

Cognitive Dissonance & the defence of denial, 'Black Box Thinking', (extract) – Matthew Said

“Now, this is important... because of what it reveals about all of us. **Festinger** showed that when we are confronted with evidence that challenges our deeply held beliefs, **we are more likely to reframe the evidence than we are to alter our beliefs**. We simply invent new reasons, new justifications, new explanations. Sometimes we ignore the evidence altogether.”

In the autumn of 1954 Festinger, who at the time was a researcher at the University of Minnesota, came across an unusual headline in his local newspaper. 'Prophecy from Planet Clarion Call to City: Flee That Flood' it read. The story was about a housewife called Marian Keech who claimed to be in psychic contact with a god-like figure from another planet, who had told her that the world would end before dawn on 21st December 1954.

Keech had warned her friends about the impending disaster, and some left their jobs and homes, despite the resistance from their families, to move in with the woman who had, by now, become their spiritual leader. They were told that true believers would be saved from the apocalypse by a spaceship that would swoop down from the heavens and pick them up from the garden of Keech's small house in suburban Michigan, at midnight.

Festinger, an ambitious scientist, glimpsed a rare opportunity. If he could get close to the cult, perhaps even infiltrate it by claiming to be a believer, he would be able to observe how the group behaved as the apocalyptic deadline approached. In particular, he was fascinated by how they would react after the prophecy had failed.

Now, this may seem like a rather obvious question. Surely the group would go back to their former lives. They would conclude that Keech was a fraud who hadn't been in touch with any god-like figure at all. What other conclusion could they possibly reach if the prophecy wasn't fulfilled? It is difficult to think of a more graphic failure, both for Keech and those who had put their trust in her.

But Festinger predicted a different response. He suspected that far from disavowing Keech, their belief in her would be unaffected. Indeed, he believed they would become more committed to the cult than ever before.

In early November, Festinger and his colleagues contacted Keech by phone and went about trying to gain her confidence. One of them invented a story about having had a supernatural experience while travelling in Mexico; another pretended to be a businessman who had become intrigued by the newspaper story. By late November they had been granted access to Keech's cult, and were ensconced in her house, observing a small coterie of people who believed that the end of the world was imminent.

Sure enough, as the deadline for the apocalypse passed without any sign of a spaceship (still less a flood), Festinger and his colleagues watched the group in the living room (Keech's husband, who was a non-believer, had gone to his bedroom and slept through the whole thing). At first the cult members kept checking outside to see if the spaceship had landed. Then, as the clock ticked past midnight, they became sullen and bemused. Ultimately, however, they became defiant. Just as Festinger had predicted, the faith of hardcore members was unaffected by what should have been a crushing disappointment. In fact, for some of them, their faith seemed to strengthen.

How is this possible? After all, this was an unambiguous failure. Keech had said the world would end, and that a spaceship would save true believers. Neither had happened. The cult members could have responded by altering their beliefs about the supernatural insights of Keech. Instead, they altered the 'evidence'.

As Festinger recounts in his classic book 'When Prophecy Fails', they simply redefined the failure. 'The godlike figure is so impressed with our faith that he has decided to give the planet a second chance' they proclaimed (I am paraphrasing only a little). 'We saved the world!' Far from abandoning the cult, core members went out on a recruitment drive. As Festinger put it: 'The little group, sitting all night long, had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction'. They were 'jubilant'.

Now, this is important not because of what it tells us about cults, but because of what it reveals about all of us. Festinger showed that this behaviour, while extreme, provides an insight into psychological mechanisms that are universal. When we are confronted with evidence that challenges our deeply held beliefs we are more likely to reframe the evidence than we are to alter our beliefs. We simply invent new reasons, new justifications, new explanations. Sometimes we ignore the evidence altogether.

'Cognitive dissonance' is the term Festinger coined to describe *the inner tension we feel when, among other things, our beliefs are challenged by evidence*. Most of us like to think of ourselves as rational and smart. We reckon we are pretty good at reaching sound judgements. We don't like to think of ourselves as dupes. That is why when we mess up, particularly on big issues, our self-esteem is threatened. We feel uncomfortable, twitchy.

In these circumstances we have two choices. The first to accept that our original judgements may have been at fault. We question whether it was quite such a good idea to put our faith in a cult leader whose prophecies didn't even materialise... the difficulty of this option is simple: it is threatening. It requires us to accept that we are not as smart as we like to think. It forces us to acknowledge that we can sometimes be wrong, even on issues on which we have staked a great deal.

So, here's the second option: denial. We reframe the evidence. We filter it, we spin it, or ignore it altogether. That way, we can carry on under the comforting assumption that we were right all along. We are bang on the money! We didn't get duped! What evidence that we messed up?