

## Denialism as Detrimental Epistemic Friction: Contexts, Agents, and the Politics of Disruption

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**ABSTRACT.** This article conceptualizes denialism as a systemic phenomenon rooted in both contextual and agentive dynamics, framing it as a form of detrimental epistemic friction. Departing from reductive approaches that treat denialism primarily as misinformation or individual cognitive bias, the analysis foregrounds the structural mechanisms through which denialism is produced, sustained, and normalized. By situating denialism within weaponized epistemic environments, the analysis shows how it reinforces power asymmetries and undermines the epistemic conditions required for inclusive and cooperative reasoning. The article provides both a diagnostic framework for identifying structural epistemic vulnerabilities and a basis for restoring democratic epistemic practices in contested knowledge landscapes.

**Keywords:** *Denialism, Epistemic friction, Epistemic authority, Epistemic Resistance, Knowledge environments.*

### 1. Introduction

Denialism, characterized by the deliberate rejection of well-established facts, theories or evidence, has recently become a significant issue for both knowledge-based groups and democratic systems.<sup>1</sup> No longer limited to marginal viewpoints, denialist stories now cover a wide range of subjects including climate change, vaccine safety, historical wrongs, and systemic inequality.<sup>2</sup> This form of resistance consistently

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<sup>1</sup> McIntyre, *On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy*, The MIT Press, 2023, pp. 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Godulla, Seibert & Klute, "What Is Denialism? An Examination and Classification of Definitional Approaches and Relevant Actors", in *Journalism and Media*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2024, pp. 135-147.



erodes public trust in scientific authority and disrupts the socio-institutional structures vital for the generation, validation, and continuity of collective knowledge. In a time characterized more by various crises and disputed power relations, grasping denialism carries immediate practical and ethical importance.

Although the current literature on denialism has provided useful insights by examining its rhetorical techniques, psychological factors, and sociopolitical drivers, significant shortcomings persist. Studies have documented how doubt is systematically manufactured to serve political agendas<sup>3</sup> and how trust in expertise is shaped by increasingly complex informational environments<sup>4</sup>. Connected to the subject, feminist epistemologists<sup>5</sup> and agnotologists<sup>6</sup> have highlighted the deliberate creation of ignorance and the sidelining of dissenting knowers. Nonetheless, despite this expanding body of research, the epistemological dimension of denialism continues to be insufficiently theorized. Many strategies emphasize the consequences of denialism, yet few examine its distinct dynamics as a knowledge-based formation.

This study seeks to fill that gap by arguing for a conceptual reframing of denialism as a form of detrimental epistemic friction. Drawing on the work of José Medina<sup>7</sup>, we adopt epistemic friction as the core analytic bodywork because it highlights the fundamental tension between cognitive freedom and constraint that characterizes both knowledge production and denial. Epistemic friction, in its productive form, is crucial for inquiry as it offers the resistance necessary for belief revision, accountability, and the collaborative pursuit of understanding.<sup>8</sup> However, we contend that denialism pushes the boundaries of this resistance.

To accomplish this goal, the article is organized in the following manner. The initial part outlines the current epistemic and political landscape where denialism has gained more prominence, emphasizing the factors that allow its discursive influence. The following section presents the core conceptual framework of epistemic friction, largely based on Medina's<sup>9</sup> research. Special attention is directed toward differentiating generative types of epistemic friction from harmful forms that hinder

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<sup>3</sup> Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*, Bloomsbury Press, 2010, pp. 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People*. Oxford University Press, United States of America, 2022, pp. 126-127.

<sup>5</sup> See Sullivan & Tuana (Eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, State University of New York Press, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See Proctor & Schiebinger (Eds.), *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance*. Stanford University Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

investigation and perpetuate epistemic inequalities. This theoretical basis highlights how social positioning and power imbalances influence knowledge dynamics. Expanding this scheme, the third section conceptualizes denialism as an instance of detrimental epistemic friction. The proposal introduces a dual analytical approach that focuses on the two dimensions: the structural conditions enabling the efficacy of denialism, and the agents who intentionally navigate and reinforce epistemic hierarchies.

The relative deprioritization of the content of denialist messages is a deliberate methodological and theoretical decision grounded in the recognition that such content is highly contingent upon the specific socio-political contexts and the agents who produce and disseminate it. Denialist rhetoric is not fixed or uniform; rather, it is malleable and responsive to the institutional support, power structures, and epistemic environments in which it emerges<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, the conceptual and rhetorical features of denialist discourse are shaped and constrained by the broader epistemic contexts and the strategic capacities of the social and institutional actors involved. By expanding the framework to include structural conditions and the roles of agents, we acknowledge that denialism is not only about what is said but also about why and how such narratives gain traction within sociopolitical and epistemic contexts.

This work contributes to current literature by shifting the focus from denialism as cognitive failure to denialism as a relational, performative, and power-laden epistemic practice. In doing so, questions prevailing beliefs that additional facts or improved information can successfully combat denialist narratives. Rather, it suggests that a significant response must confront the fundamental imbalances of epistemic authority that enable denialism to thrive. Comprehending denialism in this manner creates new avenues for criticism and, importantly, for opposition.

## 2. Denial in the system: the social conditions of epistemic breakdown

Denial illustrates the phenomenon whereby individuals can register and even acknowledge information without fully internalizing its implications or acting accordingly;<sup>11</sup> individuals actively avoid confronting these implications for being uncomfortable knowledge<sup>12</sup>. A situation of this type can arise when an intense longing

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<sup>10</sup> Schmid & Betsch, "Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions", in *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 3, Issue 9, 2019, pp. 931-939.

<sup>11</sup> Plesner & Justesen, "Digitalize and deny: Pluralistic collective ignorance in an algorithmic profiling project", in *Ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, 2023, p 24.

<sup>12</sup> Rayner, "Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses", in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 41, Issue 1, 2012, pp. 107-125.

for a particular object or outcome stands in opposition to the facts of the external world.<sup>13</sup> At its core, denial is a familiar human response—a palliative mechanism<sup>14</sup> through which individuals refuse to acknowledge facts that generate psychological discomfort or cognitive dissonance. In this sense, denial appears as a private and episodic phenomenon: a momentary lapse or defensive gesture that shields the individual from distress.<sup>15</sup> However, the following subsection contends that denial becomes epistemically and politically consequential only once it is no longer an individual coping mechanism but a collectively sustained and strategically organized mode of epistemic resistance.

### **2.1. From individual denial to collective denialism**

While denial may arise from an individual's motivated reasoning, denialism involves organized efforts to construct and maintain a "worldview that both derives from and supports the denial of some inconvenient truth"<sup>16</sup>. It emerges when personal refusals crystallize into a worldview, becoming embedded in social practices and discourses that actively contest established knowledge. What was once inward and psychological becomes outward, strategic, and ideological; a phenomenon that thrives in the contested spaces of public discourse, where the legitimacy of knowledge is always at stake. This transformation is a matter of scale, but also of function.

