

Elizabeth Han

NSPA Designer of the year submission

When I joined *El Estoque* as a sophomore, my sole desire was to become a writer. But with every story I took on, I realized that I was painting a picture through my words instead. How my source remembers the back of her aunt's head more than her face, the blue couch that stood between them, and the cold night's breeze that dried up her tears on her walk home. Rather than leaving a bland trail of information, I constructed a visual for the reader to enter, letting them slide into my source's shoes as if to experience another life.

This passion for visuals took its literal form through my design works in *El Estoque*. As the first Design Lead of our publication this past school year, I began all my works with the question: "What do I want to communicate?" My core belief stood that every visual element must contribute to the purpose of the story. If anything felt extraneous, I had to trim the fat.

Largely due to this belief, my designs began taking on simple forms that boiled down to a single takeaway. For instance, my first magazine cover in September took on minimal shapes and colors, with the hopes of communicating one emotion in my audience: fear, the central theme of our magazine. It was the result of shaving off all the details early in the ideation stage.

However, this process did not lend itself to good results with every design work I took on. At times I simply threw out every idea in my head thinking it was too complex, too detailed that it would distract the audience from gaining a core idea. With the new principle of communication in the way, I lost my old sense of purpose of producing stories, which was to create an experience for people.

Over the school year, however, I learned to tread the fine line between communication and experience in my design. The key was finding connection. Just as bland spits of words evaporate as soon as they enter your brain, journalistic art should embody the uncertainties of human life, taking comfort in the field of abstraction. While I don't agree that every piece of art should be up to a person's interpretation, I believe certain visual elements should be included for the mood it creates, suggesting a reaction in a reader — even if it has no concrete connection to the story. The value of journalism is not only the hard facts that are contained in it, but rather the combination of senses coming together in your head as you absorb the information, through both the words and the visuals.

The series of works below represent the journey I took on this year, with hopes of creating connection, making our stories memorable to our audience.

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Cover of the September issue. It represented a package of stories tied together under the theme of fear.

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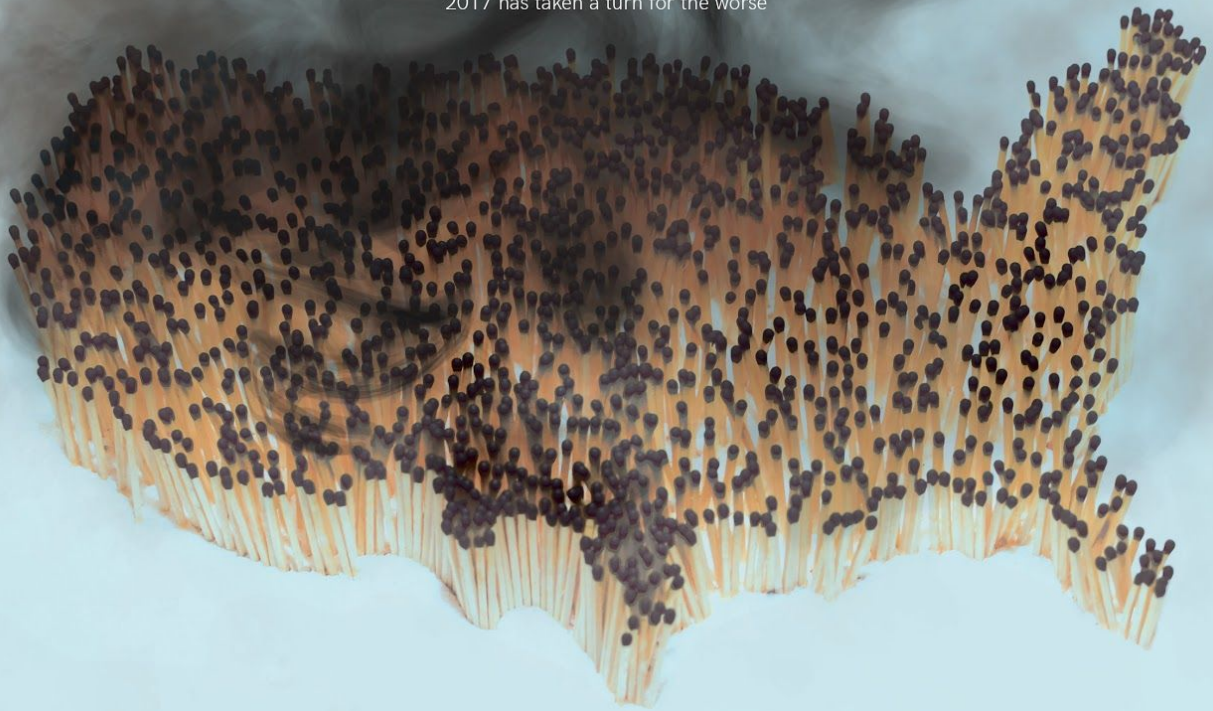
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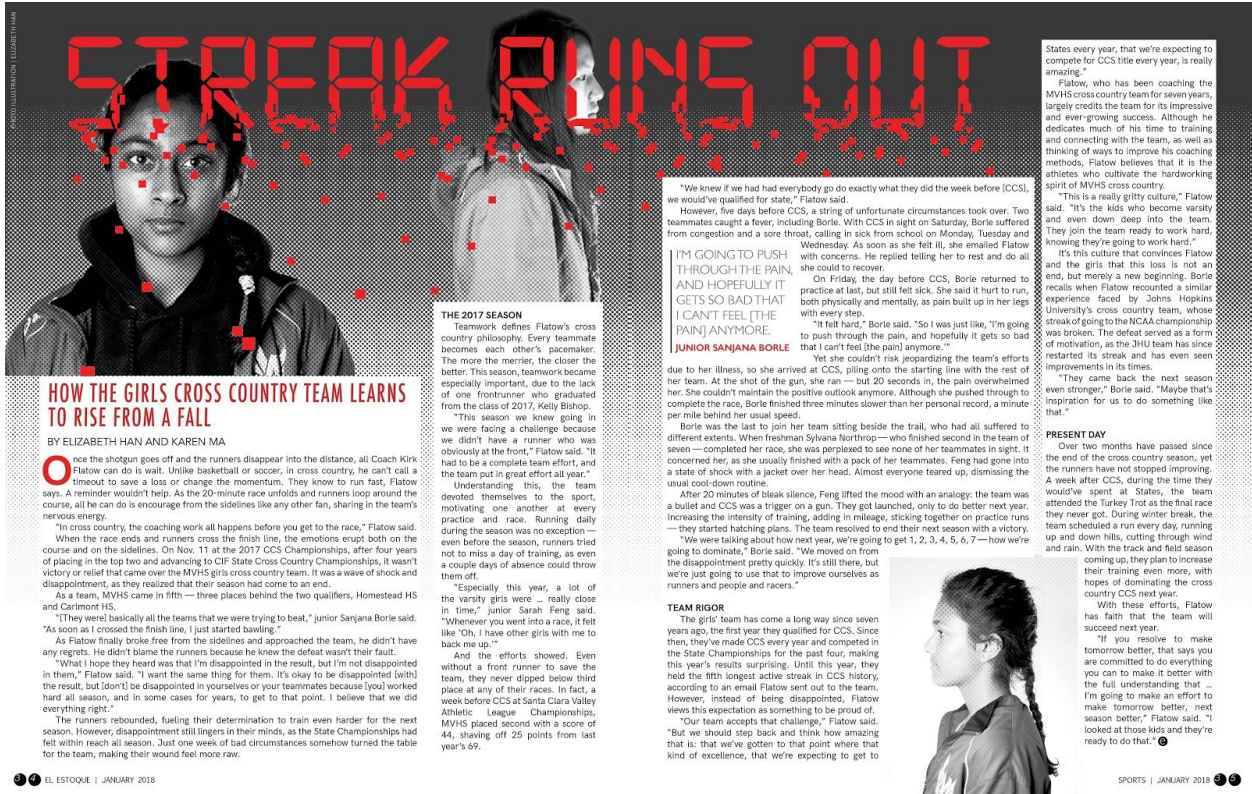
MVHS cheer and song teams prepare for competition season

16 WORST OF 2017

From mass shootings to violent protests, 2017 has taken a turn for the worse



Cover of the December issue. The main story it represented listed out the worst current events in the United States that happened in 2017.



HOW THE GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY TEAM LEARNS TO RISE FROM A FALL

BY ELIZABETH HAN AND KAREN MA

Once the shotgun goes off and the runners disappear into the distance, all Coach Kirk Flatow can do is wait. Unlike basketball or soccer, in cross country, he can't call a timeout to save a loss or change the momentum. They know to run fast, Flatow says. A reminder wouldn't help. As the 20-minute race unfolds and runners loop around the course, all he can do is encourage from the sidelines like any other fan, sharing in the team's nervous energy.

"In cross country, the coaching work all happens before you get to the race," Flatow said. When the race ends and runners cross the finish line, the emotions erupt both on the course and on the sidelines. On Nov. 11 at the 2017 CCS Championships, after four years of placing in the top two and advancing to CIF State Cross Country Championships, it wasn't victory or relief that came over the MVHS girls cross country team. It was a wave of shock and disappointment, as they realized that their season had come to an end.

As a team, MVHS came in fifth — three places behind the two qualifiers, Homestead HS and Carleton HS.

"[They were] basically all the teams that we were trying to beat," junior Sanjana Borle said. "As soon as I crossed the finish line, I just started bawling."

As Flatow finally broke free from the sidelines and approached the team, he didn't have any regrets. He didn't blame the runners because he knew the defeat wasn't their fault.

"What I hope they heard was that I'm disappointed in the result, but I'm not disappointed in them," Flatow said. "I want the same thing for them. It's okay to be disappointed [with] the result, but [don't] be disappointed in yourselves or your teammates because [you] worked hard all season, and in some cases for years, to get to that point. I believe that we did everything right."

The runners rebounded, fueling their determination to train even harder for the next season. However, disappointment still lingers in their minds, as the State Championships had felt within reach all season. Just one week of bad circumstances somehow turned the table for the team, making their wound feel more raw.

THE 2017 SEASON

Teamwork defines Flatow's cross country philosophy. Every teammate becomes each other's pacemaker. The more the merrier, the closer the better. This season, teamwork became especially important, due to the lack of one front-runner who graduated from the class of 2017, Kelly Blahop.

"This season we knew going in we were facing a challenge because we didn't have a runner who was obviously at the front," Flatow said. "It had to be a complete team effort, and the team put in great effort all year."

Understanding this, the team devoted themselves to the sport, motivating one another at every practice and race. Running daily during the season was no exception — even before the season, runners tried not to miss a day of training, as even a couple days of absence could throw them off.

"Especially this year, a lot of the varsity girls were — really close in time," junior Sarah Feng said. "Whenever you went into a race, it felt like 'Oh, I have other girls with me to back me up.'"

And the efforts showed. Even without a front runner to save the team, they never dipped below third place at any of their races. In fact, a week before CCS at Santa Clara Valley Athletic League Championships, MVHS placed second with a score of 44, snatching off 25 points from last year's 69.

"We knew if we had had everybody go to exactly what they did the week before [CCS], we would've qualified for state," Flatow said.

However, five days before CCS, a string of unfortunate circumstances took over. Two teammates caught a fever, including Borle. With CCS in sight on Saturday, Borle suffered from congestion and a sore throat, calling in sick from school on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. As soon as she felt ill, she emailed Flatow with concerns. He replied telling her to rest and do all she could to recover.

On Friday, the day before CCS, Borle returned to practice at last, but still felt sick. She said it hurt to run both physically and mentally, as pain built up in her legs with every step.

"It felt hard," Borle said. "So I was just like, 'I'm going to push through the pain, and hopefully it gets so bad that I can't feel the pain anymore.'"

Yet she couldn't risk jeopardizing the team's efforts due to her illness, so she arrived at CCS, piling onto the starting line with the rest of her team. At the shot of the gun, she ran — but 20 seconds in, the pain overwhelmed her. She couldn't maintain the positive outlook anymore. Although she pushed through to complete the race, Borle finished three minutes slower than her personal record, a minute per mile behind her usual speed.

