

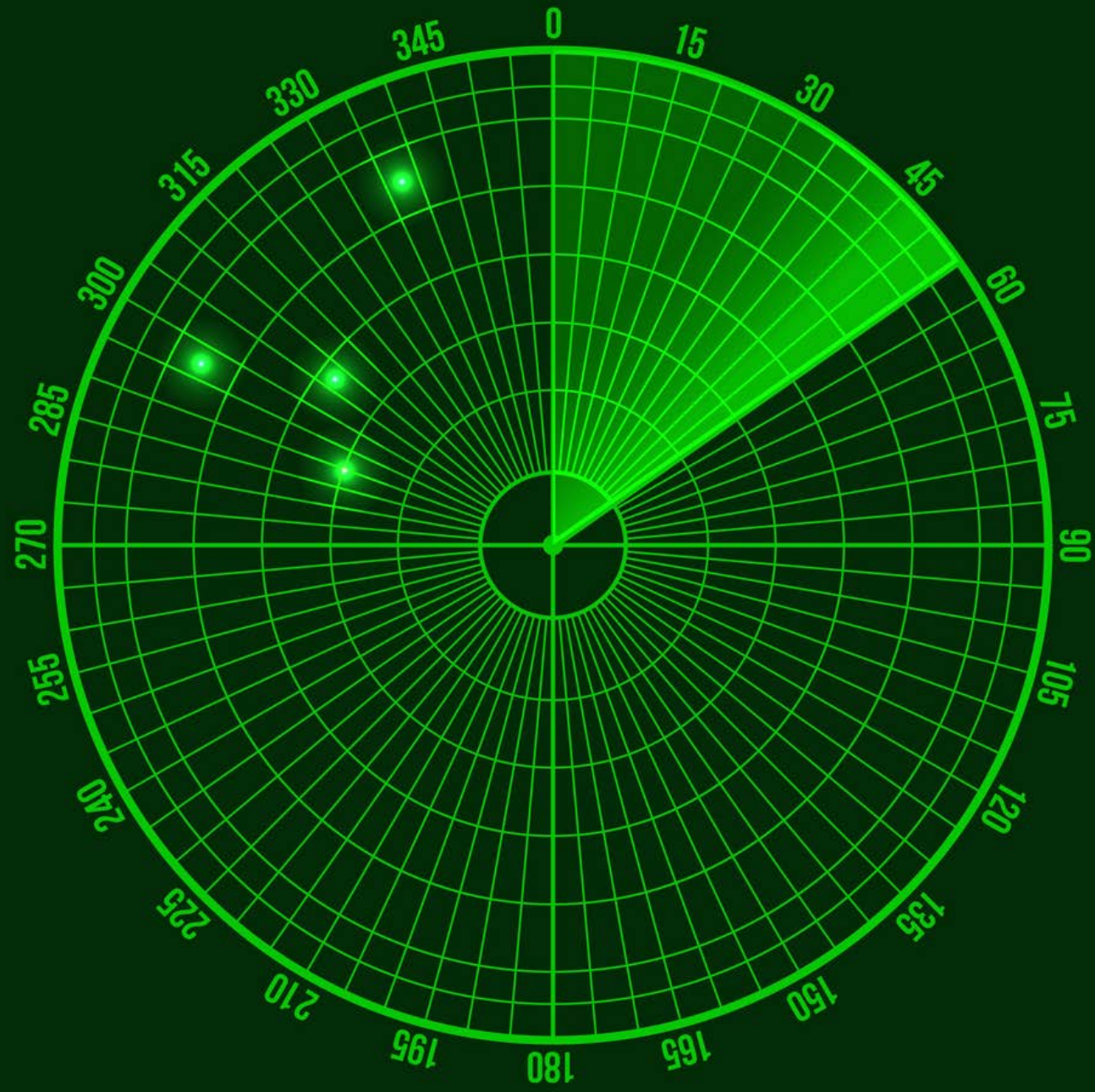
# The Doubled Edge Sword of Doubt

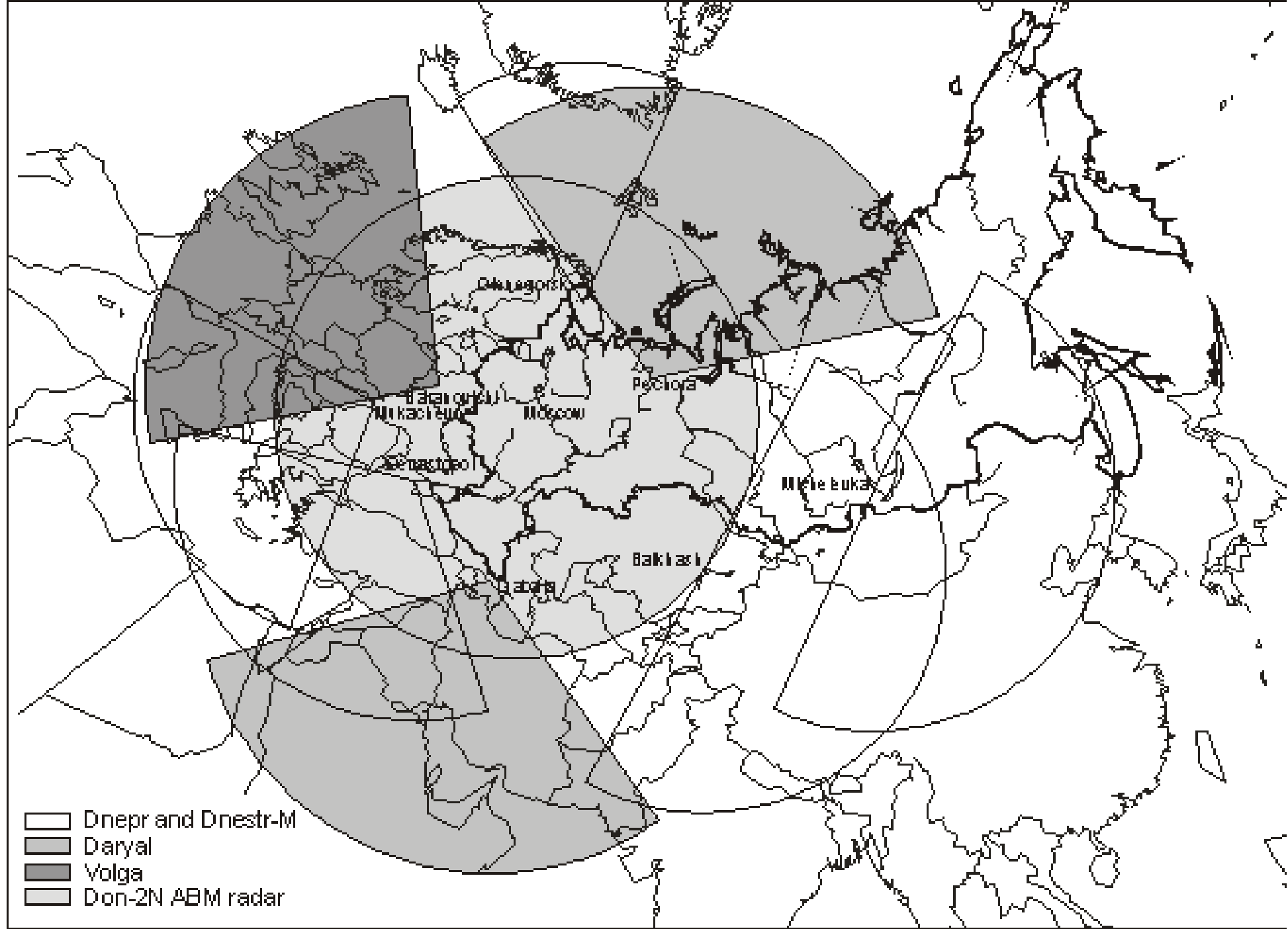
Professor André Spicer  
Cass Business School  
City, University of London



26 September 1983

















Can fostering doubt be a way to create more sustainable organisations?

Curriculum v