The systematic study of denialism as a distinct epistemic and rhetorical phenomenon can be traced to the seminal work of Mark and Chris Jay Hoofnagle in 2007. Their essay, "What is Denialism?", provided the first comprehensive framework for understanding denialism beyond mere psychologic. The Hoofnagles conceptualized the phenomenon as the following:

Denialism is the employment of rhetorical tactics to give the appearance of argument or legitimate debate, when in actuality there is none. These false arguments are used when one has few or no facts to support one's viewpoint against a scientific consensus or against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. They are effective in distracting from actual useful debate using emotionally appealing, but ultimately empty and illogical assertions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Polity Press, 2001, pp. 21-23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self-Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion*, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., cited in Altanian, *The Epistemic Injustice of Genocide Denialism*, Routledge, 2024, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Hoofnagle & Hoofnagle, "What is Denialism?", in *SSRN*, 2007, p. 1.

Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee<sup>18</sup> later contributed to the academic discourse on denialism by proposing a systematic taxonomy of its rhetorical strategies. Their analysis identified the strategies outlined by the Hoofnagles, consolidating them into five key elements (conspiracy theories, selective use of data, promotion of unqualified experts, imposition of unattainable evidential benchmarks, and application of fallacious reasoning) which are still regarded as fundamental components of denialism.

We should consider that these networks do more than simply repeat denialist talking points, they actively mobilize material, symbolic, and organizational resources to broaden both the scope and the persuasive reach of their messages. For instance, the fossil fuel sector, ideologically driven think tanks, and supportive media organizations have been pivotal in fostering this atmosphere of denial by funding dissenting academics and spreading deceptive narratives that aimed to blur the scientific consensus.<sup>19</sup> These broader setups create a system that allows denialist rhetoric to flourish not due to its knowledge gaps, but specifically because it promotes specific economic and ideological goals.<sup>20</sup> In that sense, the operation of these components and processes relies on their deep embedding within wider social, ideological, and structural dynamics, which sustain their reproduction beyond isolated or ad hoc occurrences.

Central to their contribution is the identification of denialism as a social and communicative process, shaped by (and in turn reinforcing) broader ideological and group-based commitments. Its persistence and effectiveness cannot be separated from the social and technological infrastructures that facilitate the circulation and legitimation of denialist tactics. Here, denialism is seen as a coordinated social process, enabled and amplified by networks of actors, organizations, and discursive infrastructures.<sup>21</sup>

## **2.2 Reconfiguring knowledge through disruption**

Melanie Altanian highlights a framework that conceptualizes denialism as a phenomenon that operates through both the manipulation of knowledge systems (epistemic dimension) and the coordinated actions of groups, institutions, and social

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<sup>18</sup> Diethelm & McKee, "Denialism: what is it and how should scientists respond?", in *European Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 2–4.

<sup>19</sup> Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude: Defending Science from Denial, Fraud, and Pseudoscience*, The MIT Press, 2019, pp. 159-160.

structures (collective dimension). These two dimensions function in dynamic reciprocity: denialism reconfigures epistemic conditions by mobilizing collective mechanisms of control, while those very mechanisms derive their sociopolitical efficacy from the epistemic destabilization that denialism actively cultivates.<sup>22</sup> It signifies both the rejection of particular knowledge claims and a broader attack on the social and institutional foundations that enable the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

As Mary Douglas observes, “knowledge does not float in the air; it has practical and social bases. The dissolution of empires entails the collapse of structures of knowledge. When an organization disintegrates, the forms of knowledge that have been called forth by the effort to organise disintegrate too”<sup>24</sup>. This claim should not be understood as denying the historical persistence or cross-cultural transmission of epistemic content—a phenomenon aptly captured by the notion of *translatio studiorum*. Rather, Douglas’s insight foregrounds the extent to which knowledge depends upon institutional, normative, and organizational scaffolding for its authority, coherence, and practical efficacy. Although particular bodies of knowledge may endure the collapse of empires or organizations through processes of cultural translation and adoption, the epistemic frameworks that ground their legitimacy, regulate their validation, and enable their collective uptake are often profoundly disrupted or reconstituted. The collapse of epistemic structures, in this sense, does not entail the disappearance of knowledge per se, but rather the erosion of the conditions under which knowledge operates as a socially authoritative and action-guiding practice.

This insight draws attention to the extent to which knowledge is sustained by epistemic infrastructures rather than produced by isolated knowers. Knowledge takes shape within historically embedded constellations of norms, practices, and institutional arrangements that organize epistemic activity and confer legitimacy upon its outcomes. Institutional mechanisms such as peer review, disciplinary norms governing validity, and criteria for falsifiability exemplify the structured processes through which knowledge claims are evaluated, validated, and disseminated within a community.<sup>25</sup> Their role is foundational, as they enable knowledge to emerge through communal participation, ensuring that claims are subjected to rigorous standards of proof and justification. Through these frameworks, knowledge becomes

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<sup>22</sup> Altanian, *The Epistemic Injustice of Genocide Denialism*, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> Broncano, *Puntos ciegos: ignorancia pública y conocimiento privado*, Lengua de trapo, 2019, pp. 232-233.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas, “Forgotten knowledge”, In M. Strathern (Ed.), *Shifting contexts: Transformations in anthropological knowledge*, Routledge, 1995, p. 16

<sup>25</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, pp. 55-56.

more than the aggregation of individual beliefs; it becomes a socially distributed and critically (r)examined corpus of justified understanding. This dynamic improves both epistemic reliability and democratic legitimacy by incorporating knowledge into a shared body of reasoning.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the integrity of these mechanisms cannot be assumed to be self-sustaining. Their efficacy relies on the continual reinforcement of shared epistemic norms and the active maintenance of institutional and procedural safeguards. These mechanisms are particularly vulnerable when the criteria that undergird justification and evidential accountability are deliberately undermined. In such scenarios, epistemic evaluation becomes susceptible to manipulation, leading to distortions in knowledge production and authority.<sup>27</sup>

This line of reasoning brings into focus a foundational concern within epistemological discourse: the imperative to maintain belief-formation processes in active relation to empirical referents and within schemes of normative justification.<sup>28</sup> Epistemic integrity (understood as the convergence between empirical referents and normatively grounded foundations of justification), in this sense, hinges not solely on the aggregation of information, but on the institutional and discursive practices that enable distinctions between epistemically warranted claims and those shaped by prejudice, speculative reasoning, or ideological predisposition. In the absence of such differentiating mechanisms, the epistemic domain becomes increasingly unstable, susceptible to leveling effects wherein all propositions are treated with equal credibility, irrespective of their evidentiary grounding. This erosion of evaluative criteria represents a significant epistemic hazard. It blurs the thresholds of justification that structure meaningful deliberation and impairs the ability of epistemic communities to adjudicate between competing truth claims. When epistemic systems are no longer anchored by institutional protocols (such as peer review), discursive norms (such as the demand for public reason or transparency), or methodological filters (such as replication), they risk becoming self-validating and epistemically insular.<sup>29</sup> These enclosed systems of thought render critique irrelevant.

