

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-III June 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **Heads in the Sand: The Question of Climate Denial in the Age of Post-truth**

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**Article History:** Submitted-26/04/2023, Revised-25/06/2023, Accepted-26/06/2023, Published-30/06/2023.

### **Abstract:**

The paper examines the issue of climate denial that has gained momentum since the advent of the post-truth era. The age of post-truth encourages misinformation, denial of facts, promotes doubt and gives importance to subjectivity. This scenario marginalises truth and lays stress on intuitions. Under such grim circumstances climate denialism dovetails beautifully with the deranged violence against the planet.

The climate denial discourse rests primarily on the element of skepticism that is a vital by-product of post-truth. Doubt is being deliberately manufactured in order to strengthen climate denialism, so that the mercenary motives can be carried on without hindrance. The circuit of climate deniers and skeptics devalue the scientific research and data that confirms the case of climate crisis.

Climate activists, on the other hand, are energetically improvising new ways of educating the people about the issue of climate crisis and the role of humans in this phenomenon. Storytelling, environmental journalism, climate communication strategies, street art and other mediums are being employed to raise awareness.

This paper champions the cause of climate crisis in the face of mounting climate denial. Various strategies for creating awareness are focused upon in this scholarly endeavour along with focus on other aspects of post-truth and its impact on the question of climate crisis.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, climate denial, post-truth, skepticism, fake news, misinformation.

George Carlin, celebrated American social critic, philosopher and comedian in an eye-opening jamming session held at New York in 1992 affirmed that the planet is not going anywhere and will survive any catastrophe, but it's the humans who are in a perilous state. He confirmed that the planet has already survived innumerable catastrophes and has an extraordinary coping mechanism. It is self-healing and self-correcting. However, it is we who need to be alert and save ourselves from our enormous greed and arrogance. Carlin advised the people in his peculiarly entertaining way to save themselves, instead of running campaigns for saving the planet. We have entered into an era where quotidian pursuits have greatly diminished our vision. We cannot see beyond our immediate needs into what goes around us. Our collective smugness about the issue of climate crisis has deepened the question of climate denial. This blinkered attitude has escalated to a great altitude with the advent of the post-truth era that has promoted climate denialism globally.

The term post-truth soared to prominence in 2016 as the *Oxford English Dictionary* named it the Word of the Year, but the tendency to challenge the truth and to belittle it had existed since the beginning of post-modernism. *OED* defines post-truth as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Serbian-American playwright, screenwriter and novelist Steve Tesich (1942-1996) used the term post-truth for the first time in January 1992 in an article in *The Nation Magazine*. Some celebrated books on post-truth include, *Post-Truth* (2018) by Lee McIntyre, *The Post-Truth Era* by Ralph Keyes, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (2019) by Ignas Kalpokas.

Lee McIntyre in *Post-Truth* (2018) explains the phenomenon of post-truth with immense insight and precision. He is a celebrated American philosopher and author. Some of his famous works include *Dark Ages* (2006), *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age* (2015), *The Scientific Attitude* (2019), *The Sin Eater* (2019) and *How to Talk to a Science Denier* (2021). Subversion of truth is a vital aspect of the post-truth age. Steps of subversion of truth pointed by McIntyre in *Post-Truth* include, falsehood, willful ignorance lying, self-deception and delusion. He also summarizes the causes behind escalation of post-truth such as, science denial, cognitive bias, decline of traditional media, rising tide of social media and fake news.

In the foreword to Haydn Washington and John Cook's *Climate Change Denial*, Naomi Oreskes points out that, “The first scientist to claim that climate change was under way was British engineer Guy Stuart Callendar” (11). In the 1930's Callendar pointed to the fact that the atmospheric carbon dioxide was rising along with a rise in average global temperatures.

Callendar had compiled the data mainly from Europe, but his research did attract the global attention. In 1980's, however, the signs of climate change began to be seen in the form of the shrinking glaciers, rising global temperature, melting of permafrost, extreme droughts and rainfall, hurricanes and floods. The attention of the scientists and environmentalists instantly shifted towards this rising climate crisis, and reasons for these dramatic changes began to emerge. Adam Trexler in *Anthropocene Fictions*, confirms that a team of geologists led by Nobel Prize winner and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen preferred naming the current period of history as Anthropocene. The word Anthropocene is derived from the Greek terms for human ('anthropo') and new ('cene'). The opposite of Anthropocene is Holocene which is described as the phase extending from "approximately 11,700 years ago to the present . . . an interglacial period after the most recent ice age" (1). Trexler asserts that the term Anthropocene was coined by Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980's. The human influence upon the earth has shaped a new geological era identified as Anthropocene. Currently Anthropocene is being discussed as an important epoch in terms of global climate change and bizarre atmospheric changes.