40




BUSINESS DAY

# Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace

The company is conducting an experiment in how far it can push white-collar workers to get them to achieve its ever-expanding ambitions.

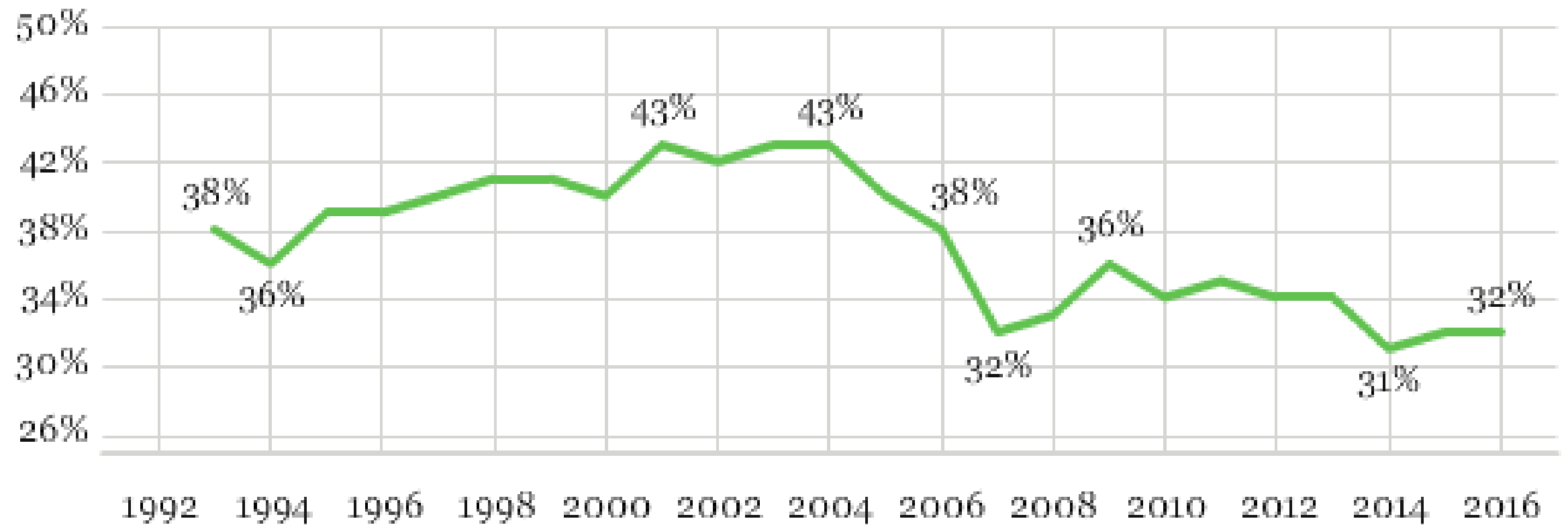
By JODI KANTOR and DAVID STREITFELD AUG. 15, 2015

