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## 5 Questions for Cato's Julian Sanchez

Cato Institute Research Fellow, [Julian Sanchez](#), set off quite a firestorm among conservatives for criticizing what he sees as a sort of closing the conservative mind. To kick off of a series called "5 Questions," Sanchez answered questions about "epistemic closure," how he knows if he's done a good job and whether or not it's fair to declare the death of think tanks.

### 1) How did you come up with "epistemic closure?"

So, I hadn't initially intended to coin a phrase: In my initial post about this, I had just thought I was using the two words descriptively. What I meant to refer to was the way conservative media had stopped engaging in a useful, corrective way with the larger public conversation and congealed into this interconnected and self-contained alternate universe, itself insulated from factual correction by a narrative that says, essentially all non-movement information sources are not just slanted a bit to the left, but barely distinguishable from the old Soviet Pravda.

As it turns out, "epistemic closure" has an unrelated and rather technical meaning in philosophy that I'd forgotten about, and that was probably jangling around in the back of my head. Possibly also the philosopher Colin McGinn's phrase "cognitive closure," which has a meaning much closer to what I was talking about—although McGinn's talking about domains of knowledge where our brains are just wired in a way that makes it impossible for us to acquire certain kinds of knowledge.

I don't know that I'd choose a different term now though. I mean, I doubt any logicians dipping into the debate are getting confused and imagining that we're talking about the technical sense of "closure under entailment" or whatever. And I know some people find it intolerably pretentious to use a word of more than three syllables, but they think it's elitist to use indoor plumbing, so I don't know if another term would've satisfied them. I've seen folks using zingier phrases like "information loop" or "bubble world"—but part of me suspects that a clinical sounding phrase like "epistemic closure" made it easier for conservatives to start engaging the problem. Nobody wants to talk about their "impotence" but "erectile dysfunction" (or better, "ED") is a little less threatening.

### 2) What's the source of the epistemic closure you've been writing about? What's the way out?

I think the explosion of media—blogs and Web magazines and Internet radio and cable—have had a lot to do with it. In principle, it would be nice to have all these conservative media acting as a corrective to a press corps that overwhelmingly self-identifies as liberal, but they've been so focused on being "the conservative alternative" that the fundamental journalistic mission to report fairly and accurately ends up taking a distant second place. Also, as these individual outlets get integrated into a larger conservative media sphere, the lines between serious think tanks or journals of ideas & the talk radio entertainers and wacky fringe sites get blurred, because there's a sense that they're all on the "same team" in a self-conscious way that you really don't see between, say, the Times



& the Post & explicitly ideological liberal sources like the Nation or Rachel Maddow. So you've got folks who know better on the right treating World Net Daily or the AM radio shouters as serious and credible—Reagan's 11th commandment.

If there's a way out, I think it starts with what we're seeing now, which is folks on the right starting to acknowledge the problem and talk about it, and realizing that in the long term an informed base that's in touch with reality is more important than a maximally riled up base.

### **3) When are think tanks at their best?**

Well, there are different kinds of missions think tanks can have. Places like the Urban Institute are more geared toward big original research projects, and they do a great job of that. Those are often more focused on a couple of core issues. Cato certainly does some of that, but I think we and places like AEI and Brookings add value mostly by acting as translators. Which is to say, we'll get into the policy weeds and the technical academic literature, and try to survey it and make it accessible to an educated general audience. I think there's also increasingly room for think tanks to serve as a platform for the kind of longer form, sustained investigative reporting that the traditional press isn't supporting as much anymore. And they can also lay the groundwork for policy. So, for instance—not that I'm especially fond of this policy—New America Foundation was pushing for a national broadband policy for years before it became a live option politically, and by getting out ahead of the issue, I think they ended up exerting a strong influence on the FCC's work there.

### **4) How do you know if you've done a good job?**

I've been a reporter for most of my career, so it's really only in the past six months that I've been a think tanker, which means I've got a limited track record here to draw on. Ultimately you know you're doing a good job if your proposals and criticisms get incorporated into the larger public policy conversation—so whether you win or lose on the particular issue, people at least feel obligated to engage your arguments and respond to them. And, of course, you're doing a good job if you're successfully engaging the best ideas folks on the other side are putting out.

### **5) Are we really at the end of think tanks, as Bruce Bartlett has declared?**

Well, if we get to the point where all we're doing is servicing the donor base—providing rationalizations for people's preexisting beliefs and positions—then we'd certainly deserve to be at the end. But again, especially as traditional journalistic outlets become less able or willing to support intensive long-form policy reporting, think tanks serve an important niche, and I think the national conversation will be much poorer if nobody's doing that work—trying to think in a serious and sustained way about what's good policy (as opposed to what's tactically optimal or good for ratings) but also trying to articulate the results of that thinking for an audience outside academic journals or professional conferences.

**For more of Julian Sanchez, follow him on [Twitter](#) or visit his [blog](#).**

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I can't believe how much I agree with a Libertarian. I love what Sanchez had to say here. I'd like to talk to him about his tie selection, however.

Posted by: aces | [May 04, 2010 at 10:16 AM](#)

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