With rise in human-induced climate change there is also a marked rise in the number of people who deny this crisis and oppose it blatantly. These deniers are commonly regarded as skeptics, and by others as plain deniers of the truth. As explained by Naomi Oreskes in the foreword, "skeptics" are people who challenge their opponents to give evidence for their beliefs. According to her all scientists are skeptics, however, in the face of truth and facts they agree to the given evidence. This means that when the evidence provided is factual and authentic then the true skeptics surrender before it and accept it. The "climate skeptics" as confirmed by Haydn Washington and John Cook are not the real skeptics, but deniers in guise. Denial according to Washington and Cook ". . . isn't about searching the truth, it's about the denial of the truth one doesn't like" (1). Due to their narrow mindedness and myopic vision the deniers turn their doubts into their beliefs and deny the facts.

In their iconic work *Merchants of Doubts* (2010), Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway focus on the deliberate manufacturing of doubts and confusion by the capitalists regarding a series of issues ranging from global warming to the hazards of tobacco smoking. They allege that those in the industry of such money-making projects fund fake research and promote fake data for their personal benefit. They successfully merchandize doubt in the minds of people across the globe to counter the facts given by the truth-seeking community of the scientists. Climate denialism focuses on denying the anthropogenic climate change. All facts and research regarding the anthropogenic climate change is challenged by the well-funded and deliberately

planned campaigns. Deniers not only exhibit narrow-mindedness, but also avoid the cause of climate crisis by affirming that the climate changes happening around us are natural, hence there is no cause to worry about them. The deniers mitigate the urgency of dialogue that is needed to address this issue. As pointed earlier their smugness blurs their vision and gives them a sense of false satisfaction.

Oreskes further professes that the varying nature of climate is well-studied by the scientists, but “natural variability” (xiv) is gradually being overridden by planetary warming dominated by human activity” (xiv). The emission of greenhouse gases, killing of forests and mangroves, destruction of marshes and swamps have greatly increased climate change. The synthetic chemicals, such as chlorofluorocarbons have harmed the ozone greatly. According to recent research, human activity in the last few decades has elevated the rate of climate variability extensively. The deniers believe that natural variability is the reason behind climate change and not the human activities. It is evident that the deniers focus on the half-truths to create a false universe of denialism that provides them an unreal sense of safety. The post-truth scenario has added to the breeding of such fake claims and half-truths. The hub of misinformation, biased attitude towards facts and focus on subjectivity is situated within the body of post-truth. The deniers blatantly deny the truth and push the evidence to the margins of ignorance. Their heads are in the sand because they deny the truth that is bound to have a catastrophic impact on the entire planet.

Kari Marie Norgaard in *Living in Denial* (2011) lays emphasis on the question of climate change, its emotional impact and everyday life particularly in Norway. She extensively details the “dramatic change in weather” (xiv) that the people are seeing in Norway. She also takes stand on how these changes are negatively affecting the local economies and the threat they pose to the survival of the people worldwide. In another illustrious work titled *The Madhouse Effects* (2016), Michael E. Mann and Tom Toles collaborate on raising awareness about the issue of climate crisis. They sincerely feel that there is an urgent need to launch a public discourse about this ongoing crisis. They also believe that, “. . . public policy has been paralyzed – sometimes from ignorance, sometimes from uncertainty, but often from a campaign of deliberate misinformation” (ix). In another reputed work *Trauma and the Discourse of Climate Change* (2020), Lee Zimmerman contends that beyond denialism and skepticism the issue of anthropogenic climate change must be studied as a “kind of trauma” (1). Climate change must be interpreted according to Zimmerman as an “existential threat . . . to the current climate system . . .” (1). Zimmerman in his study takes into consideration the role of literature and psychoanalysis in dealing with climate crisis.

