

The University of Richmond

The Epistemological Crisis in the United States

A Research Proposal Submitted to

Professor Daniel Hocutt

In Masters of Liberal Arts MLA 500

School of Professional and Continuing Studies

By

Kenneth (Kenny) Buchholz

Richmond, Virginia

December, 2021

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“We feel bad for you that you can’t see the truth,” she said.

“I feel the same way about you,” he replied.¹

Introduction

Following up on a campaign promise, President Trump announced in 2017 the intention of the United States to withdraw from The Paris Agreement.^{2,34} This accelerated an already growing divide in the country on the issue of Global Climate Change (GCC) between Democrats and Republicans.⁵ Leading into the 2020 US Presidential election, climate change was the most polarized partisan issue.⁶ The Paris Agreement seemed to take on the role of a proxy for this partisan divide as Democratic Presidential candidates pledged to rejoin the Paris Agreement in light of President Trump’s announcement to exit it. The November 19, 2019 United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) Emissions Gap report exposed the artifice of the partisan disagreement on the Paris Accord.⁷ Despite GCC and the Paris Accord being a live and strongly divided political topic, barely any mention of the UNEP report appeared

¹ “After Thousands of Trump Supporters Rally in D.C., Violence Erupts When Night Falls,” MSN, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/after-thousands-of-trump-supporters-rally-in-dc-violence-erupts-when-night-falls/ar-BB1b0swK>.

² “The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC,” accessed December 3, 2021, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.

³ John Light, “Trump Is Pulling out of the Paris Agreement? Here’s What Will Happen,” UN Dispatch, May 31, 2017, <https://www.undispatch.com/trump-pulling-paris-agreement-heres-will-happen/>.

⁴ “Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy, June 1, 2017, <https://it.usembassy.gov/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>.

⁵ Gallup Inc, “Partisan Polarization on the Environment Grows Under Trump,” Gallup.com, April 5, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/248294/partisan-polarization-environment-grows-trump.aspx>.

⁶ 1615 L. St NW, Suite 800 Washington, and DC 20036 USA 202-419-4300 | Main 202-857-8562 | Fax 202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries, “Environmental Protection Rises on the Public’s Policy Agenda As Economic Concerns Recede,” *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), February 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/02/13/as-economic-concerns-recede-environmental-protection-rises-on-the-publics-policy-agenda/>.

⁷ U. N. Environment, “Emissions Gap Report 2019,” UNEP - UN Environment Programme, November 19, 2019, <http://www.unenvironment.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2019>.

in US media. US media mentioned the report's finding of global temperature increasing 3.2C by 2100.⁸ These media reports did not mention, however, that with the Paris Agreement, the temperature increased 2.7C, resulting in catastrophic consequences, even with the implementation of the Paris Agreement.⁹

The November, 2019 UNEP report was a critical point for me. It was one more piece of evidence about the growing GCC crisis. Leading into the 2020 US Presidential election, it exposed the chasm between reality and acted perceptions. Opposition and advocacy for the Paris Agreement, a voluntary and unenforceable framework, was based, as demonstrated by the UNEP report, on a symbolic reorientation of the Paris Agreement into something it was not. Opposing sides were creating their own realities about an issue and acting from that position. This signaled to me the existence of a further crisis – The Epistemological Crisis.

Background

Overview

What is a (The) Epistemological Crisis (E-crisis)?

This is the fundamental question of this research. As such, it necessarily follows that it requires definitional clarification. The suggestion of a crisis is such that it moves it beyond a disagreement over any given specific issue or claim. A secondary analysis of any given claim is the construction or foundation of that claim which requires the

⁸ Helen Regan, "Climate Crisis Pushing Earth to a 'global Tipping Point,' Researchers Say," CNN, November 28, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/28/health/climate-crisis-global-tipping-point-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁹ Kees van der Geest and Koko Warner, "Loss and Damage in the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report (Working Group II): A Text-Mining Analysis," *Climate Policy* 20, no. 6 (2020): 729–42.

analysis of knowledge formation. This level of analysis may reveal that the differences in the foundation of knowledge construction could be a (or the) source of conflict. The tertiary and quaternary levels of analysis is the assessment of the validity of the sources of knowledge formation. If all knowledge sources are subjective and contextual, then the very idea of the existence of knowledge is uncertain. Though widely mocked by many people in certain segments of the media and public, Kellyanne Conway's phrase "alternative facts" illuminated a stark question about the very nature of knowledge and its societal implications.¹⁰

*'The epistemological crisis ... which one?'*¹¹

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) conveyed probably the bluntest warning yet in an IPCC report concerning the crisis facing the planet from GCC.¹² However, the immediacy of the past two years of enduring the COVID-19 global pandemic is likely a more visceral experience for many people.