 5491 COMMENTS



## Average Confidence Rating for All Institutions, 1993-2016

Average percentage of Americans who have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence across 14 institutions



Average is based on 14 institutions asked about annually since 1993

I DON'T BELIEVE IN  
GLOBAL WARMING  
GLOBAL WARMING  
I DON'T BELIEVE IN



GREEN  
OUR  
VACCINE

TOXIC VACCINES = AUTISM

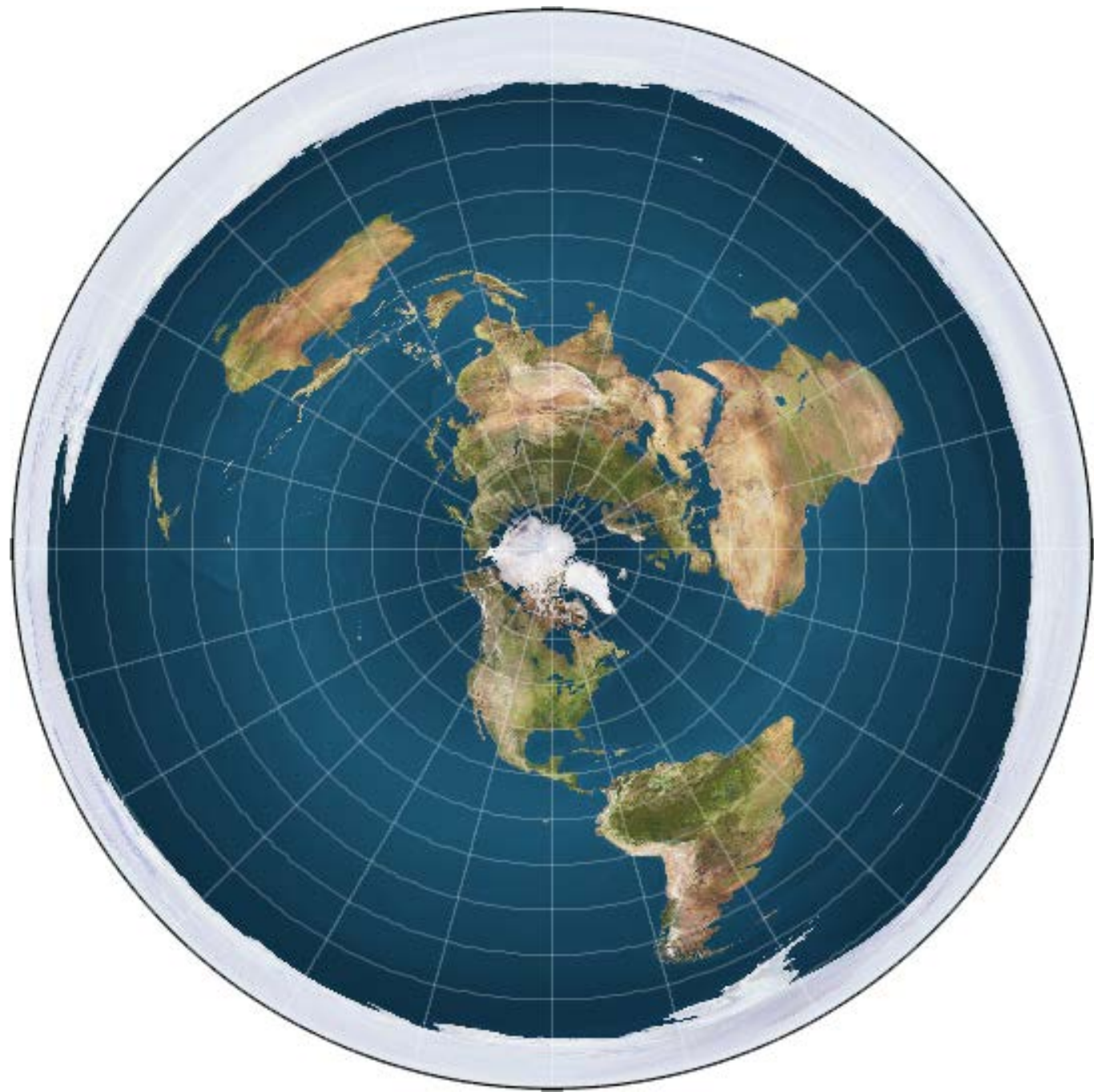
JUST ASK ME!!

