The Success Formula for Crackpot Ideas

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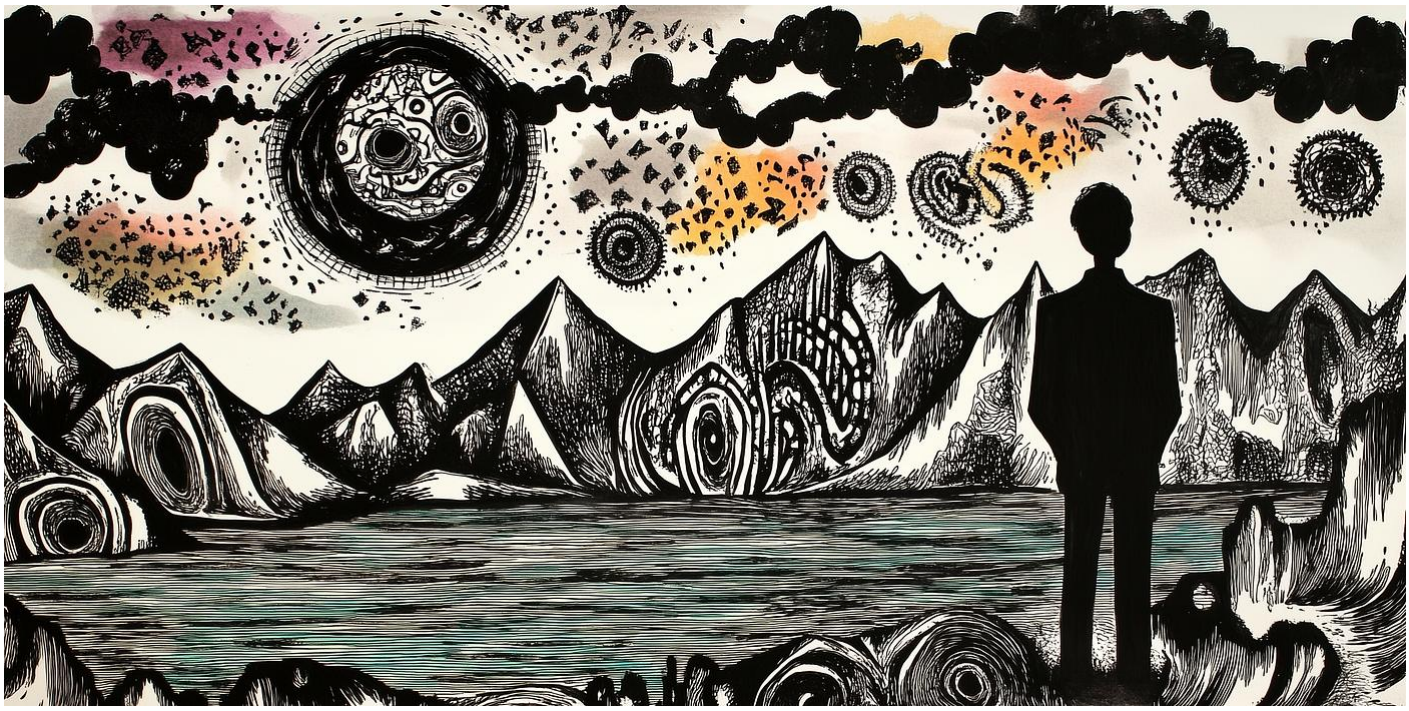


Ten years ago, I received my first crackpot email. It began innocuously enough:

“Dear Professor Ferrie, Recently, I proposed to a number of physicists that there is incompatibility between the magnetic component of the Lorentz force law, (F=qvB), and Einsteinian Relativity (ER). I illustrated this with the scenario of two point charges traveling at the same velocity, alone in the universe…”

What followed was a sprawling argument filled with technical-sounding terminology, examples from classical electromagnetism, and critiques of mainstream physics. It wove through Einstein’s relativity and Maxwell’s equations and culminated in the proposal of a new theory — the **Pressure Of The Universe** (POTU). The author, signing the email as John Best, confidently dismissed established scientific principles and concluded with a critique of the scientific community's failure to see the “obvious” flaws in modern physics.