The masking policy in the US with relationship to COVID-19 has persisted throughout as an issue with strongly divided partisan characteristics which has resulted in deleterious societal consequences.¹³ The US masking issue is both illustrative of the E-crisis and demonstrative of the consequences. Anthony Fauci, a government official at both the NIH and White House Government Coronavirus Task Force who has played a leading role on US public policy on COVID throughout this past two years and

¹⁰ Lochlan Morrissey, "Alternative Facts Do Exist: Beliefs, Lies and Politics," *The Conversation*, accessed December 7, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/alternative-facts-do-exist-beliefs-lies-and-politics-84692>.

¹¹ Dan Richards, "MLA 500 Faculty Presentation" (lecture, University of Richmond, November 16, 2021).

¹² "Climate Change Widespread, Rapid, and Intensifying – IPCC — IPCC," accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>.

¹³ Maria Milosh et al., "Unmasking Partisanship: Polarization Undermines Public Response to Collective Risk," *Journal of Public Economics* 204 (2021): 104538.

spanning both Biden and Trump administrations, has played a central figure on the masking issue. Public support for Fauci has gone from relatively strong bipartisan sentiment in May, 2020 to strongly divided in the latter half of 2021.¹⁴¹⁵ The confluence of Fauci and masking is demonstrative (though not essentially so) of the current manifestation of the E-crisis.

March 8, 2020 Fauci's public statement: "Now people should not be, there is no reason to be walking around with a mask".¹⁶ Generally, the focus has been on the latter half rather than the first part of this statement. There is more ambiguity in the latter part than the first part of this statement. In a February 5, 2020 personal correspondence, Fauci was declarative: "I do not recommend that you wear a mask, particularly since you are going to a very low risk location."¹⁷ During this early stage of the pandemic, the guidance from one of the most public and authoritative US government experts, Fauci, was that the public not wear masks, and it was not until April 3, 2020 the CDC encouraged mask-wearing.¹⁸ Fauci said in July, 2020 that "the critical issue was to save the masks for the people who really needed them because it was felt there was a shortage of masks. Also, we didn't realize, at all, the extent of asymptomatic spread."¹⁹

¹⁴ Gallup Inc, "Health Institutions Still Rated Best for COVID-19 Response," Gallup.com, May 1, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/309614/health-institutions-rated-best-covid-response.aspx>.

¹⁵ Gabriela Schulte, "Poll: Majority of Voters Say Fauci Should Resign," Text, TheHill, October 29, 2021, <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/579129-poll-majority-of-voters-say-fauci-should-resign>.

¹⁶ "Fact Check: Outdated Video of Fauci Saying 'There's No Reason to Be Walking around with a Mask,'" *Reuters*, October 8, 2020, sec. everythingNews, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-fauci-outdated-video-masks-idUSKBN26T2TR>.

¹⁷ "Anthony Fauci's Emails Reveal The Pressure That Fell On One Man," BuzzFeed News, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nataliebettendorf/fauci-emails-covid-response>.

¹⁸ Kiva A Fisher et al., "Factors Associated with Cloth Face Covering Use among Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, April and May 2020," 2020.

¹⁹ "Fauci on How His Thinking Has Evolved on Masks, Asymptomatic Transmission," accessed December 9, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/washington-post-live/fauci-on-how-his-thinking-has-evolved-on-masks-asymptomatic-transmission/2020/07/24/799264e2-0f35-4862-aca2-2b4702650a8b_video.html.

Leaving aside the moral and material efficacy of deceiving the public, Fauci's post-hoc rationale to preserve masks seems belied by the personal correspondence in which he recommended the same. The very earliest published reports of COVID in January, 2020 included the presence of an asymptomatic infected child (10 years old) along with five other symptomatic family members (16.7% asymptomatic).²⁰ Published accounts in Europe at the end of February were reporting infection resulting from asymptomatic contact.²¹ Both parts of Fauci's post-hoc rationalization appear to be unsupported by available evidence, and it is difficult to assess the exact impact of deceptive and contradictory (and contraindicated) official US Government masking guidance in the early months of the pandemic.

