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In Trump We Trust: Epistemic Isolation, Conflict Narratives, and
Climate Change Denial In
Significant Portion of Trump's 2016 Election Base

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Abstract

American political polarization around climate change is largely fueled by science denialism, and although much research investigates the impacts of ideology, little has been done on the impacts of epistemology, and more specifically, the role of conflict-conditioned narratives (CCN) in shaping epistemology. This study investigates the epistemic function of Fox News in the 2016 U.S. Election, potentially escalating conflict around climate change due to the nature of delivered narratives. Existing conflict resolution research is used as a theoretical grounding and for identifying the use of conflict narrative construction methods (CM) in online articles. This research uses a purposive approach to qualitative content analysis. Findings show the presence of these CM in Fox News' climate change reporting, meaning that information was filtered and organized in a misleading and conflict-supporting fashion, though not explicitly incorrect. Since viewers do not have the means of testing the presented narratives on science, Fox News has an especially influential epistemic role in the portrayal of climate science. This may very well mean that viewers think (and vote) within the conflict-supporting narratives Fox News creates. Recommended followup research includes more on how epistemological structures and networks operate as power

hierarchies which may have been used to empower those directing the structures rather than viewers themselves.

Keywords: Climate, Change, Denial, Fox, News, Conflict, Resolution, Narratives, Science, Representation, Public, Opinion, Epistemology, Political, Polarization, U.S. Media, Trump

Introduction

Climate change has become increasingly polarized among Democrats and Republicans. The two groups in the American public showed significant polarization between 1994 and 2014¹(NW et al., 2014). Among almost a dozen contentious issues,² one 2012 study found that the environment was an especially divisive topic among them (Guber, 2013). Yale showed this trend continued,³ detailing partisan perceptions on the matter: compared to Democrats, Republicans are vastly lower in those that affirm, slightly higher in those that are skeptical, and vastly higher in those that deny (Mildenberger et al., 2017). It's striking to see that Democrats are vastly more likely to affirm climate change, and Republicans are vastly more likely to deny it.

It's well-documented that the political divide is not a consequence of climate science, since most scientists and reports affirm anthropogenic climate change (Gillis, 2015). If it's not enough to have about 97% of the world's top climate scientists agree that humans are driving (and escalating) the crisis, then it's hard to believe a few percentage points would change that (Gillis, 2015). More importantly, the scientific community has *been* converging, beginning in 1995 with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Boykoff, 2007). Despite decades of

¹ Overlap between groups on the political spectrum shrunk, and mutual intolerance significantly increased.

² This includes healthcare, the economy, and terrorism from an analysis of three cross-sectional polls.

³ Yale's study was national, published in 2018.

convergence, evidence suggests media reports depicted a different story: a media study ranging from 1995 to 2006 suggests that the U.S. media, broadly defined, has “portrayed conflict and contention rather than coherence regarding scientific explanations of anthropogenic climate change” (Boykoff, 2007). Between the public, climate science, and the media portraying that science, investigating the media may prove helpful given the above media study.

Epistemically speaking, media outlets are powerfully positioned to influence the general public on any given issue; such a medium is difficult if not impossible to avoid in keeping up on climate science. When viewers concentrate around one source alone, the epistemic dependence such viewers have on that source increases dramatically. Concentrating on mainly one news source, namely Fox News, is exactly how 40% of Trump’s election base got their news (Pew Research Center, 2017). It may be a coincidence that among Trump’s base, doubt and denial of anthropogenic climate change was at 51% (Leiserowitz et al., 2017).

The reputation of Fox News, however, suggests otherwise: dating back to 2010, one study showed that “Fox News was associated with more rejection of many mainstream scientists’ claims about global warming” while “more exposure to non-Fox News sources is associated with more endorsement of the views of many mainstream scientists on global warming [and] more trust in scientists” (Krosnick and MacInnis, 2010). Using data collected between 2015 and 2016, one study documented the same influence of Fox News reporting: “acceptance of anthropogenic climate change decreases with Fox News viewership” (Bolin & Hamilton, 2018). This provides evidence for interpreting both of the studies about Trump’s 2016 election base as symptoms of Fox News’ continued influence. The question in this research is thus not a matter of *if* Fox News contributed to high levels of doubt, but of *how*.

