

Chatterbox #205 – Conspiracy theories

Episode description

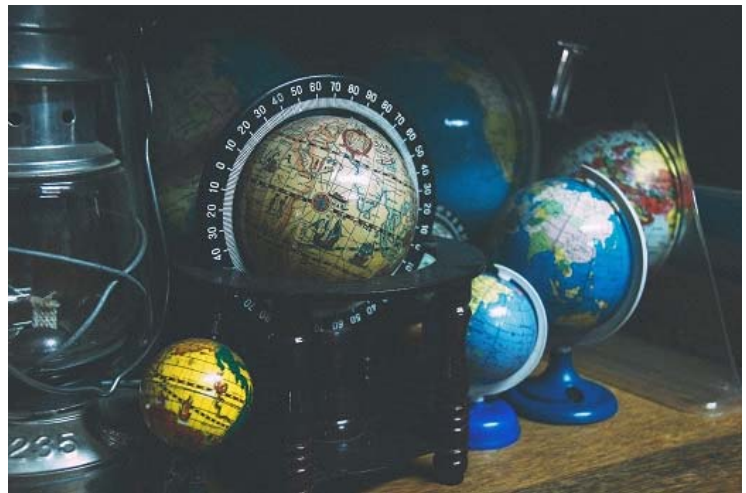
In this episode, Morag and Andrew share their thoughts on popular conspiracy theories. You may agree or disagree with some of these, but you will surely learn some new words!

Fun fact

NASA scientists say that the US flag planted on the moon should still be standing, although you probably wouldn't find colour on it. The radiation from the sun would have bleached the flag white by now.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Fun times
- Nitty-gritty
- Does not add up
- Judgment call
- Quote, unquote
- Like-minded
- To rile [someone] up



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript.

Andrew: You're listening to the Culips English podcast. To download the study guide for this episode, which includes the transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations, real-world examples, and a quiz, visit our website, Culips.com, C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Morag: And my name is Morag.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hey, Morag, how are you?

Morag: Doing pretty good, Andrew. How are you today?

Andrew: Morag, I had an interesting thing happen to me last night. What happened was I traded one of my friends a kettlebell. Do you know what a kettlebell is?

Morag: I believe I do. Aren't they the weights that sort of have a handle on them? They're mostly spherical on the bottom, but a flat bottom, and then have a large handle?

Andrew: Exactly, it's just a style of weight used for exercising. So I had a kettlebell that I wasn't using, my friend had espresso machine that he wasn't using. So I traded my friend a kettlebell for an espresso machine.

Morag: I think you got the better deal on that one.

Andrew: Yeah, it's up for debate, depending on what you like, but I really like drinking coffee, so it's good for me.

Morag: Me too. I'm doing it right now.

Andrew: What I did all day was practice making espresso and I ended up drinking a ton, so I'm really wired right now.

Morag: I know the feeling. I worked as a barista, someone who makes espresso in a shop for their living. I did that for a number of years and I remember when you're learning how to do it, you need to make so many, sort of, bad shots of espresso and taste them. I think I ended up, you know, drinking like 15 on my first day. So if you feel at all like that, I feel for you and your inability to sleep later.

Andrew: Yeah, I think it's going to be an all-nighter for me tonight, potentially.

Morag: **Fun times.**

Andrew: But Morag, we're not here to talk about coffee today, are we? We are gonna talk about a different subject, and that is conspiracy theories.

Morag: Oh.

Andrew: Yeah, conspiracy theories. But, before we get into all the **nitty-gritty** details about conspiracy theories, I would like to let everyone know that the study guide for this episode is available now on our website, which is Culips.com, C-U-L-I-P-S.com. And the study guide is a really awesome way to study with us, and it includes lots of great stuff, like the transcript, detailed explanations of all the cool vocabulary that you'll hear today, real-world usage examples, a quiz, and also prompts that you use to write a journal entry or discuss the content of this episode with your friends. So, we highly recommend you check out the study guide and, again, it's available to download from our website, Culips.com.

OK, so Morag, today we're gonna talk about conspiracy theories. I think we should start by defining conspiracy theories. Can you let everybody know what a conspiracy theory is?

Morag: Yeah, so a conspiracy theory is something that people believe is true, some people believe is true, and is very different from the official account of a particular event or group of people. So some people will believe that there are a secret group or a bunch of high-level, powerful individuals who are lying to us about a particular event or a fact or a person.