Moreover, such formations tend to privilege internal coherence over external accountability.<sup>30</sup> Within these environments, beliefs are reinforced through repetition and internal alignment rather than through exposure to contestation or empirical challenge. The epistemic landscape becomes closed off, marked not by openness to correction, but by a recursive logic that equates affirmation with truth.<sup>31</sup> Under

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> Bardon, *The Truth About Denial*, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 92

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 24

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

these conditions, the generative and self-corrective dimensions of inquiry are supplanted by a stabilizing imperative, one that protects entrenched frameworks from disruption and consolidates their authority through epistemic insulation. The potential for these risks underscores the critical importance of maintaining mechanisms of external scrutiny and normative accountability as safeguards against epistemic enclosure and stagnation.<sup>32</sup>

This concern foregrounds the significance of resistance as a constitutive feature of epistemic life; a procedural mechanism essential for maintaining the vitality, integrity, and accountability of knowledge systems. Resistance should not be construed merely as antagonism or oppositionality; challenging assumptions ensure that beliefs remain tethered to empirical reality and subject to continuous critical evaluation. In this sense, resistance operates normatively: it is a structured, rule-governed practice that enables communities of inquiry to detect errors and prevent the uncritical ossification of knowledge. Rather than being a marginal or disruptive element, resistance is crucial to the self-regulating abilities that uphold strong and dependable epistemic systems. This role of resistance is closely tied to what José Medina<sup>33</sup> conceptualizes as epistemic friction: the productive tension that arises when one's cognitive commitments encounter alternative perspectives or dissonant experiences.

Recognizing resistance and epistemic friction as elements of epistemic accountability necessitates careful consideration of the social and historical contexts from which they arise. The capacity of friction to promote critical reflection and revise knowledge is not dictated only by the procedural norms of inquiry but is significantly influenced by the wider framework of epistemic relationships. To completely understand the role of friction, it is essential to investigate how deep-rooted inequalities (formed by enduring patterns of exclusion and power) influence who has the capacity to express dissent and whose objections are acknowledged or disregarded within existing systems of epistemic authority.

### 3. Epistemic friction and its ambiguities

Medina's analysis of epistemic injustice demonstrates that the integrity of knowledge exchange cannot be fully grasped through procedural considerations alone; testimonial practices and knowledge interactions occur within a social context deeply embedded with inherited images, narratives, and cultural scripts.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.



The social imaginary, as Medina puts it, frames who is heard and who is dismissed, whose claims are taken as credible and whose are pathologized or silenced.<sup>35</sup> In environments shaped by systemic oppression, epistemic resistance must also be directed toward these social distortions: toward inherited credibility deficits imposed on marginalized groups<sup>36</sup> and the often-unearned epistemic privilege granted to dominant voices. Under conditions of longstanding social oppression, the social imaginary is warped.

Distortions generated by oppression within the social fabric extend to the allocation of credibility. Historically marginalized populations are consistently subjected to unwarranted doubts regarding their credibility; culturally ingrained stereotypes diminish the perceived validity of their knowledge and their rightful participation in discourse.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, members of dominant social groups tend to be conferred with excessive epistemic credibility, benefiting from trust that at times exceeds deserved limits based on their behavior or moral character. This dynamic engenders a fundamentally asymmetric epistemic landscape, where mistrust is routinely imposed on some, while others enjoy near-universal acceptance.<sup>38</sup>

The persistent asymmetry in the distribution of epistemic credibility carries significant normative and epistemological consequences, extending beyond a mere social inconvenience. When certain individuals or groups are consistently granted an excess of credibility, their views are less likely to be questioned, and their authority tends to be accepted without critical engagement.<sup>39</sup> For instance, celebrity figures or media pundits with large followings may be granted disproportionate credibility on scientific or political matters, leading audiences to accept their claims uncritically, even when these claims contradict established evidence. Over time, this epistemic overvaluation fosters conditions in which critical scrutiny is bypassed and intellectual accountability eroded. In these environments, individuals who consistently enjoy higher epistemic status might create engagement habits that hinder self-correction and shield their beliefs from significant scrutiny.

This insulation contributes to the emergence of specific epistemic dispositions that obstruct responsible inquiry. Individuals immersed in such environments often acquire habits that reinforce intellectual complacency and diminish their responsiveness to disagreement or unfamiliar perspectives. Among the most salient of these are

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> While Medina's framework focuses primarily on racialized and gendered forms of epistemic oppression, it may be critiqued for not explicitly engaging with capitalism as a structural system of domination that intersects with, and reinforces, these other axes of marginalization.

<sup>37</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

what can be termed epistemic vices, which tend to thrive in settings with excessive credibility. For instance, epistemic arrogance manifests as an inflated confidence in one's cognitive reliability, often accompanied by a disregard for the insights or critiques of others.<sup>40</sup> Epistemic laziness takes the form of disengagement, a reluctance to seek out new information or alternative viewpoints.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, closed-mindedness entails an aversion to confronting dissonant evidence or complexity, reinforcing cognitive rigidity.<sup>42</sup>

Together, these vices do not simply reflect personal shortcomings; they are shaped and sustained by broader social arrangements. The emergence of these traits in environments rife with unquestioned credibility demonstrates the complex connection between epistemic character and structural power. When credibility is not evenly shared, the ensuing disparities can undermine the essential norms needed for cooperative knowledge activities. A distinct representation of this dynamic can be seen in the regular hesitation to address personal social privilege (such as through evasive or dismissive participation in conversations about race or gender) which frequently illustrates how these cognitive shortcomings converge in real situations. This state, labeled as meta-insensitivity<sup>43</sup>, describes a type of cognitive and emotional numbness: a simultaneous lack of awareness regarding one's own knowledge limits and the wider structural implications of one's epistemic behavior.