To address this question, the rise of polarization is framed as the rise of conflict, based on existing conflict resolution research. Suspicion is the seed of conflict: when it takes root, the party's default becomes to engage in all communication *suspiciously*, which signals a transition, shifting the focus away from content, and more towards motives (Anastasiou, 2007). This shift begins an increasingly destructive cycle: parties in conflict will continue to interpret each other, but the more suspicion rises, the more content from the other will either be distrusted or ignored altogether until all content is imagined in lieu of new content from the other—regardless of whether such information corresponds to reality (Anastasiou, 2007). This alienates the parties from each other, setting the stage for exclusive narratives.

When it comes to climate science skepticism, the shift would be away from scientific content towards suspicions of ulterior motives in those affirming anthropogenic climate change, both scientists as well as general citizens. Using this framing, this research addresses the question: based on a purposive article sampling, is there evidence to suggest that Fox News reported on climate change using the construction methods used to create conflict-conditioned narratives? The characteristics of CCN are further depicted below. If reporting displays evidence of CM, it could help diagnose the rise of climate science skepticism, as well prompt and inform solution-oriented thinking.

Research Question

Based on a purposive article sampling, is there evidence to suggest that Fox News reported on climate change using the construction methods used to create conflict-conditioned narratives?

Research Design/Methods

This research will take a directed approach to qualitative content analysis, based on a purposive sampling of Fox News articles published anytime between January 1st, 2016 and November 8th, 2016 (election day). The time frame was chosen because strategic political messaging naturally increases during an election year. Upon Trump's election victory, campaigns end and so does the need for strategic political messaging. This article focuses on strategic political messaging because within the scope of conflict, strategy is heavily informed by existing CCN (Anastasiou, 2007). Although evidence will be limited, the hope is that it provides sufficient evidence for opening up discussion and for directing further research.

While Anastasiou's research outline of conflict emergence and escalation is helpful for understanding the broader trajectory of conflict, this research uses "Sociopsychological Analysis of Conflict-Supportive Narratives: A General Framework" for indicators that can identify CCN (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). These six observable construction methods have been adopted in this research as criteria for measuring the presence of CCN supportive of conflict. Taken together, these existing research articles provide the theoretical foundation upon which this research stands.

Selection of News Samples

This study will cover three Fox News articles, all originally published by Fox News. Each article was chosen because the evidence suggests they exhibit behaviors of CM. These exhibited behaviors will be described in detail, along with the reasoning that judged their qualities to be sufficient for inclusion. At a mere three articles, this research is far from exhaustive. Its aim, however, is to create a demonstrative sample from the population of articles within the target time range (January 1st, 2016 through November 11th, 2016). This article employs purposive sampling, as described by Banerjee and Chaudhury, because of time and resource restraints (Banerjee &

Chaudhury, 2010). As the sole researcher with limited time and resources, time is the driving factor leading to doing this research with such a limited sample size.

Evidence Indicators

To determine the presence of CCN in Fox News, the present CCN outlined in “Sociopsychological Analysis of Conflict-Supportive Narratives: A General Framework” are listed with original descriptions below:

(1) *Reliance on supportive sources* - The narrative is based on documents, testimonies, materials, and so on that support the major themes of the master narrative, while sources that provide contents contradicting these themes are ignored. (2) *Marginalization of contradictory info* - Contents (especially information that reflects negatively on the justness of group goals or on collective self-image) that contradict the major themes of the conflict-supportive narratives are presented infrequently and assigned minimal importance. (3) *Magnification of supportive themes* - Themes of the master narrative are exaggerated and presented as salient and central, especially those that concern the justness of goals, collective self-presentation, delegitimization of the rival, and patriotism. They are repeated in various ways in minor specific narratives. (4) *Fabrication of supportive contents* - This method reflects use of contents (details and even events) that are not supported by any evidence. (5) *Omission of contradictory contents* - Master narratives and other specific narratives that support a conflict omit contents that contradict their themes. This practice is sometimes referred to as ‘silence’ or ‘collective amnesia.’ (6) *Use of framing language* - This practice refers to the use of language as a framing tool that triggers emotions, memory, cognition, and motivation related to past events, nurturing and shaping these in line with the current conflict-supporting narrative. (Bar-Tal et al., 2014)

Guiding Hypothesis

Fox News reporting used multiple CM in each article on climate change, encouraging a rise of distrust in viewers of anthropogenic climate change proponents.