Andrew: Exactly. So a conspiracy theory is just the belief that, like, a secret group or an organization did something secretly right?

Morag: Yeah, they are secretly holding the truth, or they arranged events in a secret way and we aren't officially told about it.

Andrew: And usually the they is the government, right? It's the belief that the government did something and is keeping it a secret.

- Morag: Or it could be, like, shadow organizations and things, so some people will believe that, like, the Templars did something.
- Andrew: Right, or The New World Order.
- Morag: Exactly, there's some groups of people that conspiracy theorists believe are doing things, and those groups of people arguably don't exist. Or they may or may not exist.
- Andrew: Another term that you hear often when talking about conspiracy theories is a shadow government.
- Morag: Yes.
- Andrew: So, like a secret, hidden government that operates at, like, a top-secret level within the government.
- Morag: That is actually more powerful than the real government or the government that we know. That's one of the key things, is that these secret societies and secret groups of people are always the most powerful that you can possibly think of.
- Andrew: Yes, and in fact the belief that these groups exist is kind of a conspiracy theory in itself, isn't it?
- Morag: Yes, yes, it is, sort of. They're nested, you have conspiracy theory within conspiracy theory.
- Andrew: That's right. And so today what I thought would be fun to do is talk about some of the popular conspiracy theories, and there's a lot of them. So we won't have time to talk about them all, but I think we could start maybe by talking about some classic conspiracy theories, and then we'll move into some contemporary conspiracy theories.
- Morag: That sounds pretty good to me. What's your favourite classic conspiracy theory?
- Andrew: One that I like to think about, from time to time, is the moon landing. The conspiracy surrounding the moon landing is that it was fake and that we've actually never landed on the moon, that the Americans made up the whole thing and it was just a way to, I don't know, win the propaganda war during the Cold War in the 1960s.
- Morag: Yeah, I like that one, too. People who are really into this conspiracy theory will be able to tell you what sound stage they shot the faked moon landing on. So a sound stage is a set to record movies or TV or that sort of thing.

- Andrew: That's right, and I'm also not an expert of the details. If you ask people that really believe in these conspiracy theories, they'll be able to give you tons and tons and tons of information about how each detail was faked. But I think that a lot of people think that actually Stanley Kubrick—the film director that did movies like *The Shining* and *A Space Odyssey*—they think that he was responsible for filming some of the faked moon landing footage.
- Morag: That's amazing and very silly.
- Andrew: And so when you talk to people that believe in this conspiracy theory, they'll quote evidence like, oh you can see the American flag blowing in the wind on the moon.
- Morag: But there is no wind, right?
- Andrew: But there is no wind, right?
- Morag: Yeah!
- Andrew: So they will claim that as some evidence, or different things with the moon dust, and the way that the dust is moving in the footage. And there's a whole bunch of claims that they have, but the core belief is that some people think the moon landing was faked.
- Morag: Yup.
- Andrew: How do you feel about this, Morag? Do you believe in this one to any extent?
- Morag: No, I don't. I find it interesting, like you, to consider sometimes, but I really think that we went there. Considering, I also think there's some images, the images back to Earth are pretty convincing. I don't know.
- Andrew: Yeah, I agree with you, I think definitely the Americans did go to the moon. I'm open-minded to the possibility that some of the footage may have been altered or fabricated.
- Morag: Absolutely. The camera equipment, I mean it was the 1960s, I could imagine that some of that footage wouldn't have come out too well. But you would have needed to be able to produce that for propaganda reasons. So, I think there can sometimes be a grain of truth in these theories. But I definitely, for this one, think that somebody went and stood on the large rock in the sky.
- Andrew: Yeah, and I hope we go back soon.
- Morag: Yeah, me too.

Andrew: I'm looking forward to that, if that happens sometime within my lifetime or within the next couple of decades. Hopefully faster than that.

Morag: Yeah, I would love it if we got so used to space travel that you could start just going there yourself, like tourist to the moon.

Andrew: I'd love it.

Morag: Yeah. I'd sign up.

