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# DEALING WITH DENIAL

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*Denial brings comfort to those faced with challenges to long-held beliefs. But that reassurance comes at a price, especially when politicians deny scientific consensus on issues like global warming. Is there any realistic hope that this situation can be turned around? This paper was published on the RightingAmerica website on August 13th, 2024. [www.rightingamerica.net]*

## INTRODUCTION

Modern technology has fostered a revolution in communication technologies. Individuals are on the receiving end of more information now than ever before. And that information is increasingly provided by partisan news sources and social media whose journalistic standards are less than optimal. Individuals are called upon to assess the trustworthiness of this information and now with A.I.-generated disinformation making inroads, discernment is more important than ever.

Modern media affords consumers the ability to sort through an array of information choices, picking those that tell them what they want to hear. Many individuals respond to information that challenges their beliefs by using the various heuristics and psychological shortcuts (McRaney and Hagen 2011, 268) which are mentioned in this paper. This paper outlines the findings of the social sciences on the phenomenon of denial, in relation to important social policy decisions, such as those related to climate change, which may be made on the basis of politicized, less-than-factual information. The paper also discusses strategies for dealing with denial in its various manifestations.

## DENIAL

The phenomenon commonly known as denial has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Researchers in the social sciences are investigating the mental gymnastics involved in denying or suppressing threatening information. Denial is prompted by exposure to dissonant information that contradicts existing beliefs. It is about finding comfort in beliefs contradicted by evidence. Denial has been defined as motivationally distorted information gathering and processing (Balcetis 2008). It is multifaceted and multi-causal -- a key component of the human psychological immune system.

Confirmation bias is the promotion of information that supports a particular point of view, excluding any impartial consideration of contradictory evidence. Confirmation bias seeks out information that confirms a particular viewpoint. Denial avoids or discounts information that is uncomfortable. It is more often motivated by emotion than it is by rational thought (Clare and Gasper 2000, 39). Denial protects a fragile ego. It minimises ideological discomfort and dismisses contradictory information. It is essentially a social rather than an individual phenomenon. It is encouraged by interaction with individuals who hold similar views, individuals who typically come to know each other through common social media interests (Bardon 2019, 33). Denial is destructive on several different levels. With individuals, with society, and sometimes globally as well.

Science denial stands in the way of scientific progress and muddies the water when it comes to scientifically informed social policy decisions. The greatest danger to social policy formulation comes not from ignorance, but from a willful blindness to the truth (Musil 1994, 268–86). Challenges to ideological beliefs are typically met with anger, avoidance, and interpretive bias. Human beings hate to be wrong. They don't take kindly to being challenged or contradicted. Our picture of the world is regularly distorted by self-interest, peer influence, prejudice, fear, and favoritism. As we will see, denial restores a sense of peace, but often at a price.

### **GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION**

Conservatives are ideologically predisposed to be suspicious of government intervention in society. Conservative critics of government-assisted programs criticize those programs as being nothing more than socialism under another name (“George Will: ‘Global Warming Is Socialism By The Back Door,’” n.d.). Socialism, it is argued, can eventually lead to totalitarianism. Somewhere along the line, folks on the right have surreptitiously redefined socialism, linking it with dog-whistle themes such as Marxism, fascism, and autocracy. This mental sleight of hand can be quite easily accomplished when your target audience lacks the requisite background knowledge. A little study would reveal that progressive social democracies like Sweden and Denmark are doing very well, with a high standard of living and a generally happy populace.

Concern over government intervention came to the fore during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic took hold, especially in the United States, the relevant medical science was politicized, and for many, pseudoscience took charge, encouraged by a scientifically illiterate president. During the pandemic, right-wing media told people what they wanted to hear and provided support for those beliefs. Individuals who lack scientific literacy are easy marks for flim-flam artists like Donald Trump. During the pandemic, the world was given a first-hand lesson in the power of denial to upend legitimate public policy decisions, and in this case, potentially life-saving policy decisions.

As the pandemic gained momentum, and in the interest of public safety, governments made the difficult decision to close down public meeting places, including houses of worship. Conspiracy theorists got to work immediately. They argued that governments were closing down churches not because they wanted to protect people's health, but because they wanted to eliminate those houses of worship altogether. Such, of course, was not the case. Based on this kind of fallacious reasoning, and purportedly in defense of their very existence, many conservative churches defiantly did remain open, and many of their members died unnecessarily of COVID-19 as a result.