Findings

Below is a list of ten numbered pieces of evidence gathered from three articles, organized according to the conflict construction method they show evidence of (italicized). Each listing reviews the original quote for reference, and then provides an account of why the text and overall narrative construction qualify as said evidence.

(1) *Use of Framing Language*: After reviewing Democratic presidential candidates' stances on the environment, the Fox News article goes on to discuss economic impacts: "The pressure coming from the environmental left should concern us all, because banning fracking would be extraordinarily costly" (Bennett, 2016). Using the term "environmental left" is language which can create the impression that environmental concerns belong only to those on the political left. It is of course true that environmental movements are championed by left-leaning individuals and groups, but not by necessity. Yet, the fact that environmental concerns are dominated by those on the left can be easily portrayed as evidence that such concerns are left by necessity. If the left is by definition not the right, then by labeling what could be a shared interest "left," the issue becomes purportedly partisan by definition. When environmentalism is framed as an issue that *can only* belong to the left, and by necessity, it positions the political left and the political right against one another on the issue.

(2) *Omission of Contradictory Contents*: Tracing the influence environmental groups have had on Clinton, the Fox News article lists a few of her quotes related to her intended energy policies: "By the time we get through all of my conditions, I do not think there will be many

places in America where fracking will continue to take place,' presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said during the Democratic primary. 'I'm going to pledge to stop fossil fuels,' she said at another time" (Bennett, 2016). Although these quotes were supported, there was not even a brief mention of Clinton's well-documented plan to replace fossil fuel jobs with others in clean energy. This information would have been readily available from many sources at the time.⁴

Leaving out such contrary content could have been either accidental or intentional but in light of the article's title, "The very real threat to jobs Americans need to remember on election day," it would appear that the article's purpose was to depict Clinton as a threat to jobs, rather than a changemaker, intent on leading a transition from fossil fuels to clean energy. If this was the article's purpose, listing this contradictory info would defeat that purpose.

(3) *Magnification of Supportive Themes:* Citing Portland Tribune, the Fox News article reviewed Portland Public School District's (PPSD) resolution to ban curriculum deemed to promote climate change skepticism (Fox News, 2016). The article then shifts focus to various voices on the topic of climate change generally, the first of which is a comment from the Portland Tribune's website: "I have never seen a case for homeschooling more clearly put forward. This is further proof that public schools are not interested in education, only political indoctrination" (Fox News, 2016). The comment currently tops a list of 3,000+ comments, but it's unclear why this comment was chosen (Moore, 2016).

That said, the comment does distinguish between education and political motives which are certainly quite different, but the article does not investigate the matter. Featuring the comment without investigating appears quite intentional since it was clearly selected from over 3,000

⁴ Vox detailed Clinton's climate and energy policies as early as July, 2016 (Roberts, 2016). Since the Fox News article was published in November, 2016, there is no doubt such information was widespread and easily accessible at the time.

comments, yet the intention clearly is not investigative. Thus, the purpose of featuring the comment would seem to be more about simply giving the claim a platform and raising the concern of ulterior political motives. As a result, featuring this particular comment serves to magnify the supportive theme often featured in skeptics' rhetoric, namely that climate change science and the policies it informs are politically motivated, and not truly scientific at the core.

(4) *Reliance on Supportive Sources*: In the same article, the focus moves from the comment implying ulterior political motives to drawing a contrast. While PPSD moved towards affirming anthropogenic climate change, a petition by the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine (OISM), apparently signed by 32,000 individuals, claims there is no such 'convincing' evidence (Fox News, 2016). A fact check on Snopes sheds light on the matter: according to Snopes author Kasprak, yes, "a petition that has been in circulation since 1998 claims to bear the name of more than 30,000 signatures from scientists who reject the concept of anthropogenic global warming," but "the petition was created by individuals and groups with political motivations, was distributed using misleading tactics, is presented with almost no accountability regarding the authenticity of its signatures, and asks only that you have received an undergraduate degree in any science to sign" (2016). Even without engaging the science itself, the bias is clear to see when considering the conversation on climate science as a whole: despite the well-documented, global majority of climate scientists that affirm, it was not even a mention; by sharp contrast, Fox News relied on this supportive source, made especially clear because such sources are so relatively rare to find, and questionable at best (Gillis, 2015).

(5) *Omission of Contradictory Contents*: In addition to featuring the skeptics making up OISM, a marginal population in the larger context, the same article simultaneously excludes any

mention of IPCC or any other figure mentioning where the vast majority of climate scientists are on the matter (Gillis, 2015). Thus, the omission of this contradictory content is clear to see.

(6) *Magnification of Supportive Themes:* The same article magnifies the supportive theme that climate science is far from certain, the debate is alive and well, and those claiming otherwise ought to be met with suspicion. This is done by strategically organizing information.

After reviewing the PPSD resolution, then reviewing the differing voices on the matter, first with the commenter then with OISM, the article briefly mentioned the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) before going on to focus on a Yale climate change program ending.

As detailed in findings (4) and (5), climate change is portrayed as an active debate, meaning it could go either way. After mentioning the EPA's supportive attitude, it turned to Yale, mentioning that "its climate change program will close at the end of June [2016]" due to budget cuts (Fox News, 2016). Although this alone may imply *all* climate studies would cease, the opposite was true: the same source Fox News cited also made it clear that climate science studies would continue at Yale in at least two departments, yet it was omitted. By listing only the climate change program ending, without the other steady climate science studies, the article magnified the theme that climate change was still a debate. This would serve to reinforce suspicions around the truthfulness and trustworthiness of those claiming otherwise.

(7) *Magnification of Supportive Themes:* The general structure of the same article presents a fourth piece of evidence by focusing on PPSD as an (implied) example in the larger happenings of climate change. After reviewing the PPSD resolution, the article featured the suspicious comment implying political indoctrination (Fox News, 2016). After considering findings (3) and (4) which show evidence for magnifying supportive themes in the same article, there is more reason to interpret the comment in the same fashion. The subjects in the article can be characterized

as two distinguished groups: the first, consisting of PPSD and EPA, are authority figures which have decision-making authority to create policy; the second, consisting of the OISM and Yale, are educational institutions, representing beacons for scientific knowledge. The article's overall structure appears to be very pointed when considering these groups, what is excluded in the article, and the order in which they are presented.

As previously mentioned, the article then cites the OISM in two ways: as an educational institution and as a symbol of the broader state of climate science. As detailed in findings (4) and (5), climate change is portrayed as an open debate. Assuming this framework, listing the OISM early on serves as a setup for interpreting Yale to signal what might be the beginning of the end for climate science. Again, both of these knowledge institutions are included, while the IPCC's role in shaping the global conversation on climate science, and Yale's other climate science studies, are excluded. When it came to the authority group, the article listed the EPA's affirmative attitude, alongside PPSD: "Still, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says addressing the issue of global warming will help to improve public health" (Fox News, 2016).

In sum, the structure of the article implies a broader direction of movement for climate science, contrasting the movement of authorities: both knowledge institutions moved *away* from anthropogenic climate science, while the authorities instead moved *towards* policies and attitudes affirming anthropogenic climate change. All of this is underscored by listing fashion which alternated between groups, where each group reflected anthropogenic climate change positively or negatively (broadly speaking): PPSD (authority, positive), OISM (education, negative), EPA (authority, positive), Yale (education, negative). Given that each authority (positive for climate change) was followed by an educational institution (negative for climate change), the article seemingly implied error in each case, and subsequent suspicion of the authority figures. Through

a structural interweaving of supportive sources without contradictory contents, seemingly framed under the dichotomy of “education” as opposed to “political indoctrination,” the article magnified the supportive theme that those affirming anthropogenic climate change pursue purely political motives, in spite of the (portrayed) state of climate science (Fox News, 2016).

(8) *Reliance on Supportive Sources:* The next article reports that in the spring of 2016, Attorney General (AG) Schneiderman began and led a cooperative investigation into Exxon’s internal climate reports suspecting fraud (Bredderman, 2016). The article featured seven unique references. While evidence varies according to the reference, a holistic view shows a bias in source selection and use. The first of these sources is the Energy and Environmental Legal Institute (EELI). When EELI was known as the American Tradition Institute, it had connections to both conservative donors “seeking to expand political influence” and other “energy interests that have long fought greenhouse gas regulation” (Sturgis, 2011). This anti climate change mission would appear to have continued: EELI’s website currently shows its support for Trump, a known opponent of climate change and related policies, and “is working to promote [Trump’s environmental] agenda” (Lusk, 2020). Suffice to say it easily serves to support the anti-climate change cause.

The second source was the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ). According to a 2017 study of four leading media outlets, WSJ demonstrated unfavorable bias in its coverage of climate change, specifically by being the “least likely to discuss the impacts of and threat posed by climate change and most likely to include negative efficacy information and [to] use conflict and negative economic framing when discussing actions to address climate change”⁵ (Feldman et al., 2017).

⁵ This article studies the WSJ along with *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*, all of which covered the story of AG Schneiderman’s plan to investigate Exxon.

Among a wide range of sources, the article used WSJ, the source least favorable to an affirmative view of climate science.

The third source was the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), a libertarian think tank “dedicated to advancing the principles of limited government, free enterprise, and individual liberty” (“About CEI,” 2010). Since the think tank is libertarian, the goal of having a small government naturally opposes policies centered around large-scale government regulation. That does not necessarily imply opposing anthropogenic climate science - yet, a conflict of interest in the funding department would encourage exactly that. An investigation into the fossil fuel industry’s influence on education showed CEI’s funding came from the fossil fuel industry (Bohart, 1997). Since anthropogenic climate science largely challenges the fossil fuel industry, CEI has a clear conflict of interest, making it a questionable source at best.

The next source, *The Observer*, shows no apparent evidence of leanings in its mission statement or in published studies. While this source does not appear supportive, the article cites it only once, borrowing a disparaging characterization of AG Schneider’s press conference: at the event, an unknown journalist speculated if the entire event was a publicity stunt (Horner, 2016; Bredderman, 2016).

The fifth source was *The Washington Examiner*. Based on a blind study by AllSides averaging the opinions of observers across the political spectrum, the study finds that *The Washington Examiner* leans right in its reporting (*Washington Examiner Media Bias Rating*, 2012). Once again, leaning right does not necessitate opposing anthropogenic climate change, but the outlet has reflected opposition in its publication activity: conservative political commentator Michael Barone characterized climate science as “propaganda ... based on such shoddy and dishonest evidence” (Sarewitz, 2010).

The next two sources are two separate open letters by AG's across the United States, among which the article referenced four who characterized AG Schneiderman's efforts as an attempt to "silence" the free speech of political opponents, which is the word of choice by all listed AG's (Horner, 2016). Importantly, depictions of AG Schneiderman's motives came from only the opposition, not from AG Schneiderman or those cooperating. The Fox News article featured motive portrayals only from supportive sources, despite the fact that an already-featured article from *The Observer* features AG Schneiderman's intent to investigate if Exxon had misled investors (Bredderman, 2016). In the same fashion, the article relied on sources which either supported the cause or the ideology (as with *The Washington Examiner*), or were used minimally (as with *The Observer*), demonstrating an overall reliance on supportive sources.

(9) *Use of Framing Language*: The article concludes with the four AG's who all agree: these efforts abuse the power of the AG to "silence" political opponents (Horner, 2016). The author seems intent on making free speech central to the issue by using the collective voice of the AG's, conjoined by the common word "silence" (Horner, 2016). Yet, separate reporting clearly shows free speech is not the only possible interpretation: Columbia's Climate Change Law director Michael Gerrard points out that centralizing free speech is "premature until [the public sees] what charges or claims might actually be brought" (Sancya, 2016). Since AG Scheiderman had just announced *plans* to investigate, they possessed no evidence and thus had no formal accusations (Sancya, 2016). Because the characterization is based on evidence that did not exist (at least yet), the framing language was unfair at the time of reporting.