Andrew: So another popular conspiracy theory surrounds the JFK assassination. So JFK, for those that don't know, stands for John F. Kennedy, the American president who was assassinated also in the 1960s. So the official story goes that a lone gunman named Lee Harvey Oswald was responsible for the assassination, that he shot JFK. But there's all sorts of different conspiracy theories surrounding this, that state alternative possibilities, maybe it was Lee Harvey Oswald that did the shooting, but he couldn't have acted alone. There had to be a second gunman, so there's that angle. Another angle thinks it was the mafia that did it, another angle thinks it was the Russians that did it. There's all these different scenarios.

Morag: Doesn't it kind of focus on the grassy knoll or something?

Andrew: Yeah, yeah.

Morag: Where it's the idea that the man that was identified as shooting JFK couldn't have shot him from the position that he was at, and it had to be someone else. So they are looking at bullet trajectories through his head, which, yeah, it's kind of crazy. It was somebody else because of the way the bullet went, that sort of thing.

Andrew: Exactly, yeah. Because this happened, you know, over 20 years before I was born, I'm not an expert on all the details, but I know in the 1980s, I think, or maybe even the 90s, there was a film that was released called the Zapruder film. And it was actually broadcast first on the Geraldo Rivera—is that his name?

Morag: Oh yeah, yeah, Geraldo Rivera is a daytime talk-show host, or was a daytime talk-show host.

- Andrew: Yeah, Geraldo Rivera, he got this crazy scoop because this Zapruder film showed up close, like, it's the most clear footage of the assassination happening. And so when you see the trajectory of the bullet and the way that JFK was actually hit, then you compare it with the official story, and you're, like, hmm, it **doesn't really add up**. Like, I think there's maybe something that's covered up in the JFK assassination attempt. When you really get into the details of it, you're, like, maybe these conspiracy theorists have something here. I don't know, but it's intriguing.
- Morag: I think I don't understand enough about bullet trajectories, or what happens to someone's body when they're shot to be able to identify whether or not that's correct. Like, I have no idea and so pretty much most of what this conspiracy theory does, I am just believing people.
- Andrew: Right, right.
- Morag: So it's just a **judgment call** on my end. Whether or not I believe the **quote, unquote** experts who were telling me one thing or the other. So, but I think that this one is interesting because, between this and the moon landing, I think that the JFK assassination and the moon landing are, at least in North American culture, they're very iconic conspiracy theories. And a lot of characters in movies or TV will believe in these as an indication of what sort of person they are, like, they're a crazy weirdo. So we kind of culturally all have to know at least these two conspiracy theories to understand that sort of thing.
- Andrew: No, it's a very good point that, you know, if somebody believes in conspiracy theories, you can kind of stereotype them as a certain type of person. Like, you probably are going to know what type of political beliefs they hold and maybe even their socio-economic status. It's like a certain group of people tend to really cling on to conspiracy theories. So, from a cultural prospective, absolutely, they're important to be aware of.
- Morag: I find it really interesting. There's been a resurgence of conspiracy theories in the last little while, at least through people getting into internet forums and just being able to find **like-minded** people for whatever topic you're thinking of. I've definitely come across quite a number online. Have you done the same thing, or?
- Andrew: I agree with this point as well. I think the internet has strengthened communities of conspiracy theorists. Maybe if you didn't believe the official story, like, 20 or 30 years ago, you'd be kind of outcast as a weirdo. But now all of the **quote, unquote** weirdos can meet up online and there's a strong community.
- Morag: Yeah.

- Andrew: So, new conspiracies are coming out because of these online groups and some of them are really, really wacky.
- Morag: Yeah, one of the wackiest ones to me is the flat Earth theory, which is that the Earth is not round. It's entirely flat, and we've been being lied to for hundreds of years. This one gets me nuts because we've seen the Earth from space, many, many, many times.
- Andrew: Yeah, but those images are fabricated, Morag.
- Morag: They're all fabricated. Yeah, although the funny thing about conspiracy theories online now, though, is that it's not just actually people who believe in them that now take part in telling people about them or writing pro-conspiracy theories things online. There's also what we called trolls. And an internet troll is a person who says something that is controversial or even offensive for fun. They don't believe what they're saying, but they say it to get responses from other people. I actually have a friend who was really active on flat Earth groups.
- Andrew: Just to troll?
- Morag: Talking to these people, just to troll. So he would just build them up and, you know, say how right they were and really stoke the fires of their idea and try **to get them riled up**. But he never really believed, so it's now even kind of hard to know how many people actually believe these things.
- Andrew: Yeah, like if you go onto YouTube and you search for flat Earth videos, there'll be a ton and they'll have lots of views and very active comments. But, I don't know, even the people that are arguing for the flat Earth, it's such a ridiculous idea that it seems unfathomable that somebody could actually believe it. So I don't know if the whole thing is just a big troll, you know? Like the whole idea might just be a big gag. But people will seemingly believe in it when you look at the comments online.
- Morag: Well, I mean that's the thing too, though. Even if a couple of people who started it, whatever group of people started it did it as a joke, people still believe in it. People still believe in it now, so even if it began as a joke and is a total lie from the perspective of people who started it, it doesn't stop some people from believing. So there are definitely people out there.
- Andrew: Yeah, it's so bizarre. It's a really interesting time that we're living through right now.
- Morag: Yes, it is.

