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No Closure in the 'Epistemic Closure' Debate

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The Great "Epistemic Closure" debate is still raging.

Huh? Epistemic what?

While it may sound like a plumbing problem, avid readers of political blogs, conservative ones in particular, know that this awkward phrase has become a shorthand in recent weeks for a vigorous debate on the right about the movement's intellectual health. [Julian Sanchez](#), a libertarian at the Cato Institute, was the first to use "epistemic closure" to refer to what he sees as conservatives' tendency to operate in an information bubble. Any news from outside is immediately regarded as suspect.

Conservative media, Mr. Sanchez wrote, referring to outlets like Fox News and the National Review and to talk show stars like Rush Limbaugh, Mark 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."

Soon conservatives – and a few liberals – jumped into the debate. Bruce Bartlett, a veteran of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush's administrations, wrote that in the past few years, "epistemic closure" has gotten much worse among "the intelligentsia of the conservative movement."

Jim Manzi, a contributing editor at National Review, wrote that Mr. Levin's best seller, "Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto" "[was awful](#)," and called the section on global warming a case for "willful ignorance," and "an almost perfect example of epistemic closure."

Mr. Manzi's take-down provoked virtual tomatoes from many of his colleagues on the right, which only reinforced the epistemic clorurites' view that they are right.

Loyalists were not buying it. At the National Review, Mr. Levin replied that "Manzi is guilty of 'epistemic one-sidedness'," if not "lunacy" and "wingnuttery," while Mr. Manzi's colleagues scorned him for his attack on Mr. Levin.

Jonah Goldberg, the author of "Liberal Fascism" [responded that liberals](#) have many more intellectual taboos: "For more than a generation, liberalism craved and ruthlessly enforced epistemic closure."

Meanwhile on his New York Times blog, Ross Douthat suggested that what Mr. Levin and others like him are engaged in is “[politically-inflected entertainment](#),” not rigorous political thought.

Richard Lowry, the editor of National Review – on whose blog much of the debate has taken place – called the “kerfuffle” “precious and overwrought” and said it would probably soon blow over.

That hasn't happened yet. On Monday, [Henry Farrell](#), a contributor to The Monkey Cage, a political science blog, cited research by Larry Bartels on how well-informed liberals and conservatives are that suggests “the better informed that conservatives are about politics (in general), the less likely they are to give the correct answer” to a question about economic inequality in the United States. “In other words, greater exposure to political information makes conservatives less likely to be right. This strongly suggests that conservatives face epistemic closure, at least on this issue.”

Needless to say, academia, which is dominated by liberals, is frequently derided as an unreliable source of information in the conservative media.