

THE DISASTERS ISSUE

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How one man turned conspiracy theories and impending doom into a YouTube empire
(<http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/headline-story/15158/ben-davidson-suspicious-observers-youtube-conspiracy-entrepreneur/>)

By Joseph L. Flatley

There's no reason you would know who Ben Davidson is, unless you're one of the 250,000 subscribers to his YouTube (<http://www.dailydot.com/communities/youtube/>) channel, Suspicious Observers (<https://www.youtube.com/user/SuspiciousObservers>), which boasts of providing "the best open sources of information on Earth." Every morning, all year-round, he posts dispatches from his explorations into "the frontiers of solar and planetary science." In Davidson's world, earthquakes can be predicted (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPjhaweEWXA>) by looking at the Earth's electromagnetic output, the sun directly influences things like suicides and crime rates, and water rains down from outer space.

He also holds forth on common conspiracy theories about Agenda 21 (a United Nations sustainability plan often cited as a cover for a coming New World Order), chemtrails (jet aircraft trails said to secretly contain dangerous chemicals), and global warming. In a typical video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ew05sRDACU&feature=youtu.be>), he claims that global warming isn't happening, and *also* that the government is secretly spraying chemicals into the air to stop global warming. And that another ice age is around the corner.

For fans of this material, it isn't the contradictory claims that matter so much as that each of these claims calls the official narrative of anthropogenic climate change into question. Conspiracy theorists eat this stuff up.

Davidson is probably the last person you'd suspect would become a conspiracy entrepreneur. Hailing from Fox Chapel, Pennsylvania, a well-to-do suburb outside Pittsburgh, he studied meteorology in college before receiving a B.A. in economics and then a law degree in 2011. It was around then when the tsunami and subsequent disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant introduced him to a world of scientific inquiry at odds with the mainstream.

"I became really interested in the Japan earthquake," he tells me, "just because I wanted to understand the raw power of what was going on." This was at a time when pop culture was freaking out over an impending doomsday scheduled for Dec. 21, 2012. You couldn't search for tsunami videos without encountering any number of "alternative" explanations or conspiracy theories about what was *really* happening in Japan. He found this all fascinating, but the people reporting on this stuff were unreliable—"wack-jobby," in his words.

He realized that he could apply his investigative skills, picked up in law school and in his gig as a due diligence professional, to the world of conspiracies and government cover-ups. Perhaps, if he worked hard at it, this could become his full-time job. Four years later, he's not only making a living—he's established a haven for hundreds of thousands of people whose outré beliefs make them feel marginalized. In short, he's created a community of believers.

SuspiciousObservers - Welcome Video



In the spring of 2011, Davidson started posting videos to YouTube. At first, these were pretty basic iMovie creations—collages of found video, soundtracked by hip-hop and with titles like “Intro to Elenin, HAARP, and the 2012 Conspiracy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imVkUxT5W9M>).” The news footage and stock photos were interspersed with title cards, on which he editorialized. One typical example:

Do not blame Obama for what you see around you.

**This was set in motion long ago, and he is as much
a prisoner as you are.**

His greatest flaw is his belief that participation in the machine can result in change from within.

Change begins between your ears mate, open your mind.

He'd wake up well before dawn and make videos before work. By the fall, he was uploading seven days a week. He says that he doesn't take days off, ever: He's even posted videos on his wedding day and on the morning of his daughter's birth. His subscribers appreciated the effort, and soon he was gaining hundreds of subscribers a day. In the end of 2013, having reached 100,000 subscribers, he quit his job to peddle conspiracy full time.

Davidson has the understated authority of a TV weatherman or enthusiastic government official.

These days, he has just shy of a quarter million YouTube subscribers. He also makes money through premium memberships to his website (\$29.99/year or \$3.99/month), which gives subscribers access to more videos, podcasts, forums, and dossiers. And he recently started organizing conferences where tickets sell for \$100 each, or double that to attend the VIP lunch. He's also selling conference videos (<https://otf.selz.com/>) for the quite reasonable price of \$2 per talk, or \$18 for the whole set.

“I really miss the paychecks that I got at my old job,” he says. We're sitting at a coffee shop in downtown Pittsburgh on a late-September morning. Davidson, who graduated from an area high school in 2003, has the understated authority of a TV weatherman or enthusiastic government official. Talking to him, it's easy to forget that he's only about 30 years old.