### **ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM**

Many conservatives complain that their beliefs are ridiculed or attacked by a liberal elite, including a liberal media and education system. Many conservatives are of the opinion that secular universities are indoctrination centers for liberalism. It's ironic that those who make this claim are more than willing to use the same techniques themselves. Those who make this claim are more than willing to ban books they don't like. The 2012 official party platform of the Texas GOP opposed the teaching of critical thinking skills in schools because it was argued that would disrupt the parents' right to socialize their children as they see fit (Bardon 2019, 303). In other words, the Texas GOP argued that it was supporting parents' right to socialize their children apart from government interference.

Many conservatives prefer homeschooling. This is especially true in religious communities. Homeschooling allows for greater control over the content of curriculum. A substantial proportion of evangelical Christians oppose the teaching of evolution. And this is typically one of the places where science denial takes root in American culture. Research indicates that up to 70% of the American population denies evolutionary science in some form (Liu 2013).

### **THE MEDIA**

Individuals on the right habitually refer to the media as if it was monolithic. They argue that the media is biased against traditional Christianity. They seem to be unaware of the fact that media outlets exist on an ideological spectrum from left to right and everything in between. The arrival of the internet, social media, Facebook and the like brought huge changes to the way information is discovered, distributed, received and shared. Behind the scenes in social media, algorithms direct individuals to topics of interest and to communities of like-minded individuals.

With a minimum of effort, individuals can align themselves with media outlets that tell them what they want to hear. Many folks have their favorite partisan news source on at home throughout the day. Each day, for hours on end, they marinate in a particular political point of view. What they are hearing is best described as opinion rather than news. Add to that the fact

that these news sources curate what they want their viewers to know. That involves what they share and also what they fail to share.

### RELIGION

Religion has persisted as an important part of the human story for many reasons. Germane to the present discussion, religion satisfies profound emotional needs (Jost et al. 2014, 4) . It deals with existential issues such as reassurance, purpose, certainty, stability, inclusion, superiority and protection of cultural identity. Religion calms anxiety over mortality. Evangelicals pride themselves on reading the Bible literally, which, when it comes to scientific truth, makes them susceptible to pseudoscience and outright science denial (Geiger 2017). Evangelical religion and mainline science are natural cognitive sparring partners.

Acceptance of the theory of evolution is not so much about science as it is about a person's religious beliefs. Religion can be an effective tool for maintaining the status quo. Partisan media outlets and right-wing politicians know very well how religion can be used as a means of control. Evangelical patriarch Billy Graham (1918 - 2018) once said, "I don't want to see religious bigotry in any form. It would disturb me if there was a wedding between the religious fundamentalists and the political right. The hard right has no interest in religion except to manipulate it." (Frost, Bauer, and Graham 1997)

### SCIENCE

Science generates knowledge via a methodology designed to protect against confirmation bias. Lack of scientific literacy among evangelicals means that many do not know or understand how scientific methodology actually works. Evangelicals insist that scientific claims should conform to common sense and to their religious traditions, in a sense arguing that science should be kept on a short leash. Republican Governor Chris Christie, who, with Donald Trump, has a similar dismissive attitude towards science, once claimed that he didn't need science because he has an intuitive sense of how things work. At the end of the day, science is a human endeavor and exists in a social and cultural context. Cultural biases are identified and hopefully kept in check by scientific methodology, most commonly described as methodological naturalism.

An individual's political ideology typically predicts their beliefs about science. Donald Trump succeeded in politicizing science during his time in the White House. That politicization blunted the nation's response to COVID-19. Many individuals died unnecessarily because they or their loved ones believed the pseudo-science they were hearing on partisan media. In a keynote address to the American Scientific Affiliation's 2024 conference, Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health during the pandemic (and Dr. Fauci's boss), estimates the number of unnecessary deaths at more than 230,000.

Conservatives face a steady stream of dissonance-inducing discoveries and information from mainstream science. Young-earth creationism (YEC) is a classic example of science denial. YEC is at least partially responsible for the science denial that came out of the closet during the Trump administration. YEC is denial on steroids. Actually, it's more than denial. It's denialism (Kahn-Harris 2018), which is based on the idea that if the truth doesn't work for you, then go ahead and construct a new truth and propagate that. There's been a major increase in science denial in the last few decades, and this has occurred at a time when scientifically accurate information can literally make the difference between life and death. Evangelicals have been at the center of science denial for decades and ought to be held accountable for misleading large numbers of people.

