

How Trump Inoculates His Supporters Against Reality

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Donald Trump has failed at almost every venture he has undertaken. That started long before his presidency, with a string of business failures. Nevertheless, he has excelled as a con artist. That is demonstrated by the question that has haunted so many of us over the last four years: why are his supporters so loyal, no matter what he says or does?

A lot of ink has been spilled over that question. Much of it has focused on what makes his supporters so vulnerable to a con job. But in an expansion of his use of the term “epistemic closure,” the writer Julian Sanchez has provided us with insight into how Trump inoculates his followers from reality, truth, and facts.

The first thing Sanchez, a Senior Fellow at the CATO Institute, does is clarify what he did and didn’t mean by epistemic closure.

So an “echo chamber” just means you never hear any contrary information. The idea of “epistemic closure” was that you WOULD hear new and contrary information, but you have mechanisms in your belief system that reject anything that might force you to update your beliefs...

I bring this up now, because the Trump ecosystem has developed a pretty sophisticated set of epistemic closure mechanisms that work to reject new information that might otherwise pose a problem.

The closure mechanisms Trump set up to inoculate his followers include his references to things like the deep state, fake news, and the swamp. Once people buy into those, they can reject any information that comes from those sources. But it doesn't end there. As Sanchez explains, they “effectively judo-flip [contradictory information] into confirmation of the preexisting narrative, rather than new contradictory data.” In doing so, Trump actually turns those who challenge him into targets that reinforce his delusional lies.

When intelligence sources tell us that Trump knew about Russia putting a bounty on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and ignored it, that is simply the deep state at work trying to undermine the president. When fact-checkers expose Trump's lies, it is just fake news. When former administration officials decry the president, they are part of the swamp. That is how Trump inoculates his supporters and ensures that the epistemic bubble in which they live is secure.

The good news, as Sanchez points out, is that “closed belief systems like this tend to be strong but brittle.” Once something penetrates them, even if it is small, the whole thing bursts. That is precisely what is happening with at least some Republicans who have stepped out of the bubble. But the bad news is that the inoculation is especially effective for those who are already entrenched in authoritarianism—like Christian nationalists.

The bottom line is that whenever you hear Trump supporters snarl at the deep state or fake news, you can rest assured that arguments based on facts or policy will not penetrate their bubble. They've been inoculated.