In contrast, those from marginalized backgrounds, even while suffering from under-credited testimony or reduced access to resources, may be better positioned to cultivate certain epistemic virtues. Some of the instances of these virtues could be epistemic humility<sup>44</sup> (the capacity for self-doubt and openness to correction), intellectual curiosity<sup>45</sup> (a drive to learn, often sharpened by necessity), and open-mindedness<sup>46</sup> (the ability to move beyond one's group's perspective and genuinely hear others). Individuals who exhibit these characteristics can be described as meta-lucid subjects—a term that designates agents marked by the capacity to evaluate their own epistemic positioning within broader social and normative contexts.<sup>47</sup> This subject becomes acutely aware of specific social injustices while simultaneously recognizing the ways in which oppressive systems configure perception, influence patterns of reasoning, and condition the norms through which knowledge is evaluated and legitimized.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

Epistemic vices are significant for understanding epistemic resistance, as the latter arises from the dynamic interaction between the internal dispositions of epistemic agents and the external social and structural contexts in which they function. Such internal opposition may emerge from a person's commitment to mental autonomy, their sense of ethical and knowledge-driven responsibility, or a cultivated inclination for reflective self-analysis. These traits (shaped by the presence or absence of specific epistemic virtues) empower individuals to challenge dominant narratives and remain receptive to alternative perspectives. The expression and recognition of epistemic resistance are shaped by broader social imaginaries: these culturally embedded norms, stereotypes, and representation methods that shape public views on who is regarded as a credible knower.<sup>48</sup> External forces frequently constitute formidable barriers to the exercise of epistemic agency, particularly for those individuals or collectives positioned on the peripheries of prevailing epistemic regimes.<sup>49</sup> Within such environments, the efforts of epistemic agents to articulate knowledge claims or engage in collective epistemic practices encounter a bifurcated form of resistance: internally, manifesting as self-doubt and the internalization of hegemonic and oppressive social norms; and externally, through entrenched institutional and normative mechanisms that systematically marginalize and discredit specific epistemic contributions. Epistemic friction emerges at this intersection of individual epistemic agency and socio-institutional constraints, representing a dynamic interplay between personal commitment to knowledge and the external pressures exerted by prevailing normative foundations.

Medina's idea of epistemic friction builds upon frameworks such as Gila Sher's<sup>50</sup> exploration of epistemic responsibility by emphasizing the emotional, intersubjective, and power-laden dimensions of friction. The emergence of epistemic friction cannot be attributed solely to logical disagreement. It arises through interactions among socially positioned individuals whose diverse experiences, interpretative approaches, and situated knowledges contribute meaningfully to the epistemic encounter.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> For example, widely circulating cultural scripts that depict individuals with disabilities as cognitively deficient or economically non-contributive undermine epistemic subjecthood not due to actual individual incapacity but through socially imposed misrecognition. This form of epistemic exclusion limits the recognition of disabled persons as credible knowers. See Whyte, K. P., "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises", in *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, Vol. 1, Issues 1–2, 2018, pp. 224–242.

<sup>50</sup> Sher, *Epistemic friction: An essay on knowledge, truth, and logic*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Normative friction, in Sher's (2016) sense and in particular, is not distributed equally: it is shaped by power relations, institutional structures, and historical legacies that determine whose voices are heard, whose evidence is considered, and whose experiences are validated or marginalized. The standards that govern justification and credibility are themselves subject to contestation, and can be mobilized to exclude, silence, or disadvantage certain knowers.

Crucially, the intensity and trajectory of this friction are shaped not by abstract theory alone; they are conditioned by the relational practices and discursive behaviors of those who both generate and receive friction within specific contexts. The characteristics and direction of epistemic resistance depend on the contextual behaviors, motivations, and power relations of epistemic agents, who can either create friction to promote critical engagement and epistemic growth or utilize it to stifle opposition and maintain existing hierarchies.

Furthermore, epistemic friction is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Epistemic communities benefit from a certain degree of tension, which if properly oriented, is helpful for the advancement of knowledge: it constrains unwarranted belief, grounds inquiry in critical scrutiny, and enables processes of correction and learning.<sup>52</sup> Beneficial epistemic friction emerges from dissent, critical engagement, and contestation, elements that are foundational to the vitality and robustness of epistemic communities.<sup>53</sup>

This capacity for epistemic productivity likewise entails an inherent vulnerability: when epistemic friction is instrumentalized to obstruct inquiry, it becomes pernicious. Detrimental epistemic friction refers to this mode of resistance that, rather than facilitating the expansion of epistemic horizons, actively constrains and narrows the space of inquiry.<sup>54</sup> It emerges when the very norms and practices designed to promote critical scrutiny and epistemic accountability are redeployed as mechanisms of censorship and silencing. In such contexts, mechanisms like doubt and contestation are mobilized to constrain epistemic horizons, serving to suppress belief formation and foreclose alternative avenues of inquiry instead of promoting their expansion. Friction, in this pathological form, ceases to correct epistemic injustice and instead fortifies existing asymmetries. A key advantage of this approach is the redefinition of epistemic friction not just as a simple obstacle but as a crucial factor for epistemic advancement, stemming specifically from the interaction of social agents possessing differing viewpoints, experiences, and justifying methods. Such dialectical interaction generates a productive tension that challenges entrenched epistemic beliefs and fosters critical reflexivity, thereby supporting the development of more inclusive knowledge practices and facilitating transformative understanding.

The limited focus on this aspect highlights the necessity for a deeper examination of how epistemic communities manage disagreement in environments characterized by epistemic inequality. Disputes over knowledge claims are rarely neutral or evenly distributed; they unfold within institutional and cultural configurations

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<sup>52</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

that authorize certain forms of resistance while rendering others invisible or illegitimate. Institutions (often positioned as custodians of epistemic authority) occupy a complex and ambivalent role in this dynamic.<sup>55</sup> This uneven allocation of epistemic recognition shapes not only who is allowed to engage in processes of epistemic friction, but also which contributions are amplified, and which are marginalized. Such asymmetrical dynamics prompt critical reflection on the disparities embedded within epistemic resistance, and on the specific socio-political conditions that determine whether arguable engagements can lead to substantive epistemic and structural transformation.

Denialism demonstrates how epistemic resistance is fundamentally ingrained in, and influenced by, imbalanced systems of recognition and authority. Beyond irrational anomalies or trivial disturbances, denialist narratives obtain support specifically because they are expressed by individuals with significant institutional authority, symbolic capital, or financial assets.<sup>56</sup> Their capacity to mobilize epistemic friction from a position of privilege illustrates how institutions selectively authorize certain forms of resistance while delegitimizing others, particularly those emerging from marginalized or dissenting epistemic positions.

Consequently, denialism illustrates how epistemic friction, instead of operating consistently as a democratizing element, can be appropriated to reinforce power and stifle transformative contestation. This dynamic underscores the importance of extending analysis beyond the immediate content of epistemic disputes to include the structural and socio-political contexts that determine which forms of dissent gain recognition and possess the capacity to influence social change.

#### 4. When epistemic friction becomes detrimental: the case of denialism

As discussed above, epistemic resistance manifests in diverse forms, each aligned with normative and strategic objectives. Some forms of epistemic friction promote emancipatory and corrective outcomes, while others serve to entrench existing structures of domination. Resistance is therefore neither uniformly beneficial nor uniformly harmful: certain disagreements and conflicts provide essential tests for biased or unjust epistemic frameworks.<sup>57</sup> Friction in knowledge practices is not intrinsically good or bad; its normative value depends on the purposes it serves and the conditions it engages.