Missing paychecks aside, what he does now is more than just a job. It's a service to what he calls “the community,” those like-minded people out there who are being lied to, not just by the mainstream media, but by those who are being paid to promote disinformation from within the ranks of the conspiracy movement.

“The majority of the most headline-worthy things in the community,” he says, have obviously been “planted” by government shills. “You can see similarities in writing styles. Sometimes you can go to a bunch of different websites, like Before It's News, Above Top Secret, and Godlike Productions, and [the authors] all have different user names, but they'll all be pushing everyone towards the same thing.”

I tell him that I've noticed that myself, how the same story will seem to pop up everywhere at once, and that I'd always attributed it to plagiarism or at least a basic lack of standards. After all, we're talking about Internet conspiracy forums.

“It's called controlling the opposition,” Davidson corrects me. “I believe the person most responsible for this is Alex Jones.” He then schools me on how the Nixon administration would leak negative stories to get them through the news cycle before they had a chance to do real political damage. He's got an analogy brewing. “The idea is to satiate the public's want” for conspiracy news, he says, “while keeping the worst stuff hidden.”

I asked Davidson what he brings to his community. He says that he's the “voice of reason. The equilibrium.”

Top 6 Climate Change Problems



Davidson might be the voice of reason, but most people will find his message a little hard to hear. Essentially, he believes that the magnetosphere (<http://ccmc.gsfc.nasa.gov/educational/MagnetosphereWebPage.php>) is weakening, making the Earth susceptible to solar radiation that increasingly wreaks havoc on terrestrial electronics and electrical systems. This is the slow-boil beginning of solar cataclysm, which—followed to its likely conclusion—will mean the end of society as we know it.

Just this past June, he claims, solar storms “nearly sent us back to the stone age.” He offers a series of seemingly related news items as proof. There was an aviation radar outage (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/276977/investigation-into-radar-fault%27s-cause>) in New Zealand, a digital banking system failure (<http://www.fin24.com/Tech/News/FNB-website-app-hit-by-downtime-20150625>) in South Africa, and batteries on board the *Solar Impulse 2* (<http://www.wired.com/2015/07/solar-plane-fried-batteries-not-done-yet/>) experimental aircraft were fried as it flew over the Pacific. Davidson attributes all these events to solar storms (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/another-solar-storm-to-hit-earth-this-weekend/>), although each has been attributed to other, less apocalyptic explanations. But that’s fine with him. While he may currently be at odds with the mainstream media, everybody will catch up to him eventually.

“I’d like to think that I have more humility than to say I’m out on the leading edge of things,” he says, “but on a number of topics I’ve been just a little bit ahead of what the mainstream is willing to accept.” By no means is Davidson the first to report on the dangers of extreme weather from space or things like chemtrails and Agenda 21 here on Earth, but he pulls it all together in an even-handed, no-bullshit tone that his fans really appreciate. It’s that equilibrium, he says, noting that the truth likely lies “somewhere in between what the craziest people on the Internet are saying, and the straight lies fed by the mainstream media.”

Intro to Elenin, HAARP, and the 2012 Conspiracy [For the newly awakened]



In conversation, Davidson uses the word “community” quite a bit. He doesn’t have fans, or followers, or customers. And he doesn’t trade in conspiracy theories. Rather, he provides vital news and information to the conspiracy community. The borders of this community, as he explains it, are somewhat nebulous. It’s concerned with “everything from 9/11 conspiracies to things about GMOs and pollution, to magnetic pole shifts and other natural disasters, and New World Order stuff.” This list, of course, is only scratching the surface. There are probably as many theories about how the world *really* works as there are conspiracy theorists. What unites members of this community, according to Davidson, is that they’ve all experienced what he describes as an “awakening.” And he includes himself in that group.

I asked Davidson to describe his awakening.

“It’s like the realization you go through when you realize why your parents told you what they told you about cannabis,” he says. “Imagine that with every aspect of your life. So you have this amazing and fascinating world that’s been hidden right in front of your eyes. And it’s now open to you. It’s more exciting than any plot in a movie or in a book, and it’s real. These things are affecting our lives day-to-day and they might really begin to affect our lives significantly. And then you add on top of that the fact that you begin to realize how much you weren’t told, and how much you may have been lied to. And you have such a rapid shift from normalcy bias and cognitive dissonance into an awakening that you are now open to anything, because your logical filter has sort of been removed.”

And when your logical filter is removed, anything suddenly seems possible. “When you allow yourself to wake up for the first time,” he says, “your religion, your childhood fears, anything is open to being taken advantage of by these con men and these doomsayers. A lot of people do go nuts in this community.”

