted the potential dangers of pseudoscientific and conspiratorial belief adoption. Approaches to combating misinformed beliefs have tried to ”pre-bunk” or ”inoculate” people against misinformation adoption and have yielded only modest results. These approaches presume that some citizens may be more gullible than others and thus susceptible to multiple misinformed beliefs. We provide evidence of an alternative account: it’s simply too hard for all people to be accurate in all domains of belief, but most individuals are trying. We collected data on a constellation of human beliefs across domains from more than 1,700 people on Amazon Mechanical Turk, and find misinformed beliefs to be broadly, but thinly, spread among the population. Further, we do not find that individuals who adopt one misinformed belief are more likely to engage in pseudoscientific or conspiratorial thinking across the board, in opposition to ”slippery slope” notions of misinformation adoption.