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<sup>55</sup> Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. For example, in the context of climate change, fossil fuel corporations and affiliated think tanks have historically funded denialist campaigns that frame their positions as reasoned skepticism, thereby masking vested interests behind a veneer of scientific deliberation.

<sup>57</sup> Diéguez, *La ciencia en cuestión: Disenso, negación y objetividad*, Bookwire GmbH, 2024, pp. 115-116.

Against this backdrop, this section distinguishes epistemic friction that fosters justice and inclusion from friction that entrenches domination, with denialism exemplifying the latter. The analysis proceeds in three interrelated dimensions. It first examines the contextual conditions of epistemic breakdown, particularly in marginalized communities, where resistant epistemologies reveal structural exclusions while denialist practices exploit uncertainty and undermine trust. It then considers denialism contextually and agentively: the contextual dimension highlights degraded epistemic environments shaped by structural vulnerabilities, while the agentive dimension focuses on how denialist actors cultivate public identities and exploit asymmetries in epistemic authority. Together, these perspectives show how denialism is enacted, reproduced, and insulated from scrutiny. Finally, the discussion situates denialism within historically and institutionally shaped environments, showing how it perpetuates mistrust, erodes collective capacities for critical evaluation, and underscores the need for interventions that restore accountable knowledge production and deliberative public reasoning.

#### **4.1. Friction without traction**

In communities experiencing systemic marginalization (such as racial minorities, Indigenous communities, and economically challenged groups) distrust in established institutions of knowledge (like scientific bodies, academic institutions, and government) usually stems from individual encounters with exclusion and exploitation.<sup>58</sup> This type of skepticism illustrates what is referred to as resistant epistemologies: viewpoints that question the validity of institutions by attempting to reveal the selective, incomplete, and occasionally coercive tactics used to maintain epistemic power.<sup>59</sup> These critical orientations exemplify what are referred to as resistant epistemologies<sup>60</sup>: epistemic stances that interrogate institutional legitimacy by exposing the selective, partial, and sometimes coercive operations through which epistemic authority is maintained. Such resistance functions as a call for epistemic justice, seeking to address long-standing inequities in whose knowledge is acknowledged, validated,

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<sup>58</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 2023, p. 399.

<sup>59</sup> In *The Epistemology of Protest* (2023), Medina further develops this argument emphasizing how acts of protest and collective resistance can function as epistemic interventions. He contends that such practices contest institutional authority and seek to reconfigure the conditions under which credibility is assigned and knowledge is produced, thereby contributing to the democratization of epistemic life.

<sup>60</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 302.

or disregarded.<sup>61</sup> Resistant epistemologies do not aim to dismantle the pursuit of knowledge itself. On the contrary, they endeavor to transform it—broadening the epistemic field to include historically excluded voices and demanding more equitable conditions for the validation, circulation, and uptake of knowledge claims. Challenging the authority of dominant knowledge frameworks makes resistant epistemologies illuminate the power dynamics that underlie processes of knowledge production. They draw attention to whose voices are legitimized, whose perspectives are marginalized, and how these patterns reflect broader systems of social and political inequality. In this way, they offer not only critique but also a transformative vision for more inclusive and accountable epistemic practices.

This insight emphasizes the significance of perceiving epistemic friction as integrated within specific social contexts. The capacity to be recognized as a trustworthy source, an individual whose statements are esteemed, differs inconsistently across social situations. The distribution of epistemic authority is conditioned by social status, institutional configurations, and deeply ingrained belief systems, which collectively determine whose knowledge claims are acknowledged and whose are disregarded or contested.<sup>62</sup> Hence, identifying beneficial versus detrimental forms of epistemic friction surpasses mere categorization and involves profound political and ethical duties.

Grounded in sociological analysis, this approach furnishes a critical structure for understanding the specific dangers inherent in denialism, regarded as a prime illustration of harmful epistemic friction. Denialism hampers investigative processes not through legitimate skepticism<sup>63</sup> or authentic contestation<sup>64</sup>. Rather, it overwhelms the epistemic environment with bad-faith objections, epistemic double standards, and manufactured mistrust toward knowledge-producing institutions. What renders it especially challenging to discern is its imitation of epistemic virtue: denialist actors commonly appropriate the language of democratic inquiry (such as appeals to free

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<sup>61</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, pp. 54-55

<sup>62</sup> Medina, "Agential Epistemic Injustice and Collective Epistemic Resistance", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 48, Issue 1, 2022, pp. 3–28.

<sup>63</sup> Denialism is also conceptualized as a form of *pseudoskepticism*—an epistemic posture that imitates the language and rituals of critical inquiry while systematically evading its responsibilities. Unlike genuine skepticism, which is marked by openness to revision and responsiveness to evidence, pseudoskepticism operates through selective doubt, rhetorical deflection, and bad-faith critique. It performs epistemic virtue without embodying it. See Torcello, L., "Science Denial, Pseudoskepticism, and Philosophical Deficits Undermining Public Understanding of Science: A Response to Sharon E. Mason", in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, Vol. 9, Issue 9, 2020, pp. 1-9.

<sup>64</sup> Hansson, "Science denial as a form of pseudoscience", in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 63, 2017, pp. 39–47.

speech, balanced debate or scientific skepticism) employing these not to foster understanding, yet to create confusion and postpone consensus. These actors adopt the strategic posture of claiming that issues are unsettled, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, in order to present their views as worthy of serious consideration and prolong public uncertainty.<sup>65</sup>

The distinctive potency of denialism lies in its calculated appropriation of their outward forms. Denialist rhetoric seldom appears as a straightforward challenge to critical examination; it wraps itself in the guise of responsible doubt, thorough methodology, and open discussion. This rhetorical approach renders denialist actions seem credible, especially in democratic settings that value transparency and discussion. Sven Ove Hansson<sup>66</sup> contends that denialism involves a “mimicking of scientific methodological characteristics”<sup>67</sup> while concurrently undermining the foundational epistemic commitments that provide those characteristics with their justificatory value.

This deliberate imitation serves as a tactical disruption of the mechanisms by which knowledge is collaboratively created and vindicated. By deploying epistemic markers<sup>68</sup>, denialist rhetoric cultivates a veneer of rational deliberation that simulates the formal structure of democratic discourse. Yet beneath this surface lies a corrosive dynamic: one that weakens the social infrastructures that support trust in knowledge practices.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, denialism constitutes a paradigmatic form of detrimental epistemic friction—namely, a force that neither promotes critical self-reflection nor facilitates the rectification of epistemic error.