As an example of what can go wrong when one experiences an “awakening,” he mentions the rampage shooting at the Washington Navy Yard that left 12 people dead (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/local/navy-yard-shooting/scene-at-building-197/>) in September 2013. “He believed that the government was attacking him with electromagnetic frequencies (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/kazi-kearse/my-elf-weapon-a-therapist-speaks-out-about-the-navy-yard-shooter/662543080431059>),” Davidson explains. “Most of the people who end up going and shooting [up] movie theaters or malls, these people are into [conspiracy theories].”

“Just because a terrible realization about the world has changed your way of thinking forever, it does not mean that you should forget everything you’ve learned about making judgments about people, and checking the facts to see if someone is full of crap.”

According to Davidson, he escaped this all-too-common fate by experiencing a “second awakening,” as described in a video that he titled, “I wish I knew this when I ‘Woke Up.’” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-ak5ZsP2M>) If his first awakening allowed him to pierce the lies told by our government and mainstream media, the second awakening told him that he could only rely on his own investigation if he wanted to know how the world actually works. Awakening, he says, “comes at a price. But it’s a price that can be refunded through diligence and hard work, and the application of simple reasoning skills. Just because a terrible realization about the world has changed your way of thinking forever, it does not mean that you should forget everything you’ve learned about making judgments about people, and checking the facts to see if someone is full of crap.”

I wish I knew this when I 'Woke Up'



If you were suddenly awakened to the imminent end of society as you know it, what would you do? I'd be hard-pressed to come up with a better answer than Ben Davidson. He quit his job, raised \$60,000 on Kickstarter (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/828323095/the-mobile-observatory-project/description>), bought an RV, outfitted it with a meteor camera, solar telescope, and a radiation detector, and hit the road with his wife and two dogs. For the better part of a year, he traveled the United States and Canada, presenting his scientific findings to anyone who would listen—including local news programs in Joplin, Missouri (<http://www.fourstateshomepage.com/local-news-today/the-mobile-observatory-project-10914>), and Alberta, Canada (<http://globalnews.ca/video/1526579/ben-davidsons-mobile-observatory>). But more rewarding, he says, was connecting with people at the various meet-and-greets they organized along the way.

"People have to be guarded about [conspiracy topics] the majority of their lives," he explains. "They can't go out and strike up a conversation about the New World Order or solar flares with people." Davidson wasn't just meeting members of an audience he'd only known from the Internet. He was a traveling attractor, bringing together previously isolated members of his tribe. When they came together, many felt at home for the first time. They felt like they were among people who had experienced the same kind of awakening.

"They show up," he says, "and not only does nobody look at them funny or think they're insane, but they're around a bunch of people who are as open and feeling as initially vulnerable as they did. And the connections that people were making, and the amount of fun they had at these events, it was like a 'safe place' to really express these things that are so important to people."

I had an opportunity to see this for myself recently when I attended Davidson's Observing the Frontier (<https://www.eventjoy.com/e/suspicious0bservers>) conference. For a weekend in October, 120 people from around the region came to Pittsburgh to attend talks on fringe scientific topics, from starwater (<https://youtu.be/vFrbiWJ6OYI>) to fast radio bursts (<https://youtu.be/rniGXy-jtg0>). And more importantly, they had the opportunity to interact with each other—in Q&A sessions, between presentations, and during a VIP lunch rap session with Davidson himself.

My own experience with the community culminated in the conference's Saturday evening happy hour. The atmosphere in the banquet room was relaxed but cheerful. There were several groups huddled together, happily discussing everything from "electric universe (http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Electric_Universe)" ideas to ancient astronauts to 9/11 conspiracy theories. One particular guy bounced around the room energetically, talking about the connection between the cutting-edge science he was learning here and his own Divine DNA healing (<http://www.wellnesshero.biz/dna-healing.html>) techniques. If these people ever felt afraid to discuss their unique take on the world, you'd never know it by watching them here, among their peers.

As the members of his community milled around, Davidson stood off to the side of the room by himself, with a drink in his hand and a look of satisfaction on his face. Earlier in the day, I asked him if he was happy with the turnout for his event.

"I'm more happy with online orders" for the conference videos, he replied.

Sure, this is his passion, but it's also his job. And in America, with hard work and the right message, you still can make a living doing what you love. Even if it's crying out in the wilderness about the doom lurking in the heavens.

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