It is striking, however, that US public polling seems to indicate that advocates of masking policies also have positive views of Anthony Fauci despite evidence which seems to indicate Fauci's conflicting representation of masking in the early, critical, months of the pandemic. I do not believe that disambiguation of Anthony Fauci / masking policy or GCC / Paris Agreement would be central to solving either of these crises. However, it does seem that both dyads represent symbolism, and the positions on these is one of contradistinction rather than firm grounding in the substance of the positions themselves. This feature, essentially opposition qua opposition, makes the current E-crisis appear to be unique to a categorically similar so-called E-crisis. **Is the current E-crisis unique and does it have meaningful societal impact?**

²⁰ Jasper Fuk-Woo Chan et al., "A Familial Cluster of Pneumonia Associated with the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Indicating Person-to-Person Transmission: A Study of a Family Cluster," *The Lancet* 395, no. 10223 (2020): 514–23.

²¹ Camilla Rothe et al., "Transmission of 2019-NCov Infection from an Asymptomatic Contact in Germany," *New England Journal of Medicine* 382, no. 10 (2020): 970–71.

Historical Context of Epistemology

*'The Epistemological Crisis ... has been with us since Aristotle.'*²²

Any study of the E-crisis requires a grounding in the philosophical field of epistemology. Epistemology provides the necessary descriptive foundation for the E-crisis. It is an open and ancillary question of whether epistemology simply describes the E-crisis, or has played a role in exacerbating or even been the central cause of the E-crisis.²³ The Greek philosophers provide us a good grounding in epistemology. The Meno dialogues concretize Socrates ideas on knowledge. It is not enough to simply possess a "true opinion". Guessing correctly the number of marbles in a jar does not reflect knowledge regarding the number or nature of marbles. "True opinion" becomes enduring and knowledge when "chained" to experience.²⁴ Spilling the marbles out of the jar, then counting them as you put them back reflects an experience that is bound to a "true opinion". Knowledge endures because of the link to experience.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave extends this concept of knowledge. "Chained captives" in Plato's Cave (of ignorance, in the Allegory) are shown nothing but "puppet" shadow shows, mirroring the Meno dialogues of chaining experience to (in this case, the perception of) knowledge. Escaping the Cave and ascending the "royal road out of the cave into the light ... to the contemplation of the highest idea of being," the Allegory is largely about the transformative nature of education to elevate knowledge into

²² Marcia Whitehead, "MLA 500 Library Research" (lecture, University of Richmond, September 7, 2021).

²³ While not central to this research, the potential effect of Epistemology itself on the E-crisis should remain an open possibility.

²⁴ "The Internet Classics Archive | Meno by Plato," accessed November 7, 2020, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/meno.html>.

meaning.²⁵ The idea of chaining perceptual experience is also strongly echoed in the concept of “paradigms” described in 20th Century science philosopher Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn’s scientific paradigms proscribe both what is real and how to investigate the real, but they also, like Plato’s Cave, “often suppresses fundamental novelties” or new ways of thinking about and seeing the world.²⁶ Kuhn’s paradigm sets a conceptual framework that perceptual knowledge and the process of investigation are both chained to an established acceptable range commensurate with that paradigm. Existence within one paradigm is so proscribed that it is functionally an entirely separate world or epistemic bubble from another paradigm.

Seventeenth Century philosopher Rene Descartes frays the chains of Socrates/Plato with the formalization of doubt and skepticism in *Meditations of First Philosophy*. Senses which “sometimes misled us” are our source of “truth and certainty”, “it is the best part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived.”²⁷ Judgements (knowledge and meaning) resulting from potentially flawed sense information may be commensurately flawed. Descartes’ skepticism set out a formalized and functional methodological skepticism for approaching knowledge and certainty through comprehensive self-reflection. An epistemic structure (bubble) is proportionate to the epistemological foundation.

Friedrich Nietzsche extended Descartes’ methodological skepticism into an ideological skepticism upon Descartes’ presuppositional (and famous) *cogito ergo sum*

²⁵ “The Republic, by Plato,” accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>.

²⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, [2d ed., enl, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science. Foundations of the Unity of Science, v. 2, No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 5.

²⁷ René Descartes, *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy of Descartes*, vol. 24 (MW Dunne, 1901).