VIRGINIA  
WANTS  
CLEAN  
VACCINES

DO THIS TO THEM  
NOW FIX THEM!

GREEN  
OUR  
VACCINE





- We live in an age of widespread doubt and skepticism
- This is accelerated by social media
- It can lead people to buy into implausible and downright harmful ideas
- And even do very unethical things

BUSH GIVES PLAN FOR IRAQ VICTORY AND WITHDRAWAL

NO ARTIFICIAL DEADLINES

Strategy Loosely Follows Methods the U.S. Has Used in Afghanistan

By BYRON E. SANDER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 1 — Two and a half years after the American invasion of Iraq, President Bush laid out Wednesday what he called a strategy for ending the war in Iraq and setting the stage for the peace negotiations...



President Bush yesterday just before his speech at the United States Naval Academy concerning "time and patience" in the war in Iraq.

U.S. Is Said to Pay to Plant Articles in Iraq Papers

For New Court, Abortion Case Takes Old Path

By JEFF FERGUSON

WASHINGTON, Dec. 1 — "I think 'The Nation' has done a terrific job of covering the war in Iraq," said a senior official of the White House on Wednesday. "We will be continuing to work with all Iraqis, including the coalition of Iraqis, to bring about a peaceful and secure future for the people of Iraq."

ALITO FILE SHOWS STRATEGY TO CURB ABORTION RULING

REAGAN ERA MEMO ON BOB

As Justice Dept. Lawyer He Supported States in Adding Restrictions

By BYRON E. SANDER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 1 — As a lawyer for the Reagan Justice Department, the Honorable John G. Roberts Jr. was named a Justice Dept. lawyer on the right side in the Supreme Court case that would decide whether states have the right to ban abortion.

French, in First, Use a Transplant To Repair a Face

By GABRIELLE KALTMAN

Paris — In France, the first face transplant was performed on a woman who had been severely injured in a car accident. The surgery was performed by a team of surgeons led by Dr. Jean-Michel Marescaux.

Small Scissors in Your Carry-On? Beware

By G.P. Spill

The Transportation Security Administration is warning travelers to leave their carry-on luggage at home if they have small scissors or other sharp objects.

A Shift for Suburbaner

By G.P. Spill

As a suburbaner, you know your car is your best friend. But now, with the economy in a tailspin, you might want to consider a more fuel-efficient option.

Library Art Sale Disappoints

By G.P. Spill

The annual art sale at the New York Public Library was a disappointment for collectors and artists alike.



Every time the DECC visits Manhattan, a line of young children hangs up signs.

Manhattan's Little Ones Come in Bigger Numbers

By ERIC Lipton

The number of children under 18 in Manhattan increased last year, according to a new report from the Census Bureau.

Small Scissors in Your Carry-On? Beware

By G.P. Spill

The Transportation Security Administration is warning travelers to leave their carry-on luggage at home if they have small scissors or other sharp objects.

'Many Americans are going to be skeptical that their government can know enough to accomplish large tasks or be competent enough to execute ambitious policies. More people are going to be skeptical of plans to mold reality according to our designs or to solve the deep problems that are rooted in history and culture.'

Small Scissors in Your Carry-On? Beware

By G.P. Spill

The Transportation Security Administration is warning travelers to leave their carry-on luggage at home if they have small scissors or other sharp objects.

‘Big business’ sneered my friend as we walked down Lower Broadway, ‘Why, it’s all Bunk: Sham I tell you!’

And a block further on ‘God! Religion! Ethics!’ He said contemptuously. ‘What for?’ Who needs them? These things are only a crutch for the feeble minds of the common herd!’

‘Absolutely all silk socks’ shrieked a street vendor at our elbow. ‘Garunteed or your money back! Only twenty five cents!’

My friend gripped my elbow and we came to a halt.

‘All silk?’, he queered, cocking his head at the vendor.

‘Absolutely!’ replied the individual. My friend reached in his waistcoat pocket.