The force and effectiveness of denialism is closely intertwined with—and frequently amplify—preexisting asymmetries in epistemic authority; differences in who is authorized to participate in knowledge-production, whose voices carry weight, and what forms of evidence are deemed admissible.<sup>70</sup> These asymmetries extend beyond narrow epistemological concerns and are embedded in and perpetuate deeper vectors of social power, including histories of exclusion, institutionalized

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<sup>65</sup> Hansson, “Science denial as a form of pseudoscience”, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> Epistemic markers refer to discursive signals or rhetorical elements that indicate an apparent commitment to knowledge-related norms, such as objectivity, evidence-based reasoning, or expertise. In this context, they include references to empirical data, appeals to scientific consensus, or calls for open debate. While these markers are typically used to enhance the credibility of a claim, denialist rhetoric employs them superficially or manipulatively, giving the impression of epistemic integrity without adhering to its substantive standards.

<sup>69</sup> Levy, *Bad beliefs*, p. 57.

<sup>70</sup> Proctor & Schiebinger (Eds.), *Agnotology*, pp. 90-91.



marginalization<sup>71</sup>, and entrenched structural injustices<sup>72</sup>. Denialism thus derives its potency not only from the content it rejects, but also from the ways in which it exploits and distorts the conditions of epistemic credibility, authority, and participation. By contrast, resistant epistemologies, although they generate epistemic friction, advance epistemic justice by exposing structural exclusions rather than undermining the conditions of inquiry themselves. The next subsection turns to denialism as a contrasting form of epistemic friction that lacks this emancipatory orientation.

#### 4.2. *Exploring the dimensions of denialism*

As mentioned earlier, a comprehensive story cannot be reduced to mere misinformation or unusual epistemic conduct among knowledge factions. Its effectiveness and durability are best perceived as stemming from the dynamic interaction of various factors functioning at different levels of social reality. Core research in scientific and technological studies, along with social epistemology, suggests that epistemic practices are simultaneously influenced by shared norms and the discursive arrangements that establish how knowledge claims are expressed and challenged.<sup>73</sup>

Concentrating mainly on the context and actors, rather than the actual variable content, allows for a more refined and structurally aware comprehension of denialism as a type of harmful epistemic friction. Contexts create conditions that allow denialism to emerge, influencing which narratives can gain support and how epistemic resources are allocated or restricted. Simultaneously, individuals or collectives in different institutional, political, or economic positions engage in and promote denialist narratives, using particular rhetorical techniques and leveraging existing power dynamics to maintain their authority in knowledge.

Because denialist content is intrinsically linked to, and continuously shaped by, the evolving social and political contexts as well as the agents involved, an exclusive focus on the content alone risks overlooking the crucial institutional mechanisms and power relations that enable and perpetuate denialism. By directing analytical efforts toward the interaction between contextual conditions and the actors who navigate them, we gain a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of denialism as a sustained and adaptive phenomenon. This perspective brings into view the specific circumstances that facilitate its circulation, as well as the strategies

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<sup>71</sup> Broncano, *Conocimiento expropiado: Epistemología política en una democracia radical*, Akal, 2020, pp. 138-139.

<sup>72</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 156.

<sup>73</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, pp. 1–20; Jasanoff, *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and the Social Order*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1-25; Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, pp. 45–70.

through which denialist actors secure epistemic resources while evading scrutiny and accountability. Taken together, these considerations call for a more fine-grained analysis of denialism's operation across different levels of social reality. The following subsections develop this analysis in turn, beginning with the contextual conditions that enable denialist discourse.

#### 4.2.1. *Contextual dimension*

Denialism frequently creates self-reinforcing and isolated epistemic enclaves, environments that are inherently protected from external examination and resistant to shifts in understanding.<sup>74</sup> Grasping the rise and persistence of these denialist movements requires thoughtful examination of the broader epistemic schemes from which they arise. These narratives do not emerge in isolation; they are formed within socio-institutional frameworks where the norms governing public reasoning, and the assessment of knowledge claims have been significantly undermined. Denialism embodies a form of epistemic resistance that proves counterproductive, as it obstructs the necessary conditions for open investigation, mutual recognition, and institutional accountability. These dynamics are particularly clear in contexts where the evaluative criteria essential for democratic dialogue are either compromised or deliberately misapplied.

The severity of this disruption is most evident in what Levy<sup>75</sup> describes as epistemically polluted environments—contexts in which the ordinary mechanisms for producing, filtering, and appraising knowledge are systematically degraded. Just as environmental pollution contaminates ecosystems and disrupts biological integrity, epistemic pollution damages the cognitive infrastructures that sustain responsible epistemic practices. This degradation may stem both from manifestly illegitimate actors and from institutions that continue to project epistemic authority despite transmitting signals no longer aligned with standards of evidence.<sup>76</sup>

Epistemically deficient settings establish the essential conditions for denialism to thrive. Denialist narratives thrive by leveraging the uncertainty of knowledge that emerges from tainted informational environments, where conventional indicators of reliability—like expert agreement, sound methodologies, or institutional authority—have either diminished or been appropriated.<sup>77</sup> In informational situations where standard indicators of trustworthiness have been undermined or widely duplicated,

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<sup>74</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press, 2018, p. 155.

<sup>75</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 110.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

denialist stories face little opposition. Modern information settings, especially those facilitated by digital platforms, often subject individuals to communicative material that replicates the rhetorical and visual standards typical of scientific investigation and democratic discussion.<sup>78</sup> Such messages frequently include references to empirical data or utilize procedural language intended to express principles of neutrality and transparency. Yet, these signals often do not possess the rigorous evidentiary backing and normative accountability essential to genuine epistemic inquiry. An important example of this phenomenon arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, when false information frequently took on forms resembling authentic scientific communication. Misleading assertions were spread via charts, infographics, and citations of alleged “studies”, but these representations usually lacked peer review, methodological evaluation, or contextual accuracy.<sup>79</sup> This practice led to a merging of lines between science and pseudoscience, making it harder (especially for general audiences) to distinguish reliable information from misleading alternatives.

Indeed, this mimicry has profound consequences for public reasoning. Individuals navigating these environments must rely on heuristic cues (such as institutional affiliation, discursive form, or perceived neutrality) to assess the credibility of information. When these cues become contaminated, epistemic agents may recognize that something is epistemically questionable while lacking the tools or resources to pinpoint the source of the failure.

Compounding this state of disorientation, epistemic vices play a central role in shaping how agents engage with information. These vices are not merely individual moral or cognitive failings; they are often socially and institutionally reinforced, arising from the interaction between personal dispositions and the environments in which agents operate. For instance, overconfidence can lead individuals to overestimate their ability to evaluate competing claims, while gullibility may predispose them to accept information aligned with familiar heuristic cues, such as institutional affiliation or perceived neutrality, without sufficient scrutiny.<sup>80</sup> Closed-mindedness, in turn, inhibits the incorporation of corrective evidence, reinforcing false beliefs even in the face of clear counterevidence.<sup>81</sup> This interplay of vices and structural distortions creates precisely the conditions Levy describes: “I know it’s wrong, yet I have no real idea how”<sup>82</sup>. In such a state, epistemic agents sense the inadequacy of a claim without possessing the tools to trace or challenge its source,

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<sup>78</sup> Plesner & Justesen, “Digitalize and deny”, pp. 21-22.