(I think therefore I am), and there is no way to establish certainty that there is “thinking” and it is “I” that is doing that thinking.²⁸ Nietzsche’s skeptical nihilism leads to Baudrillard’s conclusion that meaning itself is ephemeral and is therefore of no value.²⁹ Baudrillard’s and Nietzsche’s nihilism exposes the potential end point of turning methodological skepticism into ideological skepticism and combining it with the pure contextual subjectivity of post-modernism. Nothing means anything and everything means nothing; we just exist.

Along with any idea of an E-crisis is the likely possibility of the presence of Sartre’s Existential Crisis. Unlike the common or colloquial usage of the term ‘bad faith’, Sartre’s bad faith self-deception is when negation of possibility applies to oneself. Bad faith is a firmly held faith which limits and constrains the individual into a self-imposed definition of who they are. Unchaining oneself from their current paradigm or epistemic bubble will move them into unknown territory. The Existential Crisis results when a person moves to escape the limits of bad faith only to find themselves “paralyzed with nothingness.”³⁰ Dismantling the illusion that one cannot be or believe in anything but what and who they are in that instant may also result in believing in nothing, akin to the nihilism of Nietzsche and Baudrillard.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language-games is one of the better analogous descriptors for the E-crisis. Words and language as mutable, “[w]hen language-games

²⁸ Jonas Monte, “Sum, Ergo Cogito: Nietzsche Re-Orders Descartes,” *Aporia* 25, no. 2–2015 (2016).

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard 1929-2007, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, [1994] ©1994, 1994), <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999754361802121>.

³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness; an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology. Translated and with an Introd. by Hazel E. Barnes.* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1966), 85, <https://archive.org/details/beingnothingness00wash>.

change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change.”³¹ As people exist within separate epistemic bubbles (or Kuhn’s paradigms or Wittgenstein’s language-games), their worldview is held and expressed in ways that are incommensurate with people who inhabit other distinct language-games. This makes even the act of communication fraught with uncertainty even with people who ostensibly communicate in the same language if they are not, themselves, existing within the same language-game (epistemic bubble).

Linguistic Relativity

Linguistics are inherent (arguably self-definitional) to any communication. The translation of ideas into communication, though constrained by Wittgenstein’s language-games, is particularly relevant to research which has epistemology as a central focus. It moves the process of pure theoretical philosophical navel-gazing into more concrete descriptive and application. Regardless of the exact interpretation or perspective, there is an undeniable interrelationship between epistemology and linguistics.

Language and ‘human’ are inextricably linked concepts for some philosophers (and linguists). According to Nietzsche, the human drive to form a metaphorical construct from sense data is translated into images then sounds. It is these sounds (language) which then form the basis of our beliefs, so that our beliefs don’t reflect a natural reality, but a false and constructed metaphor. Language is an “aesthetic impulse

³¹ “Ludwig Wittgenstein - On Certainty,” December 10, 2005, v. 65, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051210213153/http://budni.by.ru/oncertainty.html>.

to represent the external world,” and in so doing, it compels humans into a false belief of reality (natural world).³²


Edward Sapir does not dismiss these types of Nietzschean impulses, but for him, “[l]anguage is primarily a cultural or social product.”³³ Linguistics integrates into and across all fields of study. It is language which forms the “real world” or “social reality” so that “worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”³⁴

A recent example and arguably related to my research proposal is the German word *schadenfreude*, broadly described as the derivation of pleasure from misfortune. Online dictionary Merriam-Webster reported “lookups spiked 30,500% on October 2, 2020” following the official announcement that President Trump had COVID-19.³⁵ Recent research describes *schadenfreude* as multi-modal exhibiting four distinct functions or reasons for expression in social media – compensation, identification, aversion, and injustice.³⁶ The interplay between the spike reported by Merriam-Webster may be related to the concept of “emotional contagion” – the spread of emotions through social media.³⁷

³² Kieran Stewart, “Nietzsche’s Early Theory of Language in Light of Generative Anthropology,” *Anthropoetics*, 2017, 9.

³³ E Sapir, “The Status of Linguistics as a Science,” *Language (Baltimore)* 5, no. 4 (1929): 214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/409588>.

³⁴ Sapir, 209.

³⁵ “ Trend Watch: ‘Schadenfreude’ - 10/2/2020 | Merriam-Webster,” accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/schadenfreude-20201002>.

