



What the Hell is Epistemic Closure?

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Epistemic closure is a fancy term for the practice of defining—or redefining— reality in ways that support your pre-existing ideological preferences. Most of us think of it as “creating and living in a bubble.”

A recent report from *Political Animal* illustrates the concept perfectly. Consider this result from a recent PPP poll:

There continues to be a lot of misinformation about what has happened during Obama’s time in office. 43% of voters think the unemployment rate has increased while Obama has been President, to only 49% who correctly recognize that it has decreased. And 32% of voters think the stock market has gone down during the Obama administration, to only 52% who correctly recognize that it has gone up.

In both cases Democrats and independents are correct in their understanding of how things have changed since Obama became President, but Republicans claim by a 64/27 spread that unemployment has increased and by a 57/27 spread that the stock market has gone down.

Another poll—also referenced in the linked post—is even more illuminating: approximately 60% of Republican respondents said that the economy had declined since 2008; but that number *jumped to 80%* when the question was phrased differently— not in terms of how the economy had performed since 2008, but “since Obama was first elected.”

In 2010, the *New York Times* book review section had an extended essay devoted to the phenomenon, and in the Age of Trump, it is reasonable to assert that matters have only gotten worse.

The phrase is being used as shorthand by some prominent conservatives for a kind of closed-mindedness in the movement, a development they see as debasing modern conservatism’s proud intellectual history. First used in this context by Julian Sanchez of the libertarian Cato Institute, the phrase “epistemic closure” has been ricocheting among conservative publications and blogs as a high-toned abbreviation for ideological intolerance and misinformation.

Conservative media, Mr. Sanchez wrote at juliansanchez.com — referring to outlets like Fox News and National Review and to talk-show stars like Rush Limbaugh, Mark R. Levin and Glenn Beck — have “become worryingly untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy the

demand for red meat overtakes any motivation to report accurately.” (Mr. Sanchez said he probably fished “epistemic closure” out of his subconscious from an undergraduate course in philosophy, where it has a technical meaning in the realm of logic.)

As a result, he complained, many conservatives have developed a distorted sense of priorities and a tendency to engage in fantasy, like the belief that President Obama was not born in the United States or that the health care bill proposed establishing “death panels.”

In his recent speech to Rutgers’ graduates, President Obama included an eloquent rejoinder to those who wish to construct their own realities:

... when our leaders express a disdain for facts, when they’re not held accountable for repeating falsehoods and just making stuff up, while actual experts are dismissed as elitists, then we’ve got a problem.

You know, it’s interesting that if we get sick, we actually want to make sure the doctors have gone to medical school, they know what they’re talking about. If we get on a plane, we say we really want a pilot to be able to pilot the plane.

And yet, in our public lives, we certainly think, “I don’t want somebody who’s done it before.” The rejection of facts, the rejection of reason and science — that is the path to decline. It calls to mind the words of Carl Sagan, who graduated high school here in New Jersey, he said: “We can judge our progress by the courage of our questions and the depths of our answers, our willingness to embrace what is true rather than what feels good.”

“Epistemic closure” is a more elegant phrase than the ones that come more readily to mind: “The big lie.” “Propaganda.” “Bullshit.”

Or—perhaps most accurate of all—“bat-shit crazy.”