<sup>79</sup> McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>80</sup> Bardon, *The Truth About Denial*, p. 33.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>82</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 96.

making them especially vulnerable to denialist discourse. Here, epistemic vices function as both individual and systemic enablers of epistemic friction: they interact with compromised credibility cues and social asymmetries to allow disinformation to masquerade as legitimate knowledge, thereby eroding collective epistemic resilience and undermining the processes of accountable public reasoning.

It is within this environment of disoriented and compromised agents that denialism operates most effectively. Denialist narratives thrive on the uncertainty and evaluative fragility created by flawed epistemic contexts, whether online or offline. They do not merely exploit pre-existing confusion; rather, they actively cultivate and amplify it. Focusing on systematically undermining confidence in institutions and in the normative frameworks that guide public knowledge, denialist discourse diminishes the evaluative capacities essential for epistemic communities to distinguish genuine inquiry from instances of anti-epistemic disruption. In this way, the interaction of epistemic vices and structural vulnerabilities provides fertile ground for denialism to entrench itself within public discourse.

This analysis of the contextual conditions under which denialism thrives, however, captures only part of the phenomenon. To fully account for its persistence and effectiveness, it is also necessary to examine the agents who actively sustain and disseminate denialist narratives, and the strategies through which they manage their epistemic standing.

#### **4.2.2. Agentive dimension**

The adaptability of denialist strategies is closely associated with the way individuals involved in such activities cultivate and regulate their public identities. The designation denialist is rarely appropriated by those to whom it refers, given its strongly negative implications. Accepting such a designation would entail the forfeiture of any claim to epistemic legitimacy—a concession incompatible with the goal of maintaining influence within public discourse.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, the rejection of the term performs a calculated function, aimed at preserving the image of impartiality and rational deliberation.

Nonetheless, the ability for strategic self-representation that defines denialist discourse is not available to everyone. It becomes feasible mainly because of institutional and socio-political influence.<sup>84</sup> On the one hand, many denialist interventions are consciously sustained by actors embedded in powerful infrastructures (media conglomerates, corporate lobbying organizations, political institutions etc.)

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<sup>83</sup> McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude*, p.156.

<sup>84</sup> Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, pp. 34-35

that actively profit from the erosion of public epistemic clarity.<sup>85</sup> These actors are not peripheral to knowledge production; they operate from its centers. Their access to prestigious platforms (from financial means to legal safeguards) and established networks of trust enables them to dominate the substance of their dissent and the conditions under which that dissent is understood and assessed.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, the individuals and groups most often subjected to denialist discourse (especially in politically charged epistemic contexts) tend to belong to communities that have historically experienced marginalization or systemic subordination.<sup>87</sup> These are frequently populations positioned at the crossroads of gender-based<sup>88</sup>, economic<sup>89</sup>, and colonial oppression<sup>90</sup>, whose capacity to participate fully in social and epistemic life has been persistently limited by entrenched structures of exclusion.

This asymmetry underscores that dissent within contemporary public discourse is mediated less by evidentiary merit than by its circulation through structures of epistemic and social power. The same rhetorical posture (expressions of skepticism, calls for debate, or demands for open inquiry) can be received in markedly different ways depending on the institutional location and social standing of the speaker. While dissent from marginalized or non-dominant positions is frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny or dismissed as partisan, dissent aligned with dominant institutions is more readily framed in the legitimating language of rationality and procedural caution. A clear illustration can be found in the history of climate change denialism: as documented by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, political figures and representatives of fossil fuel corporations were able to question the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change from prominent media and legislative platforms.<sup>91</sup> Their statements, despite being at odds with the overwhelming body of peer-reviewed evidence, were treated as reasonable contributions to democratic debate, often given equal or greater visibility than the position of the scientific community. Comparable challenges voiced by climate activists, Indigenous leaders, or non-institutional scientists, however, have routinely been dismissed as “ideologically

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<sup>85</sup> McGoe, “Strategic unknowns: towards a sociology of ignorance”, in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 1-16.

<sup>86</sup> Daukas, “Epistemic Trust and Social Location”, in *Episteme*, Vol. 3, Issues 1–2, 2006, pp. 109–124.

<sup>87</sup> Berenstein, N., Dotson, K., Paredes, J. *et al.* “Epistemic oppression, resistance, and resurgence”, in *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 21, 2022, pp. 283–314

<sup>88</sup> Tuana, “The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women’s Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance”, in *Hypatia*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 1-19.

<sup>89</sup> Broncano, *Puntos ciegos*, p. 57.

<sup>90</sup> Spivak, G. C., “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

<sup>91</sup> Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, pp. 169-170.

driven” or “alarmist”, underscoring the uneven distribution of credibility.<sup>92</sup> The result is some kind of epistemic immunity: a structurally produced condition in which certain actors, including denialist agents, are shielded from the justifying and normative demands that ordinarily govern responsible epistemic conduct.<sup>93</sup>

This dynamic reflects the fact that denialist discourse is not merely a matter of isolated misinformation but a manifestation of broader struggles over epistemic authority. Vulnerable communities (such as Indigenous peoples contesting colonial histories or marginalized groups exposing systemic discrimination) often produce forms of knowledge that disrupt entrenched narratives and threaten vested institutional interests. These challenges undermine not only the content of dominant accounts but also the structural arrangements that grant them legitimacy. In turn, denialist discourse seeks to undermine these contributions by portraying them as unreliable, ideologically biased, or falling outside the scope of legitimate scholarly or public debate. When emerging from institutional centers of power, denialism functions as a mechanism of epistemic domination, one that consolidates authority by marginalizing dissenting voices and foreclosing avenues for epistemic redress.<sup>94</sup> The resulting asymmetry reinforces and amplifies detrimental epistemic friction within public discourse, eroding the normative grounds necessary for collective understanding and democratic deliberation.

The persistence and influence of such denialist narratives depend on infrastructures that both amplify their reach and insulate them from scrutiny. Media norms that prioritize “balance” over evidentiary weight, algorithmic systems that reward controversy, the credentialing work of sympathetic think tanks, and rhetorical strategies such as strategic ambiguity or “just asking questions” all function to reduce the accountability of denialist claims. Such mechanisms lower the evidentiary threshold for acceptance while raising the barriers to effective critique, allowing narratives to achieve disproportionate influence relative to their epistemic merit. Within this asymmetric regime of accountability, denialist discourse can circulate widely and erode the evaluative capacities essential for distinguishing genuine inquiry from anti-epistemic disruption.

