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Profile



Ed Brayton is a journalist, commentator and speaker. He is the co-founder and president of [Michigan Citizens for Science](#) and co-founder of [The Panda's Thumb](#). He has written for such publications as The Bard, Skeptic and Reports of the National Center for Science Education, spoken in front of many organizations and conferences, and appeared on nationally syndicated radio shows and on C-SPAN. Ed is also a Fellow with the Center for Independent Media and the host of [Declaring Independence](#), a one hour weekly political talk show on WPRR in Grand Rapids, Michigan.(static)

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Ed Brayton also blogs at [Positive Liberty](#) and [The Panda's Thumb](#)

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[Sanchez on Epistemic Bias and the Right](#)

Posted on: May 20, 2010 9:16 AM, by [Ed Brayton](#)

Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute has a podcast up on the Cato website talking about a phrase he recently coined -- "epistemic bias" -- to describe how the right-wing echo chamber has produced a large portion of the citizenry essentially immune to evidence that is contrary to their beliefs.

He points to things like birtherism, death panels and other right wing myths and says, quite correctly, that there is a large group of people in this country who have swallowed a whole pack of false claims and become immunized against all evidence against those beliefs so thoroughly that nothing can shake them from them.

What he describes, as he admits, is not terribly different from plain old fashioned confirmation bias, which exists in people of all political persuasions, but when you combine that with a total distrust of the media and give them sources of information like Fox News that repeat such false claims over and over again, you get a sort of confirmation bias to the third power.

Even some of the more rational conservatives have agreed with Sanchez that this is becoming a real problem. And I think he's right on the ball. Here's the audio.

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1

Well, yeah. The idea surely represents the sad state of American thought processes. But using a word like epistemic isn't going to help these morons one bit.

The resistance to knowledge is growing with the average person's inability to grasp technology and technological advances.

An example: Any marginally bright person could understand the workings of Chevy's straight six engine. Six plugs, six wires, a distributor, the oil goes in here and get drained from here. Simple, almost anyone can do the basic maintenance required. That isn't true any more. Aside from the computer that controls nearly everything, is the oil regular or synthetic? What kind of fuel is allowed or required? We are now forced to rely on experts to get even the simplest tasks done.

And we resent it. We fight against it by distrusting the experts and the expert's opinion. This does not bode well as life and systems only get more complex.

Posted by: MikeMa | [May 20, 2010 9:38 AM](#)

2

MikeMa,

That's why we get things called manuals. They explain all those things quite readily.

Posted by: ragarth | [May 20, 2010 9:43 AM](#)

3

Truthers, chemtrail believers, Illuminati fans, Freemason haters, moon hoaxers, JFK man in the bush freaks, FDR knew about Pearl Harbor in advance, etc, etc, etc.

Idiocy is the one true constant in this world.

Posted by: Chilidog | [May 20, 2010 9:44 AM](#)

4

The idea of epistemic closure is getting a lot of play within the conservative movement in their blogosphere (I haven't heard it expressed as epistemic bias so I might be off on a tangent. Andrew Sullivan has done a fine job of covering this type of closure. It seemed to get traction when ex-Lotus CEO and conservative Jim Manzi called out conservative Mark Levyn's more recent book and its absurdly delusional false claims regarding the evidence for global warming.

The biggest example recently that I think will resonate through at least the early stages of this year's electoral season was [Rachel Maddow's fascinating interview of Rand Paul](#) last evening. Rand took a popular conservative/conservative-libertarian talking point into the public square and totally failed to support it with simple follow-ups in spite of Ms. Maddow's polite but relentless questions. Three cheers for Ms. Maddow exercising journalism!

The issue was Rand's belief that the federal government should support Jim Crow laws defending business owners to prohibit blacks from purchasing goods and services because of their race rather than the federal government's constitutional obligation to defend blacks' far greater right to enjoy equal access to goods and services. His response showed all the markings he's bought into conservative viral email conspiracy myths coupled to a creationist-like understanding of the Constitution, i.e., defective beyond all measure. His response not to her challenging his position but instead demanding he clearly express it led to one of the most incoherent responses I've ever encountered. In fact it's the type of response I've imagined Sarah Palin would give if she was ever forced to actually answer a question on one of her many unconscionable positions.

This failure by Rand is similar to conservatives arguing that they believe marriage is between a man and a woman. Their problem is if a savvy interviewer asks the follow up on why their personal beliefs are justification to deny others their equal rights they have no argument. Of course such a follow up rarely happens which qualifies the

supply of epistemic closure within the conservative movement since the mainstream media rewards their exercise of cocooning. In fact Sarah Palin is a pioneer in how to become a leading figure while never emerging from her cocoon; Rush Limbaugh invented it but Palin may have the opportunity to win public office while remaining stuck in her cocoon with only rare excursions outside its protection.

Posted by: Michael Heath | [May 20, 2010 10:04 AM](#)

5

I think the problem is people conflating facts and values, for the usual reasons that it's beneficial to do so. Certain alleged facts become identified with values they're somehow connected to (sometimes the connections are tenuous, of course). In this way, intolerance of rival values is justified (those with rival values are wrong about the facts, so they're just wrong!), but at the same time the facts are shielded from criticism as facts (anyone who questions the facts must have the wrong values, and so must be evil and surely also dishonest). These benefits are sufficiently valuable that the system is often employed even in cases where nearly all of those who claim to believe in the facts in question don't really believe in them. I think the stranger historical doctrines of mainstream religions are examples of this, and probably also at least some of the political examples here.

Posted by: Protagoras | [May 20, 2010 10:04 AM](#)

6

You forgot Saddam's WMDs.

Posted by: mikka | [May 20, 2010 10:22 AM](#)

7

Michael Heath, there's an easy (if a little absurd) way to get dear Rand Paul on board with things like the Americans w/Disabilities Act. Let him design a building. Have him go all Howard Roark on it. Then sit him in a wheelchair (or leg braces and crutches or somesuch) and have him try to get inside. Alternately, paint him brown and time portal him South to the 1920's. If he's still against the Act (among others), he's *too* "Rand", and unreachable. In that case, Objectively, he's a douche.

Posted by: Modusoperandi | [May 20, 2010 10:24 AM](#)

8

At the risk of sounding like the proverbial village atheist (really, I'm not that metropolitan): doesn't the root of this epistemological weed sprout from the implied message of mainstream religious teaching that the effective truth of a story relates to the strength of emotion attached to believing in it?

Posted by: Pierce R. Butler | [May 20, 2010 10:31 AM](#)

9

Julian began the "epistemic closure" discussion here:
<http://www.juliansanchez.com/2010/03/26/frum-cocktail-parties-and-the-threat-of-doubt/>

The phrase has a different meaning in philosophy, which is perhaps why it's now being referred to as epistemic bias. Subsequent blog entries continue the discussion and link all over the blogosphere. I've seen this first hand, arguing with my mother about Fox News' rightward viewpoint (she denies it) and why torture is bad for all of us. She's a smart woman who has done great things particularly in disaster relief, but her head is full of Fox and conserva-spin email propaganda, and it's maddening as hell to get through to her sometimes.

-TTm

Posted by: Ticktockman | [May 20, 2010 10:54 AM](#)

10

Taking the risk of sounding like a bad SF movie this is a "second stage meme infection". Meme's are all the things people choose to believe in (often with very good evidence) and can range from the obvious to the outright batty.

Dan Dennet, in [Consciousness Explained](#) talks about how really successful memes go a whole stage further by generating a secondary meme that *questioning the first meme is not allowed!*

The main examples of this are religion ("It's okay, we can all just agree to disagree rather than risk discussing it") but there are plenty of others ("Of course the government denies it - it's a huge cover-up!") and the American right-wing swallows these in large numbers.

Posted by: David Durant | [May 20, 2010 10:56 AM](#)

11

@ragarth

Manuals are fine if you bother to read them. I've worked in IT long enough to discount that as any help at all.

@Pierce R. Butler

Emotion may be a factor but the easy way out is the road more often taken. Examples: God did it. Somebody I trust told me this and I believe them. A scientist lied so all science is suspect. (This doesn't apply to politicians so much.) If I cannot understand a thing with my own (crappy) native intelligence, it just isn't worth knowing. All of these contribute to the devaluation of knowledge rather than the search for it.

Posted by: MikeMa | [May 20, 2010 11:03 AM](#)

12

Perhaps our society has focused too much on teaching people facts (not that we do real well there), but haven't focused on methodologies for evaluating facts and assembling those facts into coherent and accurate worldviews. The sciences engage in this sort of instruction real well, although it's questionable how well it is instilled with those with less than a Masters degree.

Posted by: Greg Esres | [May 20, 2010 11:10 AM](#)

13

Pierce R. Butler

implied message of mainstream religious teaching that the effective truth of a story relates to the strength of emotion attached to believing in it?

I guess I missed that memo.

Posted by: heddle | [May 20, 2010 11:17 AM](#)

14

Re ragarth

1. Has Mr. ragarth ever tried to read a manual for a product manufactured in the Far East? Rots of ruck.
2. All the manuals in the world would not make the average shade tree mechanic competent to effect repairs on a multi-port fuel injected engine.

Posted by: SLC | [May 20, 2010 11:50 AM](#)

15

ragarth | May 20, 2010 9:43 AM:

MikeMa,

That's why we get things called manuals. They explain all those things quite readily.

That's not a solution. Manuals must be read. And then one must understand and use the material in the manuals. Making the reader an Elitist Know-It-All Jerk. No normal, right-thinking person could possibly read an entire manual. Manuals, in fact, make the problem worse.

Posted by: llewelly | [May 20, 2010 11:58 AM](#)

16

@4 Michael & 7 Modusoperandi

I think the Maddow/Paul interview was the best TV I've seen in weeks, but I think Dr. Paul could've defended his position a little better (well in a way, the interview was simply trying to get him to admit his position).

But in my opinion, Dr. Paul's best comment was when he compared it to free speech. He made it clear that racist speech is abhorrent, but he does not want the government to step in and prevent it by taking away freedom of speech. If he was willing to admit his position on the Civil Rights Act (rather than dancing around Maddow's questions), he could've explained it from the perspective of personal freedoms.

I believe most of us share the same values as Dr. Paul, but the issue lies in how we prioritize those values. We value personal freedoms, and we value civic equality. So does Dr. Paul. But we feel that civic equality should take priority above personal freedoms, and that is where we differ from Rand Paul.

But given his values and priorities, his position is the logical one. And our opposition is also the logical stance for those who feel that civic equality should trump personal freedom.

So while I completely disagree with Rand Paul on this issue, I do respect him. And I feel that he is a better opponent than most conservatives, because he at least has a logically consistent method of developing positions. For the portion of the public who prioritize their values in a similar manner to Dr. Paul, he is their ideal candidate.

But I was quite disappointed that he wouldn't admit his position last night. He needs to realize he'll eventually have to fully articulate his stance, since for most people, this is the first impression they have of him. So he might

as well craft his best defense now.

Posted by: Jordan G | [May 20, 2010 11:58 AM](#)

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