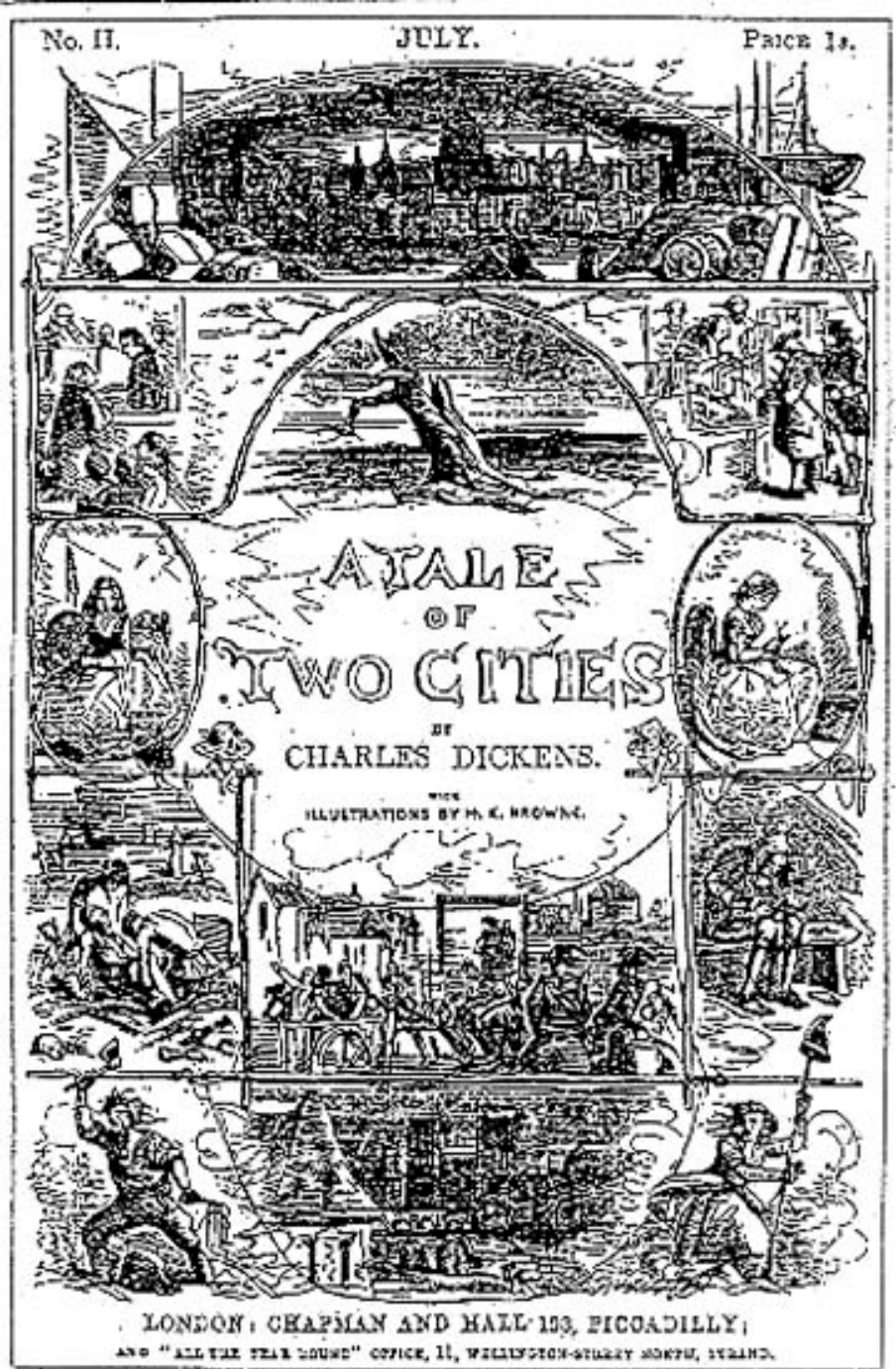
‘After all’, he murmured as he walked off with the socks, ‘They may really be silk, you know!’.

March 21, 1925

THE  
NEW YORKER

Price 15 cents





‘It was an epoch of incredulity . . . We had everything before us, we had nothing before us’

‘If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.’

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NATVRELLE DE  
RAYMOND SEBON.

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l'ordre du Roy, & Gentilhomme  
ordinaire de sa chambre.*

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A PARIS,  
Chez DANIEL GUILLEMOT, rue des  
Cordiers pres la porte S. Iacque.

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M. D. C. XL.

‘Que sais-  
je?’

Skepticism relieved two terrible diseases that afflicted mankind: anxiety and dogmatism.







PYRRHO.

"Whoever wants to live well ([eudaimonia](#)) must consider these three questions: First, how are *pragmata* (ethical matters) by nature? Secondly, what attitude should we adopt towards them? Thirdly, what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude?"

Pyrrho's answer is that "As for *pragmata* they are all [adiaphora](#) (undifferentiated), *astathmēta* (unstable), and *anepikrita* (unjudged, unfixed, undecidable). Therefore, neither our sense-perceptions nor our *doxai* (views, theories, beliefs) tell us the truth or lie; so we certainly should not rely on them.

Rather, we should be *adoxastoi* (without views), *aklineis* (uninclined toward this side or that), and *akradantoi* (unwavering in our refusal to choose), saying about every single one that it no more is than it is not or it both is and is not or it neither is nor is not'

-Timon, Aristocles passage

- Doubt isn't unique to our time . . .
  - . . . it has been with us for at least 2,500 years
- Doubt isn't the product of social media
  - . . . . There have been ages of skepticism with the appearance of all new communications technologies
- Doubt hasn't always driven stupidity
  - . . . Some have seen it as a vital means of gaining knowledge
- Doubt hasn't always been seen as bad
  - . . . . Some have seen doubt as an key to leading a good life

Could doubt be good for us?