(10) *Magnification of Supportive Themes*: The article sets a suspicious tone in the first sentence, describing AG Shneiderman's activities prior to the press conference as 'secretive' (Horner, 2016). Yet, it's entirely possible (and not unlikely) that before the press conference, plans

had not been finalized. Since plans to investigate were then made public, the intent to be transparent rather than secretive seems clear. The article then portrays a subpoena to acquire the email correspondences between AG and those cooperating according to the same theme of deception, yet the same counter argument applies to the same objection. What seems to tip the scales towards interpreting with suspicion is that AG Schneiderman's description of their motives was absent, which as noted above, was left out despite being listed on *The Observer's* featured article (Bredderman, 2016). Given the overall move towards depicting the investigation as deceptive, along with suggesting ulterior motives of participants, the article magnified the supportive theme of deception on the part of participants.

Discussion

Taking the findings as a whole, the articles support a broader CCN which can help sustain conflict: suspicion is the starting point for, and encouraged throughout, reporting, causing a shift in focus away from (scientific) content towards (ulterior political) motives, and in-group, out-group dynamics are implicitly strengthened. Recalling definitions, a CCN is the result of the systematic use of CM which filter and organize information, as observed in the findings. Repeatedly building up and centering the perspectives of some creates in-groups, while simultaneously doing the reverse to the perspectives of others creates out-groups. Since Fox News displays this in its reporting, it creates this CCN. Although viewers will become familiar with the CCN from repeated exposure, they will likely be unaware of the construction methods without close study. It's important to limit the implications of my findings here: because the portion of Trump's base (40%) concentrated on Fox News *watched* rather than read their news, these findings do not necessarily apply (Pew Research Center, 2017). However, given Fox News' reputation for negatively affecting viewers' perception of climate change, it's plausible that the CCN is also

present in TV programming (Krosnick and MacInnis, 2010; Bolin & Hamilton, 2018). Still, further studies and a wider inclusion of existing research are necessary to support this.

Turning to the observable shift in focus, the third article about AG Schneider conveyed information in an overall suspicious tone, portraying secrecy and implying ulterior motives. As finding (10) discusses, portraying AG Scheider's activities as "secret" when Schneider openly and at will announced plans to investigate Exxon to the public seems far from secretive. Despite being unsupported, the word choice is highly accusatory, especially in conjunction with the word "collusion" in the conclusion: "the only parties that may be breaking the law are those colluding AGs in their scheme to silence political opposition, while seeking funds for their preferred policy agenda. It is they who need to come clean." The latter part of the quote refers to the implied (but unsupported) accusation that AG Walker's motive was to find other "potential litigation targets" for some undisclosed, but apparently illegal, purpose. The second article covering the PPSD resolution to ban skeptical climate change material shows the same shift towards suspicion. As discussed in finding (3), featuring the suspicious comment about political indoctrination serves to give the accusation a platform and raise suspicion. Suspicious attitudes are further encouraged with the article's structure, detailed in finding (4): the article features the comment early on, establishing the suspicious framework, then follows through with a pseudo "evidence-counterevidence" structuring of information, comparing the political moves of the PPSD against the OISM petition, and the EPA's statement against Yale's activity.

One possible larger outcome from these findings is an increase in the in-group loyalty factor. The first article covering how Democratic candidates approach environmental and energy issues displays this theme. As described in finding (1), using "environmental left" as framing language serves to create a false dichotomy: because environmentalism is a leftist cause, being on

the right end of the political spectrum means opposing it by definition. This is part of the right's *identity*. If those on the right are led to believe that it is not possible to share environmental concerns while retaining the rest of their political views or while having their political identity generally, then those that would dare to do so amount to traitors, making impossible claims which amount to counterfeit. This factor is especially dangerous because it further narrows the epistemic openness of those among the in-group so that it becomes more difficult for even the trusted individuals sharing the identity to have an influence. Finding (2) can be understood to reinforce this same effect. Portraying presidential candidate Clinton as a huge threat to American jobs with no mention of what jobs she *did* plan to create cannot possibly be a fair portrayal. As mentioned under finding (2), creating this portrayal seems to be exactly the article's intended purpose. Under the impression that Clinton is simply a threat to jobs, in-group opposition of Clinton appears justified and in-group identity is strengthened.