### **SOCIAL FACTORS**

Not surprisingly, denial has a strong social component. Individuals are attracted to groups that share their worldview. Implicit in group membership is the expectation that individuals will share and defend group beliefs, and when those views are challenged, as they surely will be, group members will circle the wagons, so to speak, and vigorously defend their views. Human beings have a powerful need for belonging, and an equally powerful need to be right. If we conform to the group and its standards, our standing in the group will be enhanced. We learn early on that it's not a good idea to betray our tribe by publicly challenging its beliefs or practices (Suhay 2015). When the group achieves a victory, group members share in it, and when the group is criticized, individuals share that too.

Consider the following scenario. A barber from a small, tight-knit community in the U.S. bible belt would soon be out of a job or have his customer base dry up if he was to stray too far from what is culturally acceptable in his small town (Kahan 2012). For instance, if he was to become a card-carrying Democrat or announce to all his friends that he'd given up his young-earth creationism and adopted an evolutionary point of view, townspeople would have their ways, some subtle and some not so subtle, of indicating their displeasure with the barber's newfound radicalism.

At the end of the day, in this case and in many others, behind-the-scenes social pressure would ensure that conformity is rewarded and radical views sanctioned. A process psychologists call groupthink takes place when group members keep their opinions to themselves for the sake of group unity. The tribe comes first. The superiority of the group is beyond question. Group members quickly learn what is expected of them, and in most cases, comply.

### **CHANGING MINDS**

Social factors, as we have demonstrated, often cause problems in terms of implementing social policy. Thankfully, social factors also suggest solutions. Social identity theory (Trepte and Loy

2017) claims that the best way to change minds is to work alongside individuals in their local contexts, promoting goals that are important to you and to them. In addition, challenges that require the cooperation of both groups [i.e., superordinate goals] in order to be successful are helpful. Ask someone who has taken on the new paradigm to speak to fellow members and explain their decision. An in-group messenger has more credibility with the group than someone from the outside.

Persistent personal contact helps build trust, and an in-person meeting is better than a virtual meeting in this regard (Young 2017). People do not want to be forced to take a stand, They do not want to be put on the spot. There is no place for condescension or overconfidence; no place for scolding or coercion. Tell your story and encourage others to do the same. Individuals are reluctant to change their minds on ideologically-charged positions. In dealing with denial, it's best to be honest right up front and ask a person what sort of evidence would change their mind.

Atmospheric scientist and evangelical Christian Katharine Hayhoe knows the evangelical subculture well (Von Bergen and Mannon 2020). I recently attended an online seminar in which Katharine was the main speaker. At the end of her presentation, time was set aside for Q and A. I submitted a question asking Katharine if evangelicals ought to take the blame in some way for climate science denial. Her answer surprised me. She said that if there is blame to be assigned, it should be laid at the feet of US evangelicals. They are the only evangelicals globally who obsess about this particular issue.

Full acceptance of anthropogenic global warming has increased slowly over the years, from 45% in 2014 to 57% in 2024 (Kiley 2015). 74% of Americans believe that climate change is in fact occurring, but the number who would admit that humans are causing it is 57%, 17% less. Global warming is indeed an existential threat to humanity. But many people are emotionally and materially invested in the fossil fuel industry. They would take umbrage with that claim. Their views are supported by deliberately mendacious and, I would add, well-funded merchants of denial.

Too many citizens have no idea how to apply critical thinking to the situations they encounter in everyday life. Some strategies for initiating change have the potential to change minds. For example, conservatives may move in a pro-environmental direction if the focus is changed from economics to the stewardship of God's creation (Doran 2017). Issues can be presented in such a way as to foster audience agreement. It's important to find common ground.

### **CONCLUSION**

A vibrant democracy depends on an informed electorate. That goal is far from being accomplished in the US. Many Americans, unfortunately, are decidedly uninformed. One third of the American population cannot name a single branch of government. Many of those who call for

tax breaks in the name of trickle-down economics cannot explain how it works. Many do not understand how wealth is distributed. Most of the population has no idea what percentage of GDP is spent on foreign aid (“Voter Ignorance Threatens Deficit Reduction | The Fiscal Times,” n.d.). Many overestimate the number of immigrants in the country, especially immigrants with an Islamic background.

Most Americans cannot locate Iraq on a map. Many are woefully inadequate in science and political literacy. An uninformed electorate is ripe for deception - fair game for the purveyors of misinformation. And politicians given the responsibility of formulating social policy often let party politics get in the way of what is best for the people. And when it comes to issues of global warming, decisions made in Washington, D,C, can have global consequences.



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