³⁶ Christian Cecconi, Isabella Poggi, and Francesca D’Errico, “Schadenfreude: Malicious Joy in Social Media Interactions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 2990, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.558282>.

³⁷ Adam DI Kramer, “The Spread of Emotion via Facebook,” 2012, 767–70.

Polarization

One artifact of the E-crisis is the presence of political polarization in the United States. Superficially, this reflects the elementary level of the E-crisis – the presence of disagreement over specific claims. The growing partisan sorting has been correlated to authoritarian impulses which reflects more concern about cognitive style than issue preference or positions.³⁸ This undermines the idea that polarization (and therefore the E-crisis) is simply a matter of a disagreement (or series of disagreements) on any specific issue or even an issue set. While I disagree with Hetherington and Weiler that authoritarianism is the causal variable leading polarization, I do think there is a correlation between, as a minimum, cognition and polarization and that authoritarianism may play a strong role in US political polarization, though my sense is that it is opposite from what they propose. Rather than authoritarianism leading polarization, the polarization is leading to authoritarian impulses.

Cross-country studies have shown that political polarization is strongly correlated to trust in government and income inequality, and mitigation of polarization is achieved through government investments and expenditures.³⁹ Ironically enough, Marc Hetherington has recently acknowledged trust in the US government is linked to “federal involvement in social policy.”⁴⁰ The correlative between authoritarian impulses and fascism is revealed in the fostering of mistrust in the existing governmental structure

³⁸ Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan Daniel Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*, Reprinted, Book, Whole (Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

³⁹ Daryna Grechyna, “On the Determinants of Political Polarization,” *Economics Letters* 144, no. Journal Article (2016): 10–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2016.04.018>.

⁴⁰ Marc J Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 142.

which is a feature of Umberto Eco's Ur-Fascism in which he likened fascism as a game "not unlike Wittgenstein's notion of a game."⁴¹

Digital E-Crisis

Dissemination of information (production, consumption, and distribution) forms an (perhaps obvious) important role in epistemology. Most Americans obtain news and information through online sources which dominate by orders of magnitude other sources (television, radio, print) for US adults under fifty, including a plurality under thirty who rely on social media for information.⁴² There is a clear and demonstrable interplay between online and offline engagement.⁴³ The blurring of online and offline self is a notable transformation over the past decade from what the online world had been described as a "potential space".⁴⁴ That is not to say online epistemic bubbles are not different from offline, they are. The basic understanding of information flow in epistemological models has largely remained unchanged since the time of Descartes – sense information flowing from transmitter to receiver. Digital social media is a multi-nodal network which presents a more complex and potentially vulnerable epistemic environment.⁴⁵ Recently, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed Facebook benefits from the "spread [of] anger, hate, and disinformation" which resulted in

⁴¹ Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books* 42, no. 11 (1995): 12–15.

⁴² "86% of Americans Get News Online from Smartphone, Computer or Tablet," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

⁴³ Heather L O'Brien et al., "Rethinking (Dis) Engagement in Human-Computer Interaction," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2021, 107109.

⁴⁴ Monica T Whitty, "Manipulation of Self in Cyberspace," in *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication* (Routledge, 2009), 103–28.

⁴⁵ Emily Sullivan et al., "Vulnerability in Social Epistemic Networks," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 28, no. 5 (2020): 731–53.

algorithms which amplified this type of engagement.⁴⁶ While this type of antagonistic engagement could reasonably be considered characteristic of the E-crisis, it is more difficult to tell whether social media is leading, following, or a more complex mix of interplay of cause and effect. Though it is outside of the scope of this paper, the field of digital E-crisis is a live and active current field.⁴⁷ As such, it is imperative to continue to track this field as supplementary to my research. I have no strong position on this field, though I presume the interplay is a complex mix. Social media would not be causing the antagonism without a preexisting priming of the society it is affecting.

Methodology and Methods

Define the Epistemological Crisis in the United States and describe the societal effects.