# No: Doubt is Destructive

- Saps self-esteem (Pelham and Swann, 1989)
- Fuels the imposter syndrome (Clance, 1985)
- Lead to self-handicapping or overachievement (Branslow et al, 2010)
- Blocks or delays action (Lipschutz and Strauss, 1997; Shepard, 1997)
- Erodes legitimacy (Brunsson, 1982)
- Undermine relationships (Murray et al, 2001)
- Become infectious (Wood et al, 2016)

HELLO

my name is

insecure

# Yes: Doubt is Generative

- Prompts ongoing sensemaking (Weick et al, 2005)
- Greater cognitive flexibility (Dane, 2010; Farjourn, 2010)
- Allows negotiation of unique, dangerous and fast changing environments (Kramer, 2007)
- Enables safe operation of complex systems (Perrin, 2005)
- Facilitates individual and collective learning (Shikanti and Passmore, 1996)
- Helps to unlearn outdated ideas & allow introduction of new technology (Starbuck, 1996)
- Can provide the seeds for break-through innovations (Chai, 2017)



# Yes and No: Doubt is a double edged sword

- Drives significant breakthroughs as well as conflict (Mannheim, 1954)
- Can increase freedom but also drive escape from freedom (Fromm, 1941)
- Can create tolerance as well as dogmatism (Berger and Zijderveld, 2006)



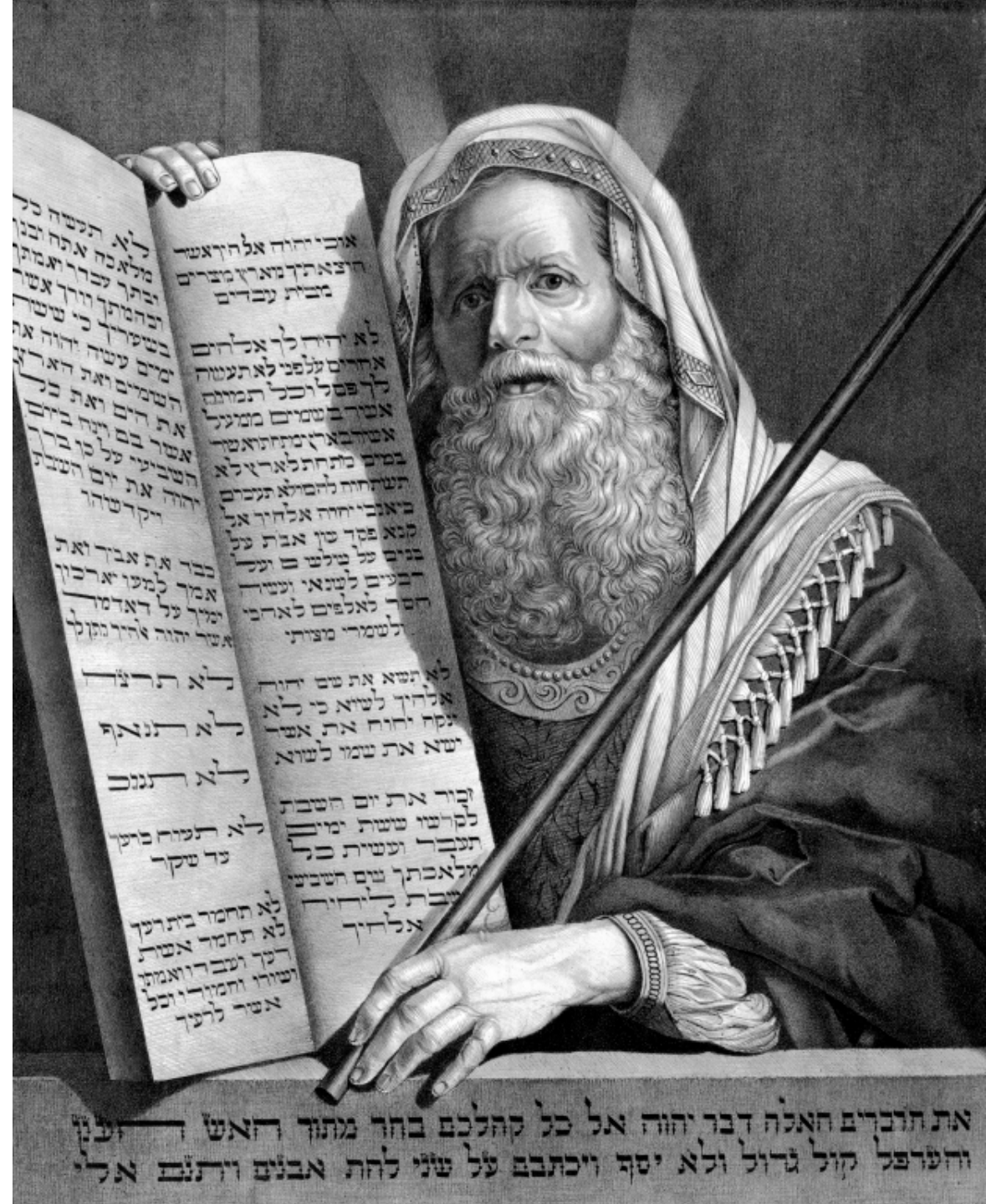
So, how do we understand this double-edged sword of doubt?