Borle was the last to join her team sitting beside the trail, who had all suffered to different extents. When freshman Sylvana Northrop — who finished second in the team of seven — completed her race, she was perplexed to see none of her teammates in sight. It concerned her, so she usually finished with a pack of her teammates. Feng had gone into a state of shock with a jacket over her head. Almost everyone teared up, dismissing the usual cool-down routine.

After 20 minutes of bleak silence, Feng lifted the mood with an analogy: the team was a bullet and CCS was a trigger on a gun. They got launched, only to do better next year. Increasing the intensity of training, adding in mileage, sticking together on practice runs — they started hatching plans. The team resolved to end their next season with a victory.

"We were talking about how next year, we're going to get 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 — how we're going to dominate," Borle said. "We moved on from the disappointment pretty quickly. It's still there, but we're just going to use that to improve ourselves as runners and people and racers."

TEAM RIBOR

The girls' team has come a long way since seven years ago, the first year they qualified for CCS. Since then, they've made CCS every year and competed in the State Championships for the past four, making this year's results surprising. Until this year, they held the fifth longest active streak in CCS history, according to an email Flatow sent out to the team. However, instead of being disappointed, Flatow views this expectation as something to be proud of.

"Our team accepts that challenge," Flatow said. "But we should step back and think how amazing that is: that we've gotten to that point where that kind of excellence, that we're expecting to get to

States every year, that we're expecting to compete for CCS title every year, is really amazing."

Flatow, who has been coaching the MVHS cross country team for seven years, largely credits the team for its impressive and ever-growing success. Although he dedicates much of his time to training and competing with the team, as well as thinking of ways to improve his coaching methods, Flatow believes that it is the athletes who cultivate the hardworking spirit of MVHS cross country.

"This is a really gritty culture," Flatow said. "It's the kids who become varsity and even bleed deep into the team. They join the team ready to work hard, knowing they're going to work hard."

It's this culture that convinces Flatow and the girls that this loss is not an end, but merely a new beginning. Borle recalls when Flatow recounted a similar experience faced by Johns Hopkins University's cross country team, whose streak of going to the NCAA championship was broken. The defeat served as a form of motivation, as the JHU team has since restarted its streak and has even seen improvements in its times.

"They came back the next season even stronger," Borle said. "Maybe that's inspiration for us to do something like that."

PRESENT DAY

Over two months have passed since the end of the cross country season, yet the runners have not stopped improving. A week after CCS, during the time they would've spent at States, the team attended the Turkey Trot as the final race they never got. During winter break, the team scheduled a run every day, running up and down hills, cutting through wind and rain. With the track and field season coming up, they plan to increase their training even more, with hopes of dominating the cross country CCS next year.

With these efforts, Flatow has faith that the team will succeed next year.

"If you resolve to make tomorrow better, that says you are committed to do everything you can to make it better with the full understanding that — I'm going to make an effort to make tomorrow better, next season better," Flatow said. "I looked at those kids and they're ready to do that."

Spread of a sports story: Streak runs out. It dealt with the loss of a 4-year Championships legacy of the Girl's cross country team.



ILLUSTRATION | ELIZABETH HAN

THE NATURE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES IS THAT THEY ARE ONLY CONSPIRACIES UNTIL PROVEN TRUE.

Exploring why people choose to look for alternative explanations

BY ANKIT GUPTA, ELIZABETH HAN, JAHAN RAZAVI, PRIYA REDDY AND KAREN SANCHEZ

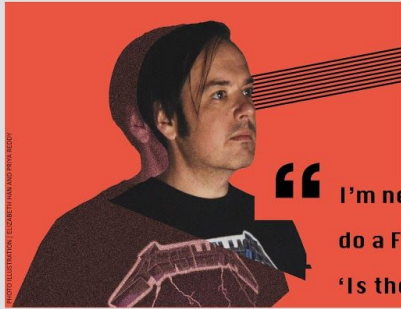
There's a certain feeling of unease that creeps into the back of the mind, shifting slightly towards the gut when intuition kicks in. Then suspicion arises. As a stubborn thought makes its way through, constantly poking into the skull, it becomes difficult to shake off the curiosity that comes with your own assurance. It's as if something, maybe something bad, is happening.

You brush the feeling off and label yourself paranoid, because the reality is conspiracies theories are just theories until proven true.

However, according to AP U.S. Government teacher Ben Reisterweid, there have been countless times in which initial suspicion and eerie intuition have proven true.

An example is the Tuskegee experiment in Alabama between 1932 and 1972, where black men who had syphilis were not given treatment. The government intentionally let the men die to see how the disease progressed over the years. People thought the idea that this was happening was ridiculous, far-fetched. But now they have documents that prove it actually happened.

The real question lies not in whether these ideas are true, but in the initial attraction to them. The alternative oftentimes crosses the line between reality and a seemingly fictional world — and perhaps that's just it. In times of confusion, when the unknown becomes a source of frustration, the human mind reaches out



HONORS AMERICAN LITERATURE, under English teacher Mark Carpenter, is as much a class about dissecting literature,

for an answer. When things go wrong, when things aren't as they should be, a world outside of this reality is appealing, comforting and, at times, entertaining. as it is about understanding social issues with a critical eye. In a typical lesson, Carpenter poses a question in his calm, yet assertive voice, shuffling a stack of cards to some students' heightened nerves. Each card contains a student's name, used when the class dissolves into periods of silence. Once one student spearheads

a discussion, however, Carpenter strolls from one end of the classroom to the next, listening keenly to their thoughts. Insights on classic novels like "The Scarlet Letter" to a contemporary book like "Citizen: An American Lyric" bloom in the air. Literary elements naturally weave into current events that students observe or experience daily. In one lesson, a student spilled her own account of gender inequality, after reading "The Confidence Gap" by Russ Harris. It's at times like this that he slowly nods his head in support.

Carpenter tries to moderate and encourage contrasting opinions, but he stills feels that he must draw the line somewhere. For the Factoid Friday projects this year, in which students formulate evidence-based arguments to qualify a controversial social issue, Carpenter no longer allowed topics such as vaccines and affirmative action. In previous years, he watched students, who must speak both for and against their chosen topic, stress that vaccines cause autism, which has been disproven, and use racially-biased sources to refute affirmative action. While they had no obvious agenda — only "poor research habits," according to Carpenter — he could not let his classroom be a channel for spreading false information.

"I'm never going to let a student do a Factoid Friday project on 'Is the earth really round?', 'Is evolution real?', you know, none of those things. No 'whose-inauguration-was-bigger?'" Carpenter said. "I try, when I can see them coming, to

cut off opportunities for alternative facts to come into the discussion in the first place."

And while Carpenter dispels such ideas in his classroom, junior Georgy Bondar finds himself meddling with the alternative. At age two, Bondar found himself in a new environment moving from Russia to the U.S. Now as a 16-year-old AP Physics C student, with long blond hair pulled back into a low ponytail, he tops off his look with a newsboy hat and t-shirts that turn heads at MHS. One day, the Trump/Pence campaign sign is on his shirt. The next, a diagram of the flat Earth emblazoned on his chest.

His curiosity toward alternative theories grew once he noticed an inconsistency in his education. As a child in elementary school, his main sources for information were his teachers and his parents, and often the two didn't align. Bondar noticed this specifically when it came to history. He was able to see how his parents, who grew up in Russia, were taught social science in a completely different manner than he was, and in doing so was better able to recognize the spin that was placed on the things he was taught in school.

"In school a lot of times, they tell us something that doesn't seem true and then my parents would say something else because they've learned history in a completely different way," Bondar said.

"Some of the things they've taught [me] are different from what they teach here, and I mean, that's more regarding the Soviet Union and the U.S., but in that sense I've

learned to be skeptical."

Such a paradigm shift cut through Carpenter's early life as well. When he entered his Catholic high school, he found discrepancies between his mother's religious teachings and the Bible. His mother grew up before Vatican II, during which Catholics used the Latin Bible. With no English translations available, she had relied on the words of her priest as her only source, which were then passed down to Carpenter in his childhood. Carpenter speculates that, perhaps due to this upbringing with no means to fact check her information, his mother gives more credulity to those who speak with authority over actual institutions.

Carpenter, who is no longer Catholic, now describes his mother as a skeptic of authority. In her occasional phone calls to Carpenter, a resentment of the system belies her words. She believes that universities are a brainwashing tool of extreme liberals, an herbalist has equal standing as a doctor and an oil executive knows just as much about climate change as a scientist. To Carpenter her sources seem dubious. She discounts news sources like The New York Times, The Washington Post or NPR, which have become Carpenter's primary selections after the abundance of fake news in the Trump era.

He tried to put his mother out of her reality initially. When she told him the pope had endorsed Trump in 2016, he tried to correct her — that the pope in fact denounced Trump. But instead of landing on the same page as he had hoped, they only moved further away from each other in their beliefs.

"It's always a losing battle. My belief that I can change your mind is a fringe belief because I've seen the studies that when shown evidence that condemns a firmly held belief, people hold more tightly to those ideas," Carpenter said. "I've stopped appealing to authority, science, journals, sociology and speak from experience ... that I have a group of friends that is more diverse in background and experience than my mother does."

Carpenter doesn't know if his mother is entirely convinced by his personal accounts that draw in ideas that she guards herself from. Nevertheless, he continues, with hopes of bringing her closer to his reality.

This journey lies in Bondar's own life as well — only it extends to Bondar's

“I’m never going to let a student do a Factoid Friday project on ‘Is the Earth really round?’”

ENGLISH TEACHER MARK CARPENTER

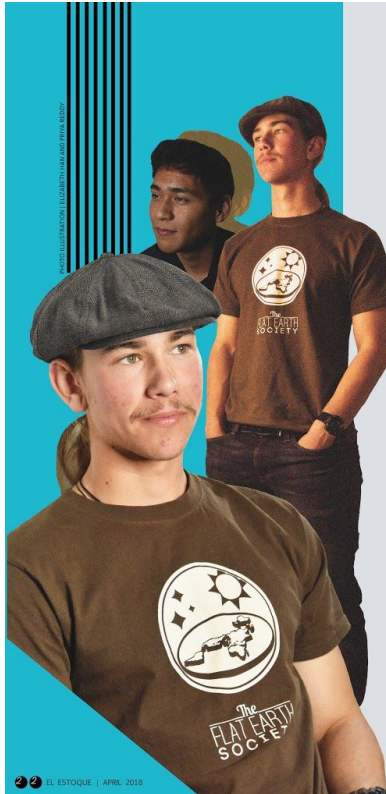


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION | ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES BROWN

classmates, not his family. Over time, Bondar has come to his own realization that people tend to follow what they are taught in school without much questioning. He has rejected this by consistently questioning authority and that which is presented as fact, a mindset he believes has to be learned.

"Not everyone can learn to disassemble the beliefs they've been taught from their very childhood," Bondar said. "Because it's one of those things that's so deeply ingrained at this point."

Understanding that there are differences in the way people perceive the world, some in the mainstream and others more fringe, Bondar enjoys showing the more alternative beliefs to those who may not see them.

So he plays a sort of game. He introduces the beliefs to his classmates, with an air of mystery in his own stance between the fringe and mainstream. He enjoys making people realize that facts can be questioned. He wants to challenge their belief system. And the game includes a crucial component: the flat Earth theory.

JUNIOR JOSEPH DEL MUNDO, a long time friend of Bondar, first learned of Bondar's apparent interest in the flat Earth theory when the two were in the same world history class.

"We were just having the normal banter that friends usually have, you know, like jokes. The flat Earth theory came about and we had a really nice, philosophical conversation and debate about it. And he ended up converting me," Del Mundo said. "He converted me to trolling people into the flat Earth theory."

Bondar and Del Mundo's friendship dates back to elementary school and has been maintained through a common interest in a variety of topics — history, the card game Magic: The Gathering, political parties — and in pranking people. "Trolling," to Del Mundo, is an integral aspect of Bondar's personality. And though this interest has remained constant, for Bondar in particular, the method through which they decide to troll has changed significantly.

Despite not actually believing the Earth is flat, it is crucial to Bondar's game that others think of him as a believer. Del Mundo has also picked up the practice of pranking others by spreading unconventional ideas to those who will listen. For both Bondar and Del Mundo, the goal is to convince the listener that they are believers, and in the process make the listener think about ideas that are considered outlandish.

Now, the two don't begin by introducing the flat Earth theory. Instead, like a coach easing someone into the shallow part of a pool, they begin with a smaller conspiracy theory and work their way up to the flat Earth theory.

"It doesn't start off with the flat Earth theory, right? That's the end game, basically. I have to convert people, first with more acceptable beliefs, like chemtrails from aircraft," Del Mundo said. "I have to work my way up. Flat Earth is like the top, the cream of the crop basically."

Bondar and Del Mundo require such buildup in their game, due to the more obscure nature of the flat Earth theory. But contributors to The Flat Earth Society (TFES) present their beliefs with firm conviction. Some within the society believe there is a dome covering the entirety of

the flat Earth, while the predominant idea is that an ice wall surrounds the Earth, preventing the oceans from flowing off the edge. To members of TFES, there is no such thing as a flat Earth conspiracy, but rather a space travel conspiracy concocted by NASA to brainwash Americans.

"It's one of those things that you never really think about," Bondar said. "But then you start looking into it, and you read what other people have written on it, and there's a lot of other experiments that people have done. There's a lot of ideas that make it much more believable than it sounds at the start."

Keep in mind, Bondar doesn't actually believe in the idea.

According to the Flat Earth Wiki (FEW), there are many ways to prove the Earth is not round and many ways to combat the

proof provided to show that the Earth is spherical. For example, the FEW states that airplanes are unreliable for proof that the Earth is round, since the windows are heavily curved and the minimum height needed to see the earth's curvature is 40,000 feet — 5,000 feet higher than the average aircraft cruising altitude.

To senior Jasmine Wang, who interned at the Center for Space Research at the University of Texas in Austin last summer, the notion of a flat Earth is far-fetched.

"When I first heard of it, I thought it was a joke," Wang said. "If the Earth was flat, nothing would work — so many scientific instruments are based on the rotation and the shape of the earth. It's obviously a really dumb opinion that's not scientifically based, and it's sad because it shows a lot of people are very willfully ignorant."

SCOPING OUT THE ZODIAC

BY SUNJIN CHANG AND VIVIAN CHIANG

It was a summer day when sophomore Mollie Smurthwaite stumbled upon a youtuber, Kendall Rae, who was talking about astrology and her personal zodiac signs. Already interested in astrology and human relations, Smurthwaite thought this was an interesting way of figuring out her relationship with others.

One's zodiac sign depends on the day, location and time they were born, following the planets as they circle the sun. "You aren't just encompassed by one sign; you are encompassed by many," Smurthwaite said. "It can help you understand your relationships with other people and friendships and how you deal with yourself."

Smurthwaite doesn't change her lifestyle to adjust to the requirements surrounding her zodiac sign of Leo. However, she does admit to the fact that she can see parallel aspects between her life and the traits Leo's carry.

"I am very impulsive," Smurthwaite said. "I'll do something and think 'Crap, that's such a Leo thing to do' or ... 'Oh I just had an inner thought

and that's very Gemini of me."

When it comes her friends and family, Smurthwaite is quick to figure out which signs people around her are. She believes that being aware of one's traits helps her understand potentially how the person will think or react. At home, she frequently discusses her findings with her parents. When talking about people, they connect them to their respective zodiac signs, making their conversations more interesting, according to Smurthwaite.

"Once you start talking about it, people start to get interested like 'Oh, what does this mean about me?'" Smurthwaite said. "Astrology can be very selfish (sometimes) because it's all about the individual."

Smurthwaite is more fascinated by the study of astrology, of how the ancient art is able to combine the stars and personalities. She believes the predictions and traits that follow the zodiac signs are purposely vague making it open for interpretations.