- Andrew: Well, Morag, we could go on and on about conspiracy theories, I think, but for our listener's sake we'll wrap it up here. Guys, we hope you learned something from this conversation. I really enjoyed it and I want to remind you about our study guide. I think it will be really helpful for this episode. So the study guide's on the website right now, Culips.com. Head on over to download it.
- Morag: And if you guys have any suggestions or comments, we would love to hear from you. So send any ideas our way, get in touch with us through either our Facebook page, which is [Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast](https://www.facebook.com/CulipsPodcast), or you can email us at contact@Culips.com.
- Andrew: That's it for now. We'll talk to you next time. Bye everybody.
- Morag: Bye.
- Announcer: Do you like listening to Culips? If so, please show your support by leaving Culips a 5-star rating and a review on iTunes or Stitcher. This helps new listeners find the show. So don't delay, rate and review today.

Detailed Explanations

Fun times

Idiom

People often say **fun times** when fondly remembering shared experiences. You can say, “Those were **fun times**,” but most people use the short form **fun times**. Some also say it ironically. You could be remembering a difficult time that wasn’t very fun and say **fun times** as an acknowledgement that it’s good that those times are over!

Here are a couple more examples with **fun times**:

Penny:	That was a crazy weekend. We were looking for the car keys all afternoon, and then you came to me and told me that you locked them in the car.
Beth:	That’s right! I remember that. Oh, fun times .
Penny:	Not really.
Beth:	You’re right. Let’s never do that again.
Penny:	Agreed.

Keith:	I’m pretty tired. What time is it?
Beth:	It’s only 10:30!
Keith:	What? Oh my god, it’s only 10:30 and all I want to do is go to sleep.
Beth:	Remember when we were university students and we’d stay out all night?
Keith:	Those were fun times .
Beth:	And those times are over. I’m going to take a shower.

Nitty-gritty

Noun, informal

To get down to the **nitty-gritty** is to discuss the essential details of a matter. In this episode, when Andrew mentions the **nitty-gritty** details, he is using the term as an adjective. It is informal, though widely accepted.

Here are a couple more examples with **nitty-gritty**:

Student:	Professor, free trade is very much in the news these days. Can we discuss that?
Professor:	Of course. What would you like to know?
Student:	In your opinion, is global free trade good or bad for the economy?
Professor:	That is a very good question. Free trade is a very complex issue. To answer that, we would have to look at the nitty-gritty aspects of every country's situation.

Vera:	The company is losing money and we need to fix it.
Dana:	It's because sales have been down.
Vera:	That could be. We need to get down to the nitty-gritty and take a detailed look at our budget.
Dana:	I'll print that out.
Vera:	Could you get that done by the 4:00 meeting?
Dana:	Sure, I'll do that.

Does not add up

Phrasal verb

When something **does not add up**, that means something is wrong. Think of mathematics: if the numbers **don't add up** correctly, then there's something not right with the equation. The same thing is true when someone is telling a story but not all the things said seem true.

Here are a couple more examples with **does not add up**:

Mother: Our son told me that he went to the park with his friends at 2:00.

Father: But he told me that he was at the movies between 1:00 and 3:00.

Mother: Something **does not add up**.

Father: All three of us need to have a long talk.

Peter: I heard her story and it really **doesn't add up**. Why would she take 2 days to text me when she says she loves me?

Grace: I know she's very busy these days.

Peter: Busy with her ex-boyfriend?

Grace: No way! At least, I don't think so.

Peter: You see? Even you can't keep your story straight!

Judgment call

Noun

A **judgment call** is a decision you take based on your personal opinions and sentiments. In the same situation, someone else might decide differently from you. Sports referees often make **judgment calls** based on what they see and their interpretation of the rules.