Today, a quick search for “John Best” and “POTU” reveals that his once-grander claims have fizzled. His original website, once brimming with half-baked scientific “proof,” now redirects to a scam gambling site based in Indonesia. In short, his “revolutionary” idea sank without a trace.

Yet, not all crackpots fade into internet oblivion. Some turn their fringe notions into global debates, push their theories into the public imagination, and, in certain cases, even sway public policy.

So, why do some patently outlandish ideas gain traction when others become footnotes of internet spam?

The recipe — the success formula, as it were — enabling crackpot theories to survive and flourish in the mainstream is **sophistication**, **authority**, **attention**, and **charisma**.

But first, let's clarify what we mean by a "crackpot theory."

A crackpot theory is a proposition that combines grandiosity, a lack of empirical support, and a resistance to critique. These unconventional ideas lack the rigorous foundation or reproducibility required for acceptance in mainstream science.

Sophistication and technobabble

A crackpot theory's first line of defense lies in **complexity**. Layer on enough obscure jargon — new terms like "vacuum inertial flux" or "quantum gravitational discharge" — and suddenly, even a tenured professor might hesitate before calling it nonsense. After all, who wants to admit they can't follow the math?

Pseudo-technical details act like camouflage. Lay readers assume that if they can't understand it, maybe it's because they just don't have the necessary expertise. Non-specialist scientists might wait for someone else to debunk it, and in that waiting, the idea gains time and space to germinate.

Consider "Reverse Data, Time Inversion, and Quantum Computing: A Path to Superintelligence" from **Stan Levandovsky**, a self-published paper (found on the non-refereed platform viXra.org — wouldn't recommend) proposing that "reverse data" and time inversion within quantum computing can trigger breakthroughs in quantum information processing and lead to superintelligent systems.

The author presents this as a radically new theoretical framework with sweeping implications, suggesting that by reversing the flow of data at the quantum level, one can exploit "backwards time" to enhance computational power.

While the text mentions "potential experimental implementations," no concrete design or feasibility analysis is provided. References to "new levels of self-optimization" remain purely speculative and unsupported by standard quantum theory.

2.2 Reverse Data in Quantum Systems

"Reverse data" refers to information processed considering both the forward development of quantum states over time and their inversion to previous states. This concept can be mathematically described using the time inversion operator T:

$$T\psi(\mathbf{r}, t) = \psi^*(\mathbf{r}, -t) \tag{2}$$

where $\psi^*(\mathbf{r}, -t)$ is the complex conjugate of the wave function at the reversed time moment. Incorporating reverse data into quantum algorithms allows quantum systems to optimize by accessing and modifying previous states during computations.

2.3 Unique Formula

To describe the interaction of reverse data with quantum states, we introduce the following unique formula, which depicts the evolution of a quantum system considering time inversion:

$$\hat{\rho}(t) = \mathcal{U}(t)\hat{\rho}(0)\mathcal{U}^\dagger(t) + \mathcal{T}\left[\mathcal{U}(-t)\hat{\rho}(0)\mathcal{U}^\dagger(-t)\right] \tag{3}$$

where:

- $\hat{\rho}(t)$ is the density matrix of the system at time t,
- $\mathcal{U}(t) = \exp\left(-\frac{i}{\hbar}\hat{H}t\right)$ is the time evolution operator,
- $\mathcal{T}$ is the operator implementing time inversion.

This formula combines the direct evolution of the system with its time-reversed development, thereby allowing the influence of both past and future states on current computations.

A snippet of the “reverse data” paper. It almost looks sensible, but equation (3) is a trivial error. The resulting object is not a valid quantum state.

Levandovsky uses the correct symbols, terminology, and *form* of quantum equations. But, as an expert, it took less than a minute to find a critical flaw in the math.

Levandovsky’s paper illustrates how outsider crackpot theories often blend **high-level jargon** (quantum computing, reversed time flow, random equations) with promises of **world-altering impact** (superintelligence), all outside peer-reviewed channels. The result is a grandiose but unsubstantiated narrative that bypasses the traditional checks of scientific inquiry.

But Levandovsky’s real problem is that no one will take *him* seriously because he lacks credibility.