The two dyads I presented in the Introduction and Background Overview, GCC/Paris and Fauci/Masking, are not critically important examples to either the issues (GCC and the Pandemic) or the topic of this research (E-Crisis in the US). They are examples which attempt to demonstrate the societal effects. The E-crisis is not one of mere disagreement on any given issue or claim; in some instances, it seems difficult to tell whether there is a disagreement on a claim for any other sake than disagreement's sake. It is comprised of the four levels outlined in the Background Overview. The crisis nature of the E-crisis, aside from the criticality of the issues in my two examples (GCC

⁴⁶ W Lance Bennett, "Killing the Golden Goose? A Framework for Regulating Disruptive Technologies," *Information, Communication & Society*, 2021, 1–21.

⁴⁷ José Ramos and Michael Nycyk, "The Internet, Epistemological Crisis and the Realities of the Future: An Introduction to This Special Issue," *Journal of Futures Studies* 24, no. 4 (2020), [https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202006_24\(4\).0001](https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202006_24(4).0001).

and the pandemic), is the appearance of opposition which substance and background is arbitrarily and evanescently grounded. It is not just that there appears to be no common ground; there does not even appear a way to arrive at common ground. Even for low stakes, this condition would be more than just problematic.

Exploratory Interpretative Research

The type of research proposed here is both investigative and limited exploration.⁴⁸ Epistemology is rich with diverse multidisciplinary inquiries; the topic of the E-Crisis in the United States seems arbitrary and lacks clarity. Labelling the current state of the epistemological landscape of the US as an E-crisis limits the focus, accurately or not, to perceived problematic dialectical public (and often political) discourse.

This will be secondary research and will not utilize any primary research methods. It will likely employ quantitative data, but not include any directed method, to discover broad high heat trendlines, as in the example earlier of *schadenfreude*. It will rely on qualitative ethnographic analysis to reveal, as in the case of Gibbons and Seitz, the “main insight” obtained through qualitative analysis only after the quantitative methods (and data).⁴⁹

Distant and Thin

Commensurate with the broad goals of exploratory-type research, Mueller posits “distant and thin treatments foster primary, if tentative and provisional, insight ... vital

⁴⁸ Robert A Stebbins, *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences*, vol. 48 (Sage, 2001).

⁴⁹ Michelle G Gibbons and David W Seitz, “Toward a Digital Methodology for Ideographic Criticism: A Case Study of ‘Equality,’” in *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric* (Routledge, 2017), 175.

glimpses of an interconnected disciplinary domain ... that define and cohere widespread scholarly activity.”⁵⁰ My initial impulse was to apply the more traditional approach of thick description of an analogical model – a thorough analysis of something which seemed to demonstrate characteristics of the E-crisis. My problem with that approach is that revealing a phenomenon in an isolated example does little to reveal (or even suggest) a broad societal level feature. Extracting information across wide (and demonstrably representative) samples is a more useful analytic data set to assess societal level characteristics, analogous to Morretti’s “devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems.”⁵¹

Analytic Autoethnography

Introduction

After moving to Richmond, Virginia from Vancouver Island, British Columbia in 2003, I enrolled at the University of Richmond School of Professional and Continuing Studies Liberal Arts undergraduate program in 2016 at the age of fifty-two. The first course I took was ‘Polarization and the Presidential Election’, and the topic of my term paper was Vaccine Hesitancy. Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate, simultaneously labelled anti-vax and big pharma shill by the two “opposing” sides after she expressed vaccines are valuable and care needs to be taken in setting vaccine policies and procedures. I did not include Stein in my paper. She was not important or remotely central to the topic apart from cynical political caricature, but she was a near perfect symbolic representation of the two ‘opposing’ sides. Seth Mnookin captured this, writing,

⁵⁰ Derek N Mueller, *Network Sense: Methods for Visualizing a Discipline* (WAC Clearinghouse, 2017), 3.

⁵¹ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review*, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 54–68.

“the instant accessibility of information has dramatically reshaped our relationship to the world of knowledge ... has led to a world with increasingly porous boundaries between facts and beliefs.”⁵²

I have seen this pattern repeat over the past two decades living in the United States on issues big and small, culminating in this being a central feature over the past two years of the COVID pandemic.

Rationale and Execution

I am not simply a passive or minimally obtrusive observer, I am a member of the culture which I am researching with biases and perspectives, “the potential power of autoethnography to address unanswered questions and include the new and unique ideas of the researcher is inspiring to me.”⁵³ Autoethnography permits an alternative approach to a new kind of epistemology, at least with regard to traditional research techniques and methodologies. More formally, Leon Anderson has detailed a list of five key features necessary for analytic autoethnography: “(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis.”⁵⁴

My proposal includes the implementation of a publicly available and open WordPress based Website/Blog hosted on the University of Richmond blog server. Rigorous and transparent adherence to posting my research materials along with my

⁵² Seth Mnookin, *The Panic Virus: The True Story behind the Vaccine-Autism Controversy*, Book, Whole (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 8.