Here's one more example with **judgment call**:

Paddy:	How do you want to get to Toronto, by plane or by train?
George:	Although the plane is faster, the train is cheaper and much more comfortable.
Paddy:	You have to make a judgment call . We need to book the tickets soon.
George:	Sure. Let's take the train. We'll have more time to work on the train and finish our presentation.

Quote, unquote

Idiom

Quote, unquote is an expression you can say when you want to undermine the subsequent word or phrase. In this episode, Morag says, “the **quote, unquote** experts.” In saying this, she shows that she does not put much faith in the expertise of these experts, and doubts whether they really are experts in the first place.

Here are a couple more examples with **quote, unquote**:

Lyle:	Here, try this. I've been practicing my barista skills.
Dave:	OK. What is it?
Lyle:	An Americano.
Dave:	Yuck! This is terrible!
Lyle:	What? Everyone loves my Americanos!
Dave:	Well, don't count me among the people who love this quote, unquote Americano. It tastes like toilet water.

Cate:	Really, you should drink 8 glasses of water a day.
Vicky:	Says who?
Cate:	All the medical studies.
Vicky:	Those quote, unquote studies are rubbish. Drink a lot of water, sure. But drink exactly 8 glasses? That doesn't make any sense.
Cate:	It does to me. Drink up!

Like-minded

Adjective

When people hold similar opinions, you can say they are **like-minded**.

Here are a couple more examples with **like-minded**:

Fiona:	Hey, Jen, you should come to the get-together tonight.
Jen:	What is it?
Fiona:	Just a lot of like-minded people coming together and chatting about various topics.
Jen:	That does not sound like something I would enjoy. I like disagreeing with people.
Fiona:	Just because we're like-minded , it doesn't mean we always agree. Come along and give it a shot.

Winnie:	Who would you say is your best friend at school?
Mary:	Genevieve, definitely.
Winnie:	OK, why her?
Mary:	We're very like-minded . I don't need to explain too many things to her. She almost always understands what I mean!

To rile [someone] up

Idiomatic verb

To rile [someone] up is to annoy or bother them. It could be in person or, as Morag mentioned in the podcast, on the internet. It can also be a passive verb. For example, you can get **riled up** by watching something upsetting on television.

Here are a couple more examples with **to rile [someone] up**:

Harry:	Every time I go to the bus stop, some kids from the other school mock me.
Oliver:	Why would they do that?
Harry:	I don't know. Maybe because I go to a private school. I don't even know them.
Oliver:	They're just trying to get you riled up . It doesn't mean anything. Just ignore them.

Steve:	I posted a picture of myself on Instagram, showing how happy I was for having lost a lot of weight, and so many people posted nasty comments.
Greg:	Really? Why?
Steve:	Some people thought I was full of myself and trying to show off my body. And then some people commented that I was still way too fat to post pictures of myself! I can't win.
Greg:	They're just trolls. Don't get all riled up about that. If you feel good, that's what's important.

Quiz

1. To be _____ is to be upset about something.

- a) not added up
- b) making a judgment call
- c) riled up
- d) wired

2. What is NOT subject to a judgment call?

- a) facts
- b) opinions
- c) quality
- d) theories

3. Like-minded people often share the same:

- a) facts
- b) likes and dislikes
- c) soft drinks
- d) bank accounts

4. Which is NOT a synonym for nitty-gritty?

- a) minutiae
- b) details
- c) essentials
- d) dirty

5. If you say quote, unquote before a word, you are:

- a) underemphasizing that word
- b) quoting a famous book
- c) undermining that word
- d) showing your intelligence

Writing or Discussions Questions

1. Which conspiracy theories do you believe are true?
2. Which are the craziest conspiracy theories you have heard?
3. Have you ever started a rumour just for fun?
4. How do you respond to internet trolls?
5. What kind of thing really riles you up?
6. What comes to mind when you think of fun times in your past?

Quiz Answers

1.c 2.a 3.b 4.d 5.c

Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Morag St. Clair

Music: *Something Elated* by Broke For Free,
Step On by Jahzzar

Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates

Audio editor: Andrew Bates

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Matty Warnock

English editor: Stephanie MacLean

Business manager: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima

Project manager: Jessica Cox

Image: João Silas (Unsplash.com)