

Venturing down many rabbit holes

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For decades, humans have been aware of the existence of black holes in the universe. These all-consuming regions pull in everything in their path and the gravity is so strong not even light can escape it. Black holes often occur when stars die. There's nothing like it on earth, and fortunately not one within earshot in our solar system. And then there are rabbit holes, but not the dens for small furry rodents. Merriam-Webster defines "rabbit hole" as a "complexly bizarre or difficult state or situation conceived of as a hole into which one falls or descends" or "one in which the pursuit of something (such as an answer or solution) leads to other questions, problems, or pursuits." These, on the other hand, abound almost everywhere on terra firma. These invisible whirlwinds that suck the life out of people in search of answers, can be mind-boggling. And they're everywhere. I bumped into one the other day and almost lost a shoe! The term was first coined by Lewis Carroll, in his 1865 classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Within those captivating pages, Alice follows the White Rabbit into his burrow, and is transported to the very strange, often nonsensical world of Wonderland. If only our modern rabbit holes were that simple, and that enjoyable. Our technologically advanced rabbit holes involve seemingly endless rolls of red tape. They almost always defy logic. It's often difficult, if not impossible, to escape from such a hole. Alice herself admitted the futility of it all. "It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then." Venturing down one of these holes will change you. Today's rabbit holes, often facilitated by the internet, feature countless distractions, dead-ends and endless loops. So brothers and sisters, here we are living in a world of misinformation and mistrust, a world we all pitched in to build. I never thought of myself as naive, but wakeup calls are there, just waiting for you to hit "snooze." But eventually you have to get up. Some of these can be minor, but others are like a shovel in the face; The Three Stooges style. In recent excursions in the surreal world of the internet, I discovered there's a fair amount of dishonesty. Many people would like to sell you something, but it's nothing like what's depicted. It's a finely crafted lie, a deceitful myriad of photos, promises and methods of payment. Some would say that at this very minute, people are lined up in cyberspace, ready to lie to you at the drop of a hat. The most annoying rabbit holes are customer service sections of company websites. It takes forever to find an appropriate way to "contact us?" and it's often in a template format, a message board that is never answered. Few even want to accept emails, likely because they don't want to pay staff to answer them. There are "live" chats, but the only living thing in this case is you. Go to the list of FAQs and "commonly asked questions," which almost always offer little help at all. Then, we're faced by the always optimistic "was this helpful?" or "glad we could help." Oh, what a tangled web we've woven. Misinformation and mass distrust, partly due to the isolation of the pandemic, is abundant. People today seem to be more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and baseless ideas. During the worst of the pandemic, we've heard people say the virus was man-made and let loose on an unsuspecting society. We've heard that the vaccines are "poison." Anti-maskers came together. Of course, there's a big difference between conspiracy theories, and uncovering oddities, discrepancies and unusual circumstances. As a journalist, I wanted to know the total budget being spent by the federal government and provinces on vaccines. Three or four attempts provided no answers. Surely someone, somewhere must know how much Ottawa is paying Pfizer or Moderna. Someone is signing the cheques. And make no mistake, when sums as large as billions of dollars are at stake, well, anything can happen. Is this an unfounded conspiracy theory, base-less assumption or plain quackery? COVID-19 and the pandemic has created one massive, global rabbit hole. The vaccines work, but some may require annual doses, like the flu shot. This sets in motion, an endless, multi-billion-dollar gravy train for pharmaceutical companies. It's enough moola that they could afford to abandon all research and production of other life-saving drugs. Just saying. Masks may become commonplace in public from here on in. Mask-makers are a dime a dozen, and all promise fantastic results, all for the one-time low price of "Again, government contracts for PPE are massive and likely has create millionaires overnight. People have lied, cheated and killed for much, much less. I'm not saying that government graft and inappropriate behaviour is common. I'd like to think it's rare in our society today and everyone is working together in our best interest. That's not to say rabbit holes don't exist at all levels of government. Think of dropping a dime through a sewer grate. You want it back, and make every effort to find it, but it's gone forever. There's no evidence that dime existed in the first place! And, no one will offer to replace it. Just saying.