*The Swaddle* in an Instagram post, a news and media website, confirms that, “we might be living through the sixth mass extinction event—the biggest since the fall of the dinosaurs—and humans are largely responsible.” The post also cites the words of Tanya Steele, chief executive at WWF-UK while she spoke to *The Guardian*. She observed that though there has been a trend currently in rise where the politicians are seen making big promises and delivering emotional speeches about the climate crisis, yet there has been minimal action in this regard. The displaced populations, sudden climatic changes, and rapidly disappearing animals all signify an awaiting catastrophe that is anthropogenic, or human-induced. In this regard, it must also be noted that it was because of the empty promises and numbness of the politicians and a coterie of powerful people that young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg had to raise her voice to seek strong climate action. This apathy towards the crisis of climate was also witnessed during the 26<sup>th</sup> annual climate talks, or COP26 (Conference of Parties) organized in Glasgow by the United Nations in 2021. The President for COP26 Alok Sharma, expressed his concern and disappointment with the results of the meeting. He also worried about the uncertain future of the agreements reached and the promises made by the participating nations.

Writers across the globe are focusing on the growing climate crisis by means of their literary endeavours. In Michael Mann’s *The New Climate War* he reveals the ways in which the fossil fuel industry has been playing with the issue of climate crisis. The industry has shifted the cause of the crisis from collective responsibility towards individual responsibility. The matrix of misinformation and manipulative tactics create a zone of denial. Another insightful book that delineates with the issue of climate crisis is Tim Jackson’s *Post Growth: Life After Capitalism*. In this work Jackson seamlessly untangles the knots created by denialism and states that capitalism and the growing economies play a vital role in enhancing the crisis. Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs the Climate* argues that the free markets have escalated the economic growth and in turn have adversely affected the climate. *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells is another masterpiece that delves into the destruction of earth by perennial disasters that are a result of global warming. These books and many more notable works clearly point to the fact that the climate crisis is anthropogenic and denialism is also a man-made strategy to mitigate meaningful action in this regard.

Production of non-fictional works focusing on climate crisis have gained momentum, but there is dearth of fiction on climate crisis as pointed by eminent Indian writer Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh believes that fiction can fill the gap that exists between the readers and the writers about the issue of climate crisis. It will motivate and educate people to fight against climate crisis and take meaningful action. He further deals with the issue of

climate in *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) and *The Living Mountain* (2022). He takes the case of Arundhati Roy and stretches it further arguing that she writes passionately about climate in her non-fictional works, but her fictional works lack in this regard. He even criticizes himself on this account. In the Indian context the question of climate crisis seeks immediate intervention by the novelists. The genre of climate fiction in India has not gained a concrete ground and the issue of climate change still remains peripheral in many ways. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Amruta Patil, Mridula Ramesh, Bahar Dutt, Viju B. and many more have been writing about this crisis in their non-fictional works. Insightful fiction regarding the climate crisis is still a distant phenomenon in the Indian context.

There are innumerable reasons for escalation of climate denial in the era of post-truth the spread of fake news and misinformation has fueled doubt about the facts of climate change. The advent of the alternative facts has promoted climate denial to a great extent. According to an American philosopher, writer and scholar, Lee McIntyre the alternative facts can be understood as, “Information that is provided to challenge the narrative created by facts that are hostile to one’s preferred beliefs.” McIntyre also defines fake news as, “Disinformation that is deliberately created to look like actual news in order to have a political effect” (173). It is the impact of post-truth that a majority of the population gives importance to emotions and feelings rather than truth and facts. Post-truth has also introduced the people to different kinds of denial that are prevalent. Focusing on different kinds of denial Frank Fischer, eminent author, professor and scholar illuminates the readers about another important aspect of post-truth. In an article he supports the view of writer Kathrin Braun about the “various types of post-truth denial” (1). According to Fischer, Braun confirms that “there are many kinds of denial going on under the banner of post-truth” (1). Some such kinds of denial include “climate denial, denial of science, anti-science policy, organized lying, attacks on critical thinking, the policing of political language, use of manipulation rhetoric, appeals to negative passions . . .” (1). In such a scenario where numerous kinds of denial float around freely it becomes problematic to single out climate denial as the most urgent of all.

Cognitive dissonance is another reason for the rise of climate denial. According to Leon Festinger, an American social psychologist, cognitive dissonance is the psychic discomfort that an individual faces when his beliefs, established behaviour and attitude is challