

# Shades of Denialism

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## Abstract

Journalists and scholars have been writing about the phenomenon of climate denialism since the late 1990s. These exposés of climate denialism focus on how controversy has been manufactured by the oil, gas and coal industries and the think tanks and policy institutes they underwrite. In exposing these tactics, critics tend to portray climate deniers as a homogeneous group of ideologues, scoundrels and dupes. We argue that climate denialism or climate skepticism is a more nuanced cultural formation that has complex sources, ideological commitments, and rhetorical expressions. This argument follows recent analyses turning primarily to ideology, political affiliation, and personal values to explain denialism and skepticism in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence (McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Poortinga, Spence, Whitmarsh, Capstick, & Pidgeon, 2011; Whitmarsh, 2011). Using analyses primarily of online spaces, such as comments on news stories and discussion threads on the forum-based site Reddit, this paper will identify multiple shades of denialism and skepticism as they emerge in a variety of forums. We plot these variations on a theme on a map organized by the degree to which a position emerges from a scientific background and the strength of its skepticism. This paper argues that if we are to address the crucial problem of climate denialism, we need a better understanding of not only the political and economic, but also the rhetorical and social nuances of the problem.

## Shades of Denialism

In a recent review essay in *The Atlantic Magazine*, Charles Mann recounts the stalemate between ecologists and economists over how to address global climate change. Mann's thesis that we don't know how to talk about climate change is both inaccurate—we know a great deal—and troubling—we don't know enough. This paper argues that if we are to address the crucial problem of climate denialism and the consequent policy stalemate, we need a better understanding of not only the political and economic issues, but also the rhetorical and social nuances of the problem. Faced with both escalating climate change and persistent denial of its reality, we, like many others, wonder how can we respond to climate denialism in more civil and more effective ways.

Journalists and scholars have been writing about the phenomenon of climate denialism since the late 1990s, and particularly about efforts to cultivate denialism. Ross Gelbspan's 1997 *The Heat Is On* and 2004 *Boiling Point* are landmark investigations of the industry-funded campaign to manufacture controversy over climate change. James Hoggan brought this controversy online with the *DeSmogBlog* in 2005, and followed with the 2009 book, *Climate Cover Up*. More academic books such as Oreskes and Conway's *Merchants of Doubt* have documented the strategic manufacture of the controversy. In rhetoric and communications, Marlia Banning (2009) and Leah Ceccarelli (2011) offer critical analyses of denialism. In the most comprehensive overview of what they call the "denial machine" McCright and Dunlap identify the same list the actors and institutions who generate the "echo chamber" of denialism (McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Dunlap, 2013).

These exposés of climate denialism focus on how controversy has been orchestrated by the oil, gas and coal industries and the think tanks and policy institutes they underwrite. In exposing these tactics, critics tend to portray climate deniers as a largely homogeneous group of ideologues, scoundrels and dupes. They are a “machine” and they talk in an “echo chamber.” As Dunlap and McCright say, “the glue that holds most of them [conservative think tanks] together is the shared opposition to governmental regulatory efforts to ameliorate climate change” (2011, p. 144) and a “commitment to free enterprise, limited government, and promotion of unfettered economic growth” (2011, p. 149). Though it is not an academic analysis, Naomi Klein’s recent book *This Changes Everything* comes to the same conclusion about “The Right,” understood as the coherent neoliberal political and ideological consensus. While they do not attribute the policy deadlock solely to this cabal, Dunlap and McCright conclude that the combined and coordinated efforts of the denial machine “have certainly had a profound effect on the way in which climate change is perceived, discussed, and increasingly debated—particularly within the US” (2011, p. 156).

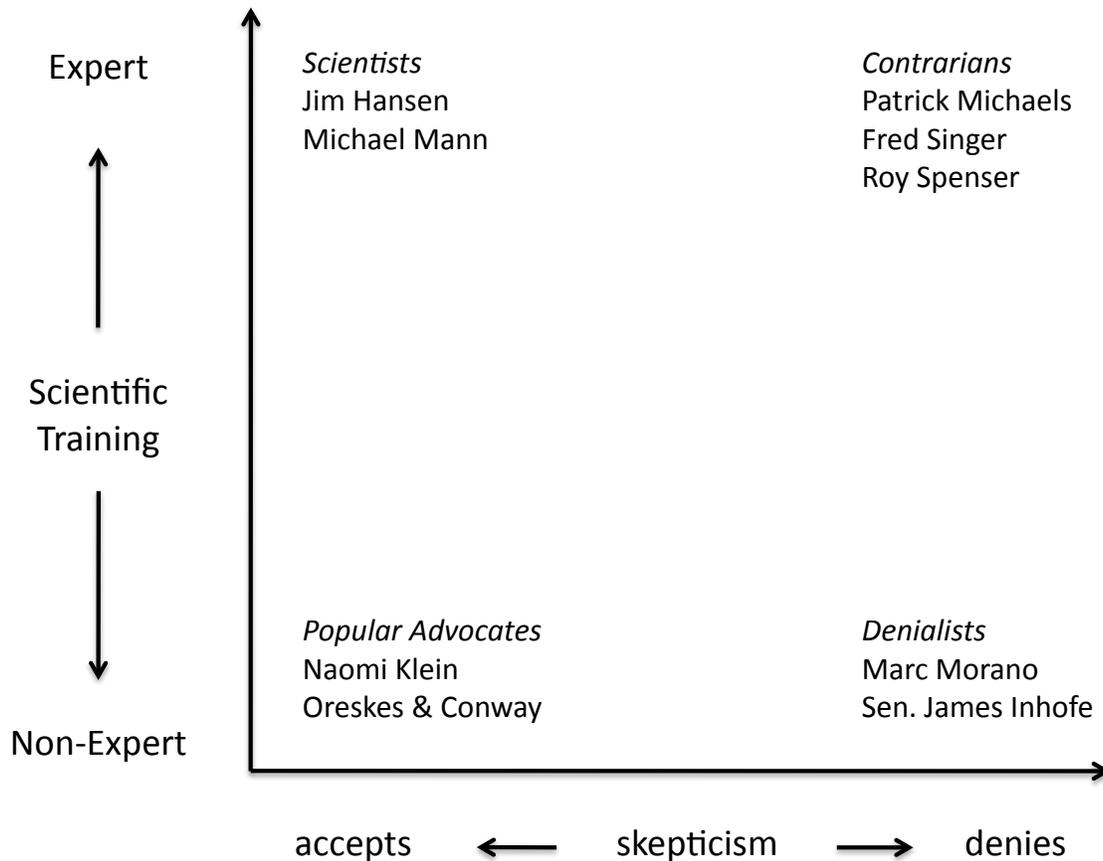
While we certainly acknowledge the power of the denial machine and its effects on public opinion, we think it is a dangerous mistake to stop there. We worry that for many environmental scholars and cultural critics such as ourselves, blaming the mercenaries of neoliberal fast capitalism is just too attractive an option to be questioned. Finally, what we have known all along is verified, and those conservative ideologues can be reassuringly and satisfyingly vilified.

But climate denialism or climate skepticism is a more nuanced cultural formation that has complex sources, ideological commitments, and rhetorical expressions. We worry that the denial machine will function like the closely associated deficit model popular for so long in the scholarship on public understanding of science. Where the deficit model holds that controversies can be solved by providing more or more accessible information, the powerful concept of manufactured controversy can suggest that exposing the villains and correcting their misinformation can move us toward resolution and closure. We believe that any such easy answer is dangerous because first, it blinds us to the complex rhetorical activity surrounding climate denialism and, second, it cuts off possibilities for rhetorical engagement.

We are not alone in saying that the efforts of the denial machine do not explain the durability or intransigence of the controversy over anthropogenic climate change. Sheila Jasanoff argues that a “more complete” answer is that the civic epistemology in the US is based on the adversary system of common law and involves “overt confrontation between opposing, interest-laden points of view” and typically depends on mechanisms such as the courts, federal agencies and advisory committees to establish closure. She concludes that the controversy over anthropogenic climate change persists because “the IPCC’s carefully constructed procedures for seeking peer review failed to answer adequately to US traditions of achieving knowledge closure” (2011, p. 135).

Similarly, Dan Kahan’s popular theory of cultural cognition argues that people perceive and interpret the facts about controversies like climate change based on their personality type and an associated set of values. In general, Kahan’s cultural cognition lays out a schematic structure or grid of personality types and a series of psychological filtering mechanisms that make it almost impossible to hear, value and be persuaded by evidence that threatens deeply held values. This filtering perception works most powerfully in more heated policy controversies that might threaten a listener’s neoliberal commitments and group identity.

Like Mike Hulme, we believe that there are many reasons why we disagree about climate change, to borrow the title of his book. And some of these reasons are not irrational, simply products of the denial machine, or permanently closed to discussion. The scholarship on manufactured controversy and denialism describes a rhetorical landscape that is schematic and, we think, incomplete and unproductive. Figure 1 represents the schematic constructed by the manufactured controversy and denialist machine literature.



**Figure 1. Map of the rhetorical climate change landscape.**

If you are an expert scientist, you most likely argue on factual grounds that anthropogenic climate change is real and indisputable. It is “extremely likely” in the words of the IPCC. Your role is to bring the truth of science to the citizenry so that they can act accordingly. Non-experts like the many journalists and scholars who have documented the denialism machine or the controversy such as Naomi Klein or Naomi Orestes expose the villains and advocate powerfully for radical change. Meanwhile, scientists who are hired guns or goons of the machine are “contrarians” who sell their scientific credentials in the service of the fossil fuel industry. They have “expertise” though not always in climate science, and make arguments that serve the interests of the extractive industry and its political skills. And finally, non-experts who cleave passionately to the neoliberal and tea party

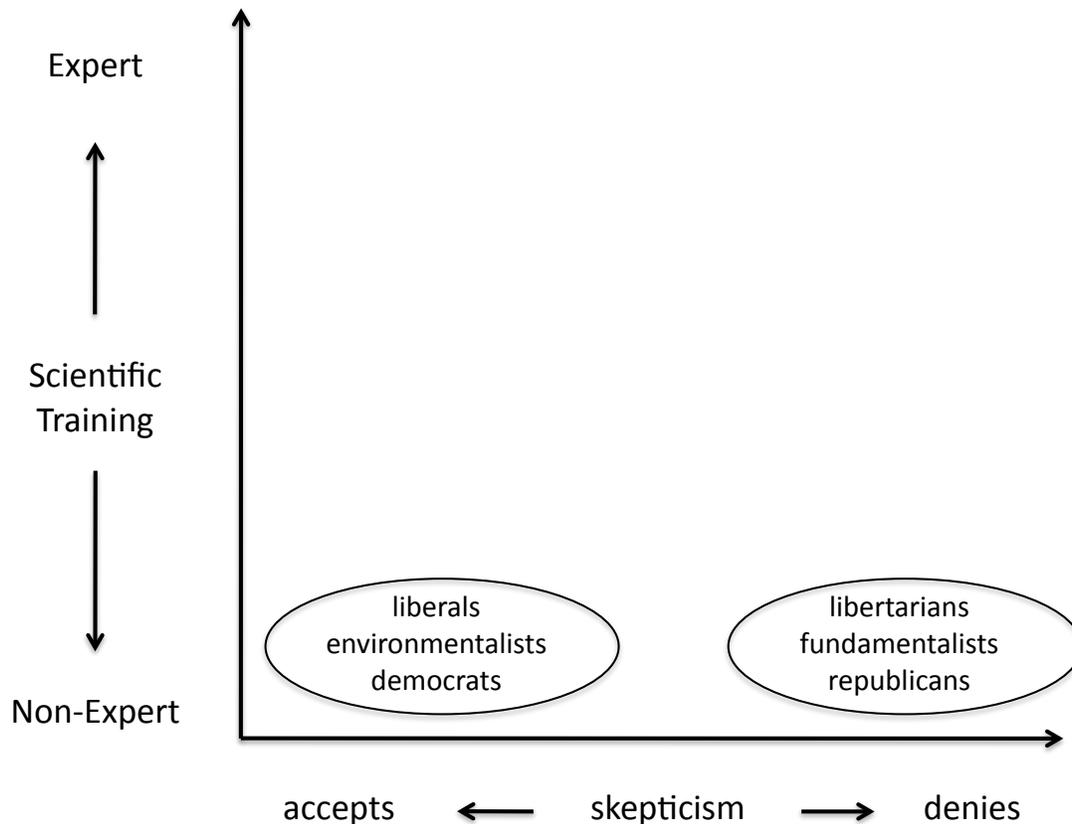
ideology—the familiar Fox news, conservative blogosphere nexus—supply an endless stream of propaganda to their complaint listeners. Somewhere caught in the middle of this partisan warfare—and we choose the metaphor purposefully—the average citizen occupies the no man’s land in an arc centered on the lower left corner of our graph.

We think there is much truth in this map and that it is not inaccurate. But we think it only tells part of the story. As John Meyer has recently argued:

Yet even in the United States, a singular focus on opposition and climate science denialism as the obstacle to change is itself a form of denial; it imagines that these efforts have been far more monolithic and effective in shaping public opinion than is the case. (2015, p. 3)

Like Meyer and Bruno Latour, we think that constructing the public sphere in this monolithic and homogeneous way is a mistake for two reasons: first, it leads to a critical position that is counterproductive, as those being critique are unlikely to listen favorably to that critique. As Meyer says, quoting Jane Bennett, “from the perspective of the populace at large, in turn, this critic’s evident disdain invites their rejection” (2015, p. 6). Our second concern is that this schema—like any schema built on structuralist foundations—provides a static picture of the situation and minimizes the possibilities for genuine rhetorical activity. The schematic mapping of the public discourse obscures the moments of dialogue and the possibilities for genuine rhetorical engagement that are necessary to change.

To address these concerns, we propose an expanded schema that acknowledges the possibility of more nuanced forms of skepticism and denialism. Moving beyond a limited understanding of denialism also allows for a dynamic schema in which individual denialists may come to understand and believe in climate change through dialogic communication. In our above schema of denialism, the only role for communication is one-way messaging from each of the four camps noted in Figure 1 to their ideological constituencies. As in the American two-party political system, much of the battle seems to be about solidifying and galvanizing their base audiences; the remainder of the messaging effort goes towards picking off the occasional stray undecided voter. Figure 2 shows these target bases, typically understood to be non-experts with particular ideological leanings that lead them to accept or deny climate change in line with their political or ideological positionality.



**Figure 2. Map of publics' perceived attitudes towards climate change.**

This model of public attitudes suggests that people's beliefs about climate change can possibly be slightly shifted by top-down communication, but are just as likely to be intransigently grounded in indelible values and ideologies. This model, however, is missing an important factor: individual communication about climate change that happens between non-public figures.

These moments of dialogue and possibility for rhetorical engagement can be seen in a number of online spaces. We've surveyed a number of these spaces, focusing on comments sections in news articles and message board threads, and noted that there are numerous interactions between individuals that don't fit the static model of denialism communication pictured in Figure 1. Certainly, there are many examples of online conversations that reflect the sharp, often political, and dismayingly antagonistic divide between those who accept climate change and those who deny it. In these conversations, there are moments in which we can see the standard talking points of various public denialists—the scientists, the non-expert denialists, etc.—inflecting particular comments. However, in the dialogue between commenters, a conversation emerges that is not just a back-and-forth parroting of the established positions we typically refer to in discussions of denialism.

Our study of these examples of dialogic communication is ongoing, so we don't claim here to have comprehensively mapped the ways in which online dialogue prompts us to reassess Figure 1's static map of beliefs about climate change. We would like to share a few moments from online dialogues that offer more nuanced illustrations of how people think about climate change—and hint at how their thinking might evolve as it is challenged. It is in these dialogic communications that we see

possibilities for rhetorical engagement, and the promise of a richer role for communication and rhetoric in furthering attempts to motivate public support for climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. At the very least, we hope that finding new ways to engage with and shift public attitudes about climate change will erode political resistance to such efforts.