A sprinkle of authority

Even the wildest ideas benefit from a sprinkle of **authority**. Credentials don’t need to be ironclad. Sometimes, a doctorate in a vaguely related field or a past affiliation with a reputable institution is enough. Even “I once collaborated with a NASA engineer” can be brandished to suggest that credible scientists have blessed the theory.

Consider **Rod Rinkus**'s article entitled "Representing Entities as Sets Provides a Classical Explanation of Quantum Entanglement." Dr. Rinkus has a PhD in computational cognitive neuroscience with a thesis on *sparse distributed codes*. He uses this concept to frame a re-interpretation of quantum states that culminates in equating the initial moment when multiple "coding units" share an identical "tuning function" to the birth of entangled particles in quantum mechanics — both being deemed "completely correlated."

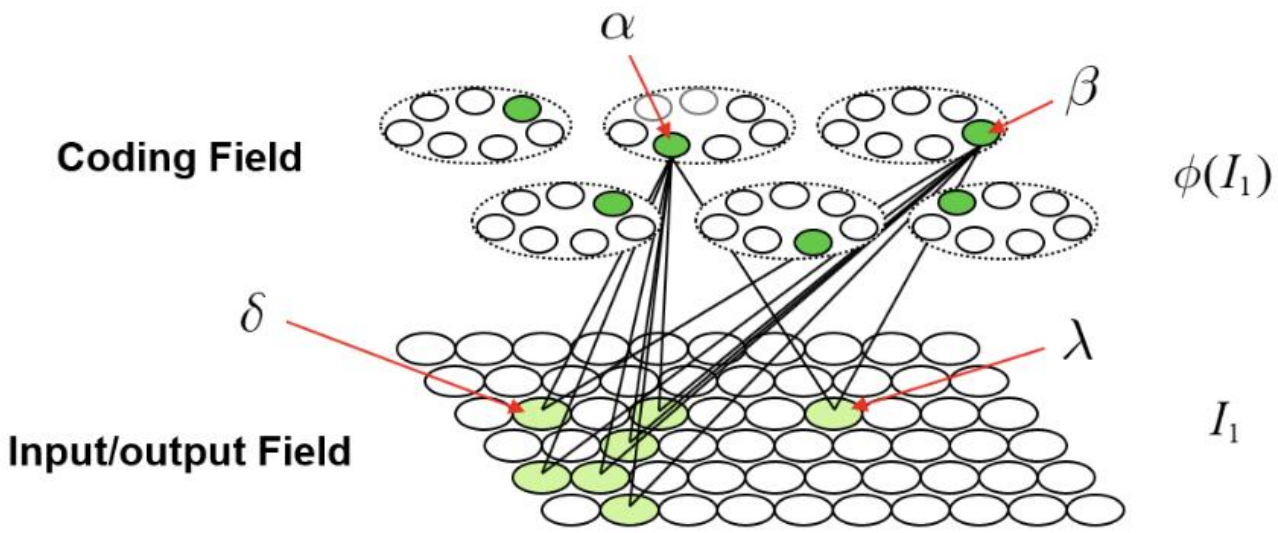


Fig. 2: The first input to the model, I_1, consisting of the S=7 light green units, has been presented and a code, $\varphi(I_1)$, consisting of Q=6 units (green), has been chosen at random. All forward and reverse weights between active input and coding fields units are set to one. The black lines show all such weights involving coding units α and β.

Rinkus's depiction of his "hidden variable theory." It's dense with jargon unaligned with standard concepts and notation. Even if it could be clarified, it would be unconvincing to quantum physicists seeking more than an analogy or re-labeling of established quantum phenomena.

This highlights how **legitimate expertise in one domain** can lead to **ambitious but underinformed** forays into another. It lacks the hallmarks of a serious physics proposal. Without a robust alignment with established quantum results, precise experimental predictions, or a rigorous treatment of fundamental constraints, in the continuum of crackpottery, this piece occupies a **crackpottery gray zone**.

It may not have any technical flaws, but neither would someone suggesting the Pythagorean theorem can be applied to form a new interpretation of consciousness. It's "wrong" on a meta level.

Humans evolved to be vigilant pattern detectors — a skill vital for survival. However, this same impulse (technically, **apophenia**) can go awry when individuals perceive meaning in random data or tenuous coincidences. Crackpots often exemplify this phenomenon, "connecting dots" that experts dismiss as unrelated.