When the dynamics of a conflict emerge and solidify, the conflict comes to have and sustain a life of its own. Findings show evidence of the shift away from focusing on (scientific) content towards ulterior (political) motives, which if more widespread, can indicate that science and science communication alone cannot address the issue of political polarization around climate change because they are unequipped to dismantle the conflict dynamics within it. The rise of in-group, out-group dynamics only worsens the problem, creating a collective identity for anthropogenic climate change scientists and those in support of their work whom the in-group will oppose. Increasing convergence in anthropogenic climate change can (and likely will) be perceived suspiciously as a ploy created by the out-group to disguise hidden motives. The trouble with suspicions is that they are not products of evidence so they cannot be put to rest with evidence; when there is not a single open door for anything positive and trustworthy, nothing of this sort will

ever get through. Narratives receptive to only negative and threatening information is very close to a recipe for an increasingly destructive negative feedback loop.

There are critical epistemological dimensions and implications which are vital if any construction initiative may come of research on the matter. The featured CCN displays two troubling features, especially for a problem in which science and the science community is so important. The first sign of trouble is that it is clear to see that the six CM filter and organize information to support conflict, rather than the scientific ends of articulating the best explanatory hypothesis according to the best available evidence. While it's true that discoveries using the scientific method may (and have) given rise to conflict, this is the result of the circumstances the method was applied to, not the method itself: just as an honest and fair detective who discovered the culprit cannot be accused of pursuing personal vengeance, one cannot hope to promote conflict using a method where the outcome is unknown at the onset. Far from these two, the CM allow for selectively including evidence, and manipulating what implications the evidence appears to have.

Secondly, given that this type of selective inclusion and manipulation does not bend *to* the evidence, but rather *bends* the evidence, the epistemology would allow for beliefs to be changed in very limited ways. Summarizing Pierce's writing in *The Fixation of Belief*, Spencer lists three alternatives to the scientific method: the first is tenaciously clinging to beliefs against counterevidence, the second is the method of authority where beliefs are adopted according to the authority's decisions, and the third is the a priori method where beliefs are held while evidence is disregarded according to preexisting beliefs or criteria. Each of these can manifest in a variety of ways in the climate change scenario: tenaciously clinging to beliefs can express what a person *wants* to believe; changing beliefs according to an authority could be what is decided by Fox News or the master CCN of the individual or in-group; changing beliefs according to some preexisting

criteria could mean existing political beliefs. Although they can each manifest differently, they pose an epistemic problem to this climate change conflict in which science is central. As Spencer writes, “only the scientific method provides a means, independent of our preferences, of determining whether our beliefs are correct, because it uses external evidence to judge these beliefs rather than using our beliefs to judge the evidence” (Spencer, 2020).

CM structurally differs from the scientific method, so the degree to which Fox News reporting uses them is the degree to which its reporting is unscientific. Although it cannot be determined in this study, it’s important to note that the degree to which Fox News uses the methods *intentionally* is the degree to which it aims to be unscientific, which amounts to being anti-scientific. Existing research shows that the accuracy of an individual’s perception can be dramatically altered depending on their epistemic beliefs, measured according to how much they rely on their intuition for facts, how consistent evidence and beliefs may or may not need to be, and if they interpret truth to be political (Garrett & Weeks, 2017). Given the epistemological concentration of power Fox News has and the dependence of concentrated viewers, it is entirely possible that these narratives are created as epistemological systems of oppression, a theme explored in Medina’s “Epistemic Injustice and Epistemologies of Ignorance” (Medina, 2017).

Conclusion

Expanded research into the epistemological practices of Fox News, and by inference those of viewers, may help illuminate the challenges such epistemological beliefs pose to climate change polarization. If such challenges have conflict dimensions, then conflict resolution can illuminate constructive initiatives. If CCN plays a bigger role in climate change political polarization, then resisting and dismantling this CCN is a necessary component of a constructive resolution. Until then, these narratives will presumably sustain climate change opposition by sustaining the conflict-

conditioned narratives. “Action has meaning only in relationship, and without understanding relationship, action on any level will only breed conflict. The understanding of relationship is infinitely more important than the search for any plan of action.” — Jiddu Krishnamurti

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