⁵³ Sarah Wall, “An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (2006): 149.

⁵⁴ Leon Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (2006): 378.

assessment and analysis of the material and maintaining open comments would satisfy Anderson's second through fourth features. The success or failure of this research will be demonstrated by the quality of the theoretical analysis to provide materially transformative understanding of the topic.

A Brief Word on Postmodernism

I understand the impulse to place autoethnography within a postmodern perspective, particularly as a new methodology challenging traditional approaches. As Carolyn Ellis wrote, "[autoethnography] acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist."⁵⁵ I am firmly of the belief that all of these play a role even in the most objectively prescribed natural science research, and I embrace and value the "radical honesty" suggested by autoethnography.⁵⁶ However, I see postmodernism susceptible to sliding into the nihilism of Nietzsche and Baudrillard, a position I am not comfortable with. Rather, I see the potential of autoethnography (particularly as described by Anderson) as aligning with Kant's public use of reason and necessity of establishing democratic epistemic canons, which is a position I embrace.

Contemporary Historical Analysis

Influential crises have strong epistemological interconnections throughout the entirety of human history. My focus, as it reflects the current state, will be on the

⁵⁵ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research (Köln)* 36, no. 4 (138) (2011): 274.

⁵⁶ Suzanne Sink, "MLA 500 Faculty Research Presentation" (lecture, University of Richmond, October 19, 2021)

Anthropocene (mid-20th Century forward), an epoch “shaped by human activity.”⁵⁷ Hinge or inflection points during this period would be ideal for populating a “thin and distant” data set, if they are also concomitant with some or all four levels of the E-crisis.

An early example concerning GCC is the 1965 President’s Science committee publication of *Restoring the Quality of Our Environment* which described the “national necessity” of moving away from the burning of fossil fuels because of the risk of “climatic change.”⁵⁸ Days after the release of this report, the president of the American Petroleum Industry, Frank Ikard, delivered remarks to his industry regarding the “catastrophic consequences” of GCC by 2000.⁵⁹ Yet the contemporaneous Washington Post publication on this report merely mentioned that the government would “continue to measure carbon dioxide over the next several decades” and “stimulate industry ... for automobiles and trucks that will not produce noxious effects.”⁶⁰ This deep disconnect between what the media told the public and what government and industry knew have led to the very catastrophic consequences Ikard was warning about as GCC has become emblematic of the current E-crisis.

Selection Criteria

The ideograph will be the unit of analysis. While some may reasonably describe the ideograph as vaguely defined representing an ambiguous set of ideas, McGee

⁵⁷ Meera Subramanian, “Anthropocene Now: Influential Panel Votes to Recognize Earth’s New Epoch,” *Nature*, 2019.

⁵⁸ United States. President’s Science Advisory Committee. Environmental Pollution Panel, “Restoring the Quality of Our Environment: Report of the Environmental Pollution Panel, President’s Science Advisory Committee” (Washington: The White House, 1965), 12, <http://richmond.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/>.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Franta, “Early Oil Industry Knowledge of CO2 and Global Warming,” *Nature Climate Change*, no. Journal Article (2018): 1025, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0349-9>.

⁶⁰ Washington Post., “Major Recommendations In Environment Report,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, 1965, A5.

presents “analysis of ideographic usages in political rhetoric ... reveals ... “structures” ... which have the capacity both to control “power” and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual’s “reality”.”⁶¹ Selection of historical ideographs would be characterized by meeting more than a single level of the E-crisis and demonstrate a link between “power” and the shaping of epistemological “reality”.

The events of September 11, 2001 may be such an example. One simple demonstration is the difference between President Bush’s statements about ‘they hate us for our freedoms’, and on the other ‘side’ a comment by Ward Churchill alluding to ‘chickens coming home to roost’. Ideographs of justice, freedom, terrorism, and hate drove the political will and power to create decades long impressions to individual and cultural reality.