Things really go off the rails when apophenia is coupled with **Dunning-Kruger** — colloquially, the less one knows, the easier it is to overestimate one's understanding.

Crackpots typically lack formal mastery of the fields they seek to overhaul. As a result, they misjudge the complexity of established scientific knowledge. Conversely, insiders who drift into fringe territory can be overconfident in applying their expertise to areas they only partially grasp.

Like many other technically correct ideas, this one, too, will die in obscurity.

Attention amping

The final push that allows a fringe idea to break free from its insular community is **attention** — any form of public engagement, whether negative or positive. Like oxygen to a flame, *visibility* can transform an obscure theory into a topic of broader curiosity overnight. Even the sharpest attempts at debunking can backfire. If a notable scientist publicly ridicules a fringe claim or a major publication runs a sensational headline, the result is a spotlight that draws in fresh onlookers. From the outside, people think, “If it’s being covered, there must be *something* worth discussing.”

Consider the **Electric Universe Theory** (EUT), which continues to flourish online and at specialized conferences. Proponents package plasma physics (originally pioneered by Nobel Laureate Hannes Alfvén) alongside speculative assertions that electromagnetic forces, not gravity, are the primary architects of cosmic structures.

Mainstream astrophysics dismisses EUT as pseudoscience, but occasional mentions in documentaries, podcasts, or science publications spark new waves of curious viewers. These onlookers, some attracted by the drama of “challenging the establishment,” trickle into EUT forums, watch the slickly produced “Thunderbolts Project” videos, and soon find themselves immersed in a parallel scientific universe — one that thrives largely on shared skepticism of conventional cosmology.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgGTzXu3EA8&ab_channel=TheThunderboltsProject

Classic crackpottery. Click at your own risk. You don’t want this in your browsing history.

In many ways, this echo chamber looks like a miniature version of mainstream science — complete with self-published “papers,” podcasts, and a robust social media presence. None of these materials passes traditional peer review, yet they give EUT an air of intellectual rigor to outsiders. Frequent references to NASA images or real phenomena (comets, solar flares) reinforce the illusion that the theory is built on a solid scientific substrate. It’s the *attention* cycle that makes all the difference: each new article, blog post, or YouTube rebuttal — whether praising or condemning EUT — can inadvertently boost its profile.

Ultimately, the outcome is a steady influx of curious readers who — after encountering only EUT-friendly material — find it plausible enough to stick around. They may never see the well-founded critiques from astrophysicists, or they may interpret those critiques as proof of a “closed-minded establishment.” Either way, they become part of EUT’s self-sustaining audience.

Still, attention alone doesn't guarantee lasting prominence. Some fringe ideas burn brightly for a news cycle or two, then vanish as another viral sensation takes center stage. To truly make a dent — to rally believers for the long haul — requires a final key ingredient.

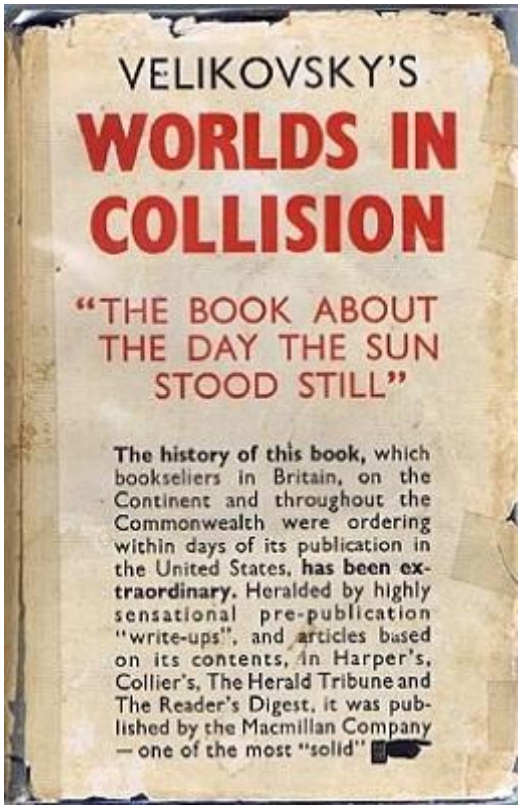
Charismatic (Over) Confidence

Of all the ingredients that keep crackpot theories afloat, **charisma** — an unshakeable conviction that one's idea will revolutionize the world — may be the most potent. It's not purely about social magnetism. It's an unwavering *belief* in one's own world-changing vision, energized by a deep-seated **need for significance**. A grand unifying theory or a perpetual motion device doesn't merely promise intellectual satisfaction — it offers personal triumph. Proposing a radical idea that "changes everything" can be intoxicating.