"You have to take it with a grain of salt because not everyone can be every single trait of their zodiac sign," Smurthwaite said. **B**

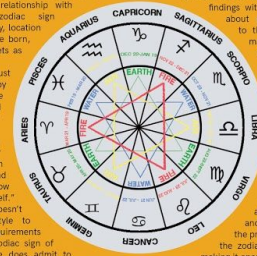


ILLUSTRATION | SUNJIN CHANG AND VIVIAN CHIANG



According to Wang, common occurrences in nature would not be possible if the Earth were truly flat.

"For example, compasses wouldn't work if the earth was flat," Wang said. "It would take some crazy violations of the laws of physics for it to be flat and not to fall apart, and for everything on the earth to work if the Earth was flat. And we wouldn't have seasons, we wouldn't have so many other things."

Despite disagreeing with flat Earth believers, Wang still respects their thoughts because she believes their ideals have minimal effect on the scientific community.

"It's funny, obviously it's freedom of speech," Wang said. "People who are ignorant enough to accept those beliefs, it doesn't do that much harm [to the scientific community]. It's just mind blowing. People who know the Earth is round don't have the right to oppress the voices who believe the Earth is flat, even if it's dumb."

WHILE BONDAR'S PRANKS CIRCULATE in real life, the Internet has become a hub for the unconventional. Sometimes

Carpenter believes that the Internet can play a significant role in the presence of alternative ideas, as it influences the way society communicates.

"The Internet allows people with narrow areas of interests, specialty or fringe, the opportunity to connect over great distances," Carpenter said. "It also gives a megaphone to any opinion. Those two things are great things about the Internet. But it makes fringe beliefs feel more valid to people that hold them."

Bondar feels similarly about the Internet; specifically, that people can spread ideas without having to leave the comfort of their home.

"There are books you can read and other stuff, but again you find out about all this stuff from the Internet," Bondar said. "So if an idea is unpopular, really any idea, you can find more about it through the Internet."

Recktenwald believes that the Internet is akin to a double-edged sword, one that promotes freedom of speech while also being a tool for censorship.

"The Internet has been a tremendous

tool for good, but also a tremendous tool for crime and for awful things," Recktenwald said. "And for oppression. For example in China, the Chinese government used the Internet to control people how to think and say and spy on people. Some of the conspiracy theories are saying that the U.S. government is doing that too."

Though Bondar looks for a reaction from many of his victims when they realize that he is "trolling," he is unwilling to fully commit to revealing the extent of his deceit. Instead he plays coy, offering a shrug of the shoulders or a quick twist of the mouth as a way of leaving some uncertainty as to where his true beliefs lie.

JUST AS BONDAR USES THESE GAMES

to convey his more fringe beliefs, he goes about the same way to share his political stances. And while he derives a certain type of enjoyment from seeing the reactions to these opinions, the difference lies in his conviction. With his political beliefs, Bondar is entirely serious, and at times has had discussions about them with fellow students and the occasional teacher. Bondar believes that since his political beliefs seem more real and as a result more believable to the people around him, the reactions are stronger and more emotional.

Bondar never enters these debates with the goal of convincing the other party. He knows that when people have political debates it is unlikely that either participant will end up changing their views.

"That's the thing with political debates, you never convince the other person you're right. You just kind of get mad and leave at one point, but you know again it's not about convincing the other person, it's getting the other person to actually think about it," Bondar said.

Bondar and Del Mundo have found somewhat of an audience to listen to their beliefs in the people around them. They listen, not so much because they believe, but more because of a fascination about beliefs that are out of the norm.

"People want to hear something, right?" Del Mundo said. "Not just because they believe in it, but also because it's funny. It's just so absurd, it's comedy [and] they're interested."

And for Bondar, that is enough.

"If I talk to them and introduce my viewpoint, their first reaction might be, 'Oh, that's insane. That's stupid,'" Bondar said. "At least you're still thinking about it and hopefully after the fact, they'll still have that thought in their head, and they may not necessarily change their views but at least they'll think about the things more." **e**

Spreads of the main feature story of the May issue. It detailed the stories of different people and their experiences with alternative realities.

Cover of the May issue. It represented the main feature story about alternative realities, mentioned above.