The selection criteria are subject to two complications. This, broadly, is an exploratory research topic and any predefined set would artificially restrict the scope of a topic which I contend is broad-ranging. I would also subject my bias into the establishment of a criteria set. Set criteria would, I suggest, result in an amplification of my bias, and artificially restricts the scope making the project narrower and more bias than broad unstructured criteria set. The best selection criteria I imagine is frequency – making sure that I post to the blog a minimum frequency (once per week) of material and initial analysis of items that resonate to me as relevant to this project.

⁶¹ Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 5.

Results and Discussion

*'years of analysis for a day of synthesis'*⁶²

The E-crisis is the focus of my MLA program at UR. I currently (and provisionally) scheduled one course per semester for the next four and a half years.

The proposed blog will serve as clearinghouse/archive for this specific research proposal and my MLA coursework. The open-source nature of WordPress provides flexibility to adapt it to an autoethnographic methodology.⁶³ The proposed interpretative approach will permit identification (tagging) and theme development (pages) within the site. The 'thin and distant' approach will generate a data set. Systematic analysis will lead to the emergence of identifiable core characteristics which will be indicative of a definable feature set of the E-crisis. Additionally, and significantly, autoethnography permits adaptation and revision of the project which can be tracked and evaluated for coherence. The cross and multi-disciplinary approach of my MLA program integrates with the proposition the E-crisis is a broad societal-level phenomenon rather than isolated and temporal. The blog will be the repository of material and analysis upon which I would write a synthesis report.

Speculative Analysis

What is the E-crisis and describe its Societal Effects

If a thing can be identified and it occurs frequently enough, it is reasonable to presume it has significance. The E-crisis may be an emergent phenomenon or an

⁶² Marc Bloch quoted in Moretti (2000).

⁶³ Dr. Suzanne Sink's autoethnographic "Around Her Table" (<https://aroundhertable.org/>)

assemblage of phenomena which are homogenous or potentially heterogenous. The E-crisis may simply be a repeated signpost which reveals flaws of the underlying social structure akin to the same way that Cubitt's "glitch reveals the pure indifference underpinning the logic of exchange on which it is founded."⁶⁴ Alternatively, the E-crisis may be the street lights which illuminate the existing structure and insure that as the only viable path.

It is possible the E-crisis is only the appearance of a distinct phenomenon reflected by the kinds of epistemic bubbles central to related research in the digital social media field. The COVID pandemic pushed social discourse online which further amplified these digital epistemic bubbles while the distinction between online and offline behaviors and attitudes dissolved, therefore transposing the digital epistemic bubbles into real life epistemic bubbles. I do not believe this is the case, but accept it may be a possibility.

I believe the E-crisis signals, interacts, and manifests the cultural superstructure of the United States revealing and amplifying fundamental flaws. This is similar to Nietzsche's perspective (and arguably with an equally pessimistic outcome) on language - an instinctual impulse which imperfectly mimics the 'real' which then reinforces a flawed perception because it is forced through this flawed filter. The E-crisis is the crisis of the United States. Currently, and in the context of this proposal, I am reticent to offer a meaningful analysis of the foundational crisis of the US. I do not know whether relevant analogous models throughout history may apply, since I am under the

⁶⁴ Sean Cubitt, "Glitch," *Cultural Politics* 13, no. 1 (2017): 12.

impression the US in the Anthropocene is too unique to be able to establish effective analogous modelling.


Conclusion

I have excluded Narrative (Criticism) from this draft proposal despite my belief of its importance. Borrowing from Dan Richard's lecture material quoting David Ropeik, "Emotions are the filters through which we see the facts."⁶⁵ Because of the emotional power of narrative, it plays a critical role for both individual and social epistemology, and therefore its standing with respect to the E-crisis. My next class in the MLA program is Erik Nielsen's Voice of Hip Hop course, and this will, hopefully, provide an opportunity to further revise this research project to include Narrative. I have not included here references to issues with broad domestic consensus, but oppositional (and often antagonistic/militaristic) positions with other countries. This 'internationalization' of the US E-crisis is worthy of consideration in subsequent revisions, particularly as it interacts with the internal domestic E-crisis.

Positivist, postmodern, or Kantian, this research topic will follow me through these next five years (in one form or another), and I hope the journey will be as valuable as the destination, if not more so.

⁶⁵ "Science Says: How Risky Is That Virus? Your Mind May Mislead," AP NEWS, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-health-ap-top-news-international-news-weekend-reads-580923fa5e2200f98c0a42b5c0d7b236>.

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