This hunger for importance intertwines with attention amplification in a kind of feedback loop. In a saturated news and social-media landscape, sensationalism sells. Talk of time travel breakthroughs, free energy, or cosmic secrets draws clicks and headlines — even if the mainstream scientific community dismisses these stories. The ensuing viral drama can leave the public with a lingering sense that "maybe there's something to it," particularly if the proponent's sheer confidence overshadows the actual scientific weaknesses. Before long, a once-obscure theory is trending, fueled by the very debunking efforts meant to quell it.

All this thrives on a broader **distrust of institutions**. Public wariness of government agencies, media conglomerates, and even scientific bodies has grown, fueled by politicized debates and high-profile scandals. When a charismatic figure proclaims that mainstream science is suppressing "the real truth," it resonates with audiences already primed to suspect hidden agendas.

A classic illustration of these dynamics — charisma meeting controversy — is **Immanuel Velikovsky**. A psychoanalyst by training, Velikovsky made the leap to amateur astronomer in the 1950s with his wildly speculative cosmic-catastrophe theories. Mainstream experts lined up to refute him, pointing out the glaring impossibilities in his celestial mechanics. Rather than retreat, Velikovsky doubled down. He radiated certainty that he had exposed an intellectual conspiracy of epic proportions; critics, in his telling, were simply too entrenched in conventional paradigms to see the obvious truth.



From the first UK edition of *Worlds in Collision,* which contains (amongst other nonsense) that Venus formed inside of Jupiter and was ejected as a comet.

This kind of public defiance only magnified his allure. His book, *Worlds in Collision*, soared in popularity, debate raged in newspapers and lecture halls, and Velikovsky's myth-drenched take on planetary upheaval became a pop-cultural touchstone — despite virtually no acceptance in professional astronomy.

What Velikovsky demonstrated was that charismatic **confidence**, bound up with our collective fascination for **mavericks**, can buoy a fringe theory well beyond its scientific merits. Once people invest emotionally — finding meaning in the proposed revolution, distrusting the institutions that resist it, and feeding off media hype — no amount of counter-evidence seems sufficient to quell the excitement.

In the end, that synergy of personal ambition, media spectacle, insular cliques, and cultural skepticism cements a crackpot theory's place in the public imagination, where it can live on in defiance of all mainstream dismissal.

Why Any of This Matters

So, why didn't the Pressure Of The Universe take off? John Best may have crafted a complicated argument, but he lacked the other essential components of the crackpot "success formula." He had plenty of resentful contrarianism, sure — but no significant credentials, no network of supporters, and no big-name scientist inadvertently broadcasting his ideas with a scathing rebuttal. Most importantly, he didn't have the charismatic aura or an established platform to stage his fight against the mainstream.

His story is a reminder that rarely do crackpots go on to become widely recognized figures. Crackpot theories live or die by a simple formula:

1. **Appear as sophisticated as possible** — if no one understands it, they might let it slide.

2. **Leverage any authority available** — a single PhD or mention of a big institution can do wonders.
3. **Attract attention, positive or negative** — the very act of public discussion legitimizes the idea.
4. **Play the role of the ‘lone genius’** — everyone loves an underdog battling a monolithic establishment.

For every forgotten John Best, there’s another fringe theorist who skillfully polishes their brand of pseudoscience, gaining followers and occasionally swaying the mainstream conversation. Their success isn’t proof of a better theory — it’s proof of a more effective formula.

Understanding how these ideas latch onto our cultural imagination is the first step in protecting ourselves and our scientific institutions from their influence. Only then can we ensure that the attention-grabbing theatrics of the next viral crackpot don’t overshadow genuine breakthroughs.