A telling example of online commentary occurs in dialogues when individuals self-identify as potentially skeptical but open to discussion and consideration of scientific evidence. There are numerous such moments in an “Ask Me Anything” discussion thread with denialist researcher John Cook (2015) on Reddit, a popular online discussion forum. Cook, a cognitive psychology PhD student researching attitudes towards climate change, offers through the “Ask Me Anything” format to share his expertise with curious readers. The commenters ask questions and make comments, to which both John Cook and other commenters can respond. In one interesting exchange, commenter “Cyklotimik” writes, “Agreed, I am not convinced by all the theories on climate change, yet I am not denying anything. I’m even willing, if not to be convinced, at least to ear [sic] arguments of all parties. Though, I am not encline [sic] to ear [sic] what you have to say when you won’t even put yourself into question” (2015). Commenter “jelliknight” seconds this viewpoint, explaining that “Even though I accept that there is a scientific consensus I still have some questions about AGW, but I can’t even ask them without being shit all over for not blindly accepting what I’ve been told to believe (healthy skepticism? Not if you’re on the ‘wrong’ side)” (2015). Both of these comments illustrate an attitude towards climate change that does not fit neatly into the categories of acceptance or denial. Instead, these two commenters both seem resistant to the monolithic messaging offered by various groups. They are searching for a dialogic space in which they can hear from others, ask questions, and challenge claims without being boxed into simple categories that they feel leave no room for discussion.

Another example of unexpectedly complex attitudes about climate change comes from moments when individuals demonstrate a willingness to resist certain political and economic responses to climate change without denying climate change itself. On an NPR story on how to teach climate change in the classroom (Lombrozo, 2014), one comment thread begins with commenter “J H” claiming that “People don’t want climate legislation. They want JOBS.” Following a lengthy debate about whether or not climate legislation actually threatens the economy, another commenter pithily dismisses J H’s economic concerns by writing, “You can go on thinking that climate change is a big conspiracy - but you are not correct.” J H replies, “I don’t think that. :)”

The move to question climate change on the grounds that the likely policy responses are economically harmful is a familiar move to anyone involved in these debates. What is interesting in this example, though, is the presence of a commenter who stakes out a pro-science, pro-climate change position while also adopting an economic viewpoint we are primed to attribute to denialists. The same commenter, J H, goes on to express tempered support for climate change policy, writing “Create jobs. Get the economy going. Then put together a modest climate package, and even I’ll support it.” While this sentiment is problematic given the urgency of climate change, it does represent a sort of mixed viewpoint that isn’t well-captured in the static schema of climate change denialism. J H also attempts to engage with the underlying science, joining a debate about Arctic sea ice coverage and the so-called “global warming pause.” Here again, his position seems contradictory to what we would expect from a self-professed non-denialist willing to accept climate legislation: he argues that the arctic sea ice data is too limited to be anything but scientific “cherry picking,” and that “the pause is indisputable.” These claims come straight from a variety of denialist sources, both expert and non-expert, but J H has incorporated them into a position that is not purely denialist.

This evidence of a viewpoint not easily reducible to one camp of climate change denialism supports Olaf Corry and Dan Jørgensen's claim that "moving beyond the categories of 'believer' and 'denier' may facilitate debate about rival political strategies for climate governance—re-politicising the policy debate while depoliticizing the science debate" (2015, p. 172). J H's involvement in both the comment section's economic and scientific debates demonstrates that not all intransigence is motivated by scientific skepticism, and—more importantly—not all intransigence is as monolithically intransigent as we might believe based on a static schema of denialism.

Of course, we are not ourselves denying the often unproductive and frankly vitriolic nature of many public conversations about climate change. But what we have found in these online dialogues is that public conversations are not limited to well-trained audiences shouting the party line past each other. Individuals take information and ideas from a variety of sources, even ones seemingly in conflict, and use them to establish complex attitudes about climate change that may be more malleable than the polarized and ideologically coherent attitudes we might expect based on a static schema of denialism. The online dialogue we study does not minimize the power of denialism but it does suggest that the rhetorical dynamics are more flexible than the denialist model implies and that there are possibilities for engaging large numbers of citizens in potentially productive dialogue.

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