- Organisations (and social life) is structured around shared beliefs
- These beliefs are routinely contradicted by things like breakdowns, anomalies, paradoxes etc
- But we are really great at ignoring these contradictions to our beliefs (thanks to cognitive biases and collective conformity)
- However, if these contradictions persist they are likely to be costly, disturbing and embarrassing – triggering a sense of doubt
- To deal with this doubt, we rely on common rituals (like experimentation, reflection, dialogue)
- These rituals have upsides (like learning), but also big downsides (like anxiety)
- When these downsides people try to overcome doubt by returning to their original beliefs, becoming fixated on new beliefs, becoming completely cynical or trying to live with doubt productively
- These can easily turn into vicious or virtuous cycles of dogmatism and doubt which shape entire organisations

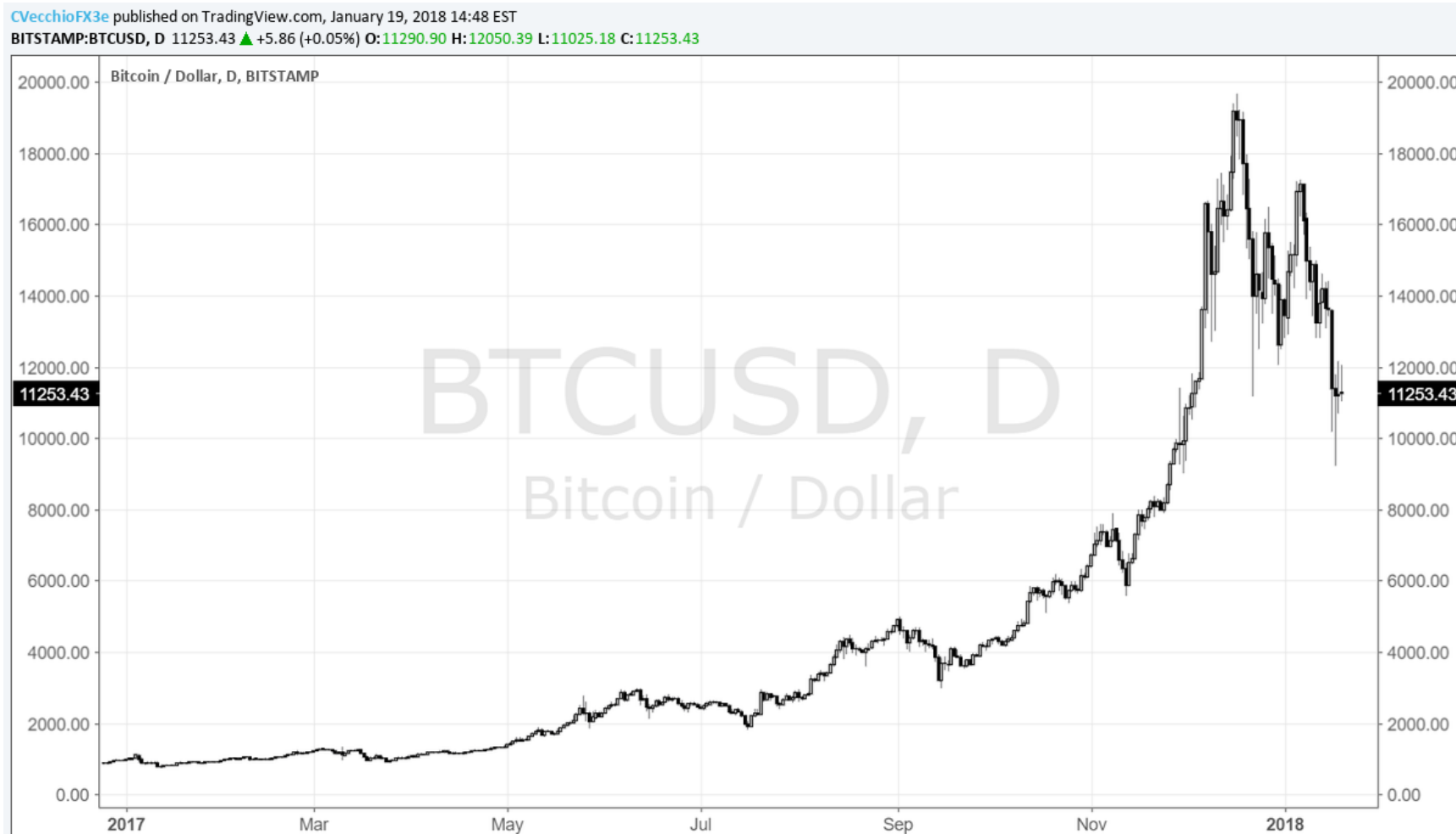
# Organisations are structures around beliefs



But these beliefs are routinely contradicted



# Our beliefs are usually defended by our cognitive biases



However, if they become too costly, embarrassing and disturbing they trigger a sense of doubt



To deal with that sense of doubt we use rituals like reflection, dialogue and experimentation



These rituals have some upsides like learning, updating and fostering tolerance





But they come with costly like anxiety, cost conflict and loss of enthusiasm

## Analysis Paralysis

over-analyzing (or over-thinking)  
a situation so that a decision or  
action is never taken.

When doubts are maintained through rituals  
we get constructive skepticism



# But maintaining doubt requires slack resources

- Temporal
- Emotional
- Reputational

But when those rituals become empty procedures, it can easily degenerate into cynicism

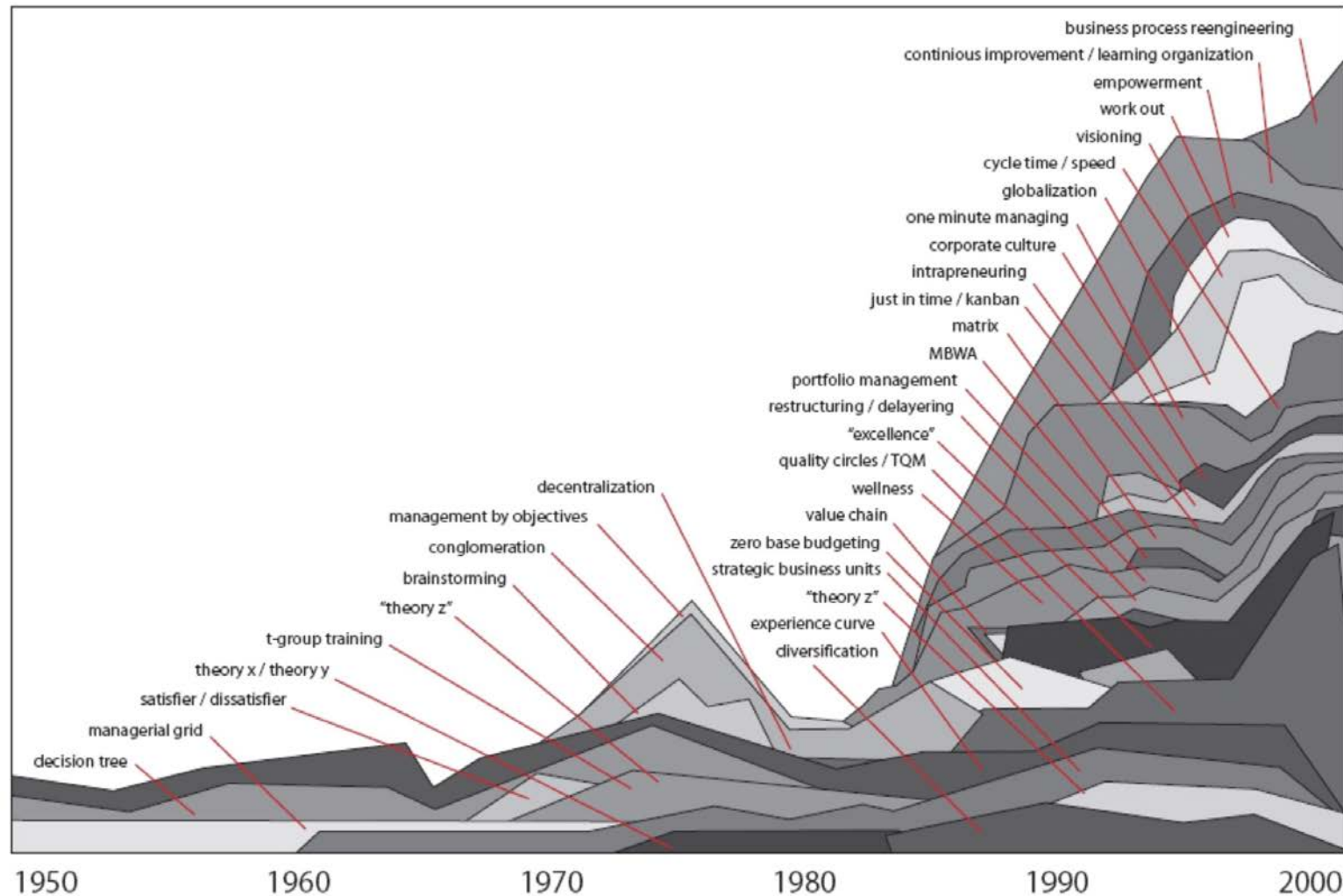




Fundamentalism: Returning to their original beliefs with new found fervor



# Radicalism: Attaching themselves to a new set of beliefs with equal fervor



# Each of these patterns can set of self-reinforcing cycles

- For good: cycles of constructive skepticism in software code development
- For bad: cycles of competing dogmatism in social movement



So how do we encourage constructive doubt while minimising corrosive forms of doubt?

# So how do we encourage constructive doubt while minimising corrosive forms of doubt?

- Resources

- We need to ensure there are slack emotional, temporal and reputational resources

- Ritual

- We need to ensure that ritualised forms of doubting like experimentation, reflection, and dialogue are available, people are inducted into them so they are skilled at them

- Relationships

- We need to ensure there are strong enough relationships – often across doubting divides – to ensure this process is possible

# What does that mean in practice

- Give people resources to doubt by not making them feel insecure, artificially pressed for time and low status
- Ensure that ritualised doubt is built into any work process
- Building relationships across divides

And what can we do about it?

- As Educators: Critical Thinking
- As Researchers: Generative Doubt
- As Practitioners: Encouraging Inquisitiveness
- As Public Intellectuals: Constructive Challenge
- As People: Negative Capability