#### *4.3. Understanding the endurance of denialism in contemporary society*

The preceding analysis of contextual and agential dimensions provides a lens through which the operations of denialism can be recognized as a particularly destructive form of epistemic friction. Denialist discourse does not emerge in

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<sup>92</sup> Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene...”, p. 226.

<sup>93</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 214.

<sup>94</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Protest*, p. 371.

a vacuum; it takes root in epistemic environments already subjected to sustained erosion. These are not merely disordered or fragmented spaces, but historically and institutionally shaped terrains where the normative commitments that guide inquiry have been systematically weakened.<sup>95</sup> Such environments are the outcome of protracted sociopolitical processes, shaped by technological infrastructures and institutional arrangements that gradually distort the ideals of public reason. Within them, the mechanisms that once enabled collective deliberation and critical assessment falter. The result is not simply a decline in knowledge production but a deformation of the conditions under which meaningful epistemic engagement can occur.

What marks this degradation as particularly pernicious is its capacity for self-perpetuation. Once certain distortions enter public discourse (amplified by actors who strategically present misinformation as rational dissent) they begin to replicate, crowding out practices that sustain epistemic integrity.<sup>96</sup> In this context, denialism accelerates their breakdown by embedding doubt, confusion, and selective skepticism as discursive defaults. This feedback loop corrodes trust in epistemic institutions (such as journalism, academia, and scientific bodies) not via abrupt collapse, but through a gradual process of delegitimization that compromises their capacity to perform essential public functions.<sup>97</sup> As confidence in them wanes, the space for denialist narratives expands. The more these narratives circulate, the more resistant the epistemic environment becomes to critical correction. In this way, denialism thrives on and contributes to a polluted epistemic ecology, where the breakdown of shared standards creates the very conditions that sustain its growth.

The agential element of denialism highlights the tactical actions of individuals situated in positions of institutional advantage. These individuals function within well-structured networks of influence, where access to material assets and knowledge infrastructures allows for the arrangement of narratives with broad public impact.<sup>98</sup> Their influence emerges through alignment with systems that already confer

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<sup>95</sup> Kahn-Harris, *Denial: The Unspeakable Truth*, Notting Hill Editions, 2018, pp. 39-41.

<sup>96</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 122.

<sup>97</sup> Social media platforms are crucial in this context as they facilitate the swift, extensive spread of denialist stories and inaccuracies, frequently bypassing conventional control measures. The algorithms powering these platforms often elevate emotionally charged or contentious material, irrespective of its truthfulness, thus deepening epistemic polarization and uncertainty. As a result, the ongoing spread of misinformation disrupts public epistemic structures while also normalizing epistemic fragmentation. This, overall, complicates institutions' ability to fulfill their crucial roles in shaping collective understanding and public discourse. See Sinatra, G. M. & Hofer, B. K. *Science Denial: Why It Happens and What to Do About It*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

<sup>98</sup> Broncano, *Puntos ciegos*, p. 168.

legitimacy, allowing their claims to circulate as credible before they are even subject to evaluation. This positioning facilitates a mode of epistemic authority that is performative in nature: through presence within powerful discursive arenas—mainstream media, academic venues, or political forums—these agents cultivate the appearance of neutrality and expertise. Such performative authority acts as a protective shield, insulating their claims from the rigorous scrutiny and critical interrogation that typically govern epistemic evaluation. What seems to be simple involvement in public discussion functions through ingrained power dynamics that determine whose understanding is acknowledged and the way that acknowledgment is sustained.

Addressing the persistence of denialism necessitates a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the mere correction of wrong information. Interventions must engage with the deeper, structural dimensions of the epistemic environment, seeking to restore and fortify the conditions that underpin collective knowledge production and critical discourse. This involves the systematic reinforcement of shared standards of credibility, which are essential for distinguishing well-supported claims from ideologically or strategically motivated assertions. Equally critical is the cultivation of spaces in which reflective and critical inquiry can flourish, providing forums where deliberation is guided by principles of transparency and methodological rigor. Such interventions collectively aim not merely to counteract specific instances of denialist discourse but to reconstruct an epistemic ecology resilient to the self-perpetuating dynamics of distortion and delegitimization, thereby fostering a public sphere in which rational deliberation and evidence-based understanding can regain normative authority.<sup>99</sup> This analysis shows that denialism endures not despite epistemic degradation but because it actively exploits and deepens it, reinforcing a self-sustaining cycle of epistemic erosion.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has approached denialism as more than a cognitive failure or the inadvertent outcome of misinformation. Rather, it constitutes a complex and entrenched epistemic configuration, structured through the interrelation of institutional arrangements, affective regimes, and stratified systems of credibility. Conceiving denialism as an instance of detrimental epistemic friction reframes it from a mere aggregation of falsehoods into a deliberate and strategic disruption of the social processes by which knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated.

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<sup>99</sup> Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 123.



This perspective underscores the significance of both contextual and agentive factors in shaping the environments in which denialist interventions arise. Moreover, it demonstrates that the potency of denialist rhetoric and discourse is deeply intertwined with the broader social structures that govern the distribution and exercise of epistemic authority.

Although this study has created a theoretical framework for comprehending denialism as harmful epistemic friction, its examination has mostly been conceptual. Future studies might effectively explore the socio-technical systems that support the production, spread, and enhancement of denialist narratives. These inquiries may encompass thorough examinations of media contexts, platform algorithms, communication practices within organizations, and the networks of individuals who purposefully leverage these systems. Comparative and cross-contextual research (such as examining various political, cultural, and epistemic environments) can enhance understanding of how denialism evolves in different contexts, uncovering the relationship between structural weaknesses and active strategies that perpetuate epistemic blockage.

Framing denialism as detrimental epistemic friction provides a nuanced analytical lens that illuminates not only its operational logic but also its far-reaching societal implications. This framework advances scholarly discourse by moving beyond treating denialism as a mere collection of false claims, highlighting instead its systemic nature as an orchestrated disruption embedded within wider socio-political distributions of epistemic authority and power. By revealing how denialism thrives through structural vulnerabilities and strategic agentive practices that undermine the infrastructures of credible knowledge, the conceptualization equips researchers and practitioners with a critical tool to diagnose and address epistemic harm in a holistic manner.

Crucially, this approach extends beyond the analysis of denialism alone, offering a conceptual framework for examining a broader range of complex epistemic obstacles, including organized disinformation campaigns, widespread skepticism toward scientific authority, and politically charged disputes over knowledge. It highlights the importance of replies that tackle the deceptive information along with the foundational relational, institutional, and normative factors that maintain epistemic dysfunction. In the end, this analysis could aid in bolstering democratic epistemic practices by encouraging the restoration of damaged knowledge ecosystems and advancing more inclusive and robust public reasoning in progressively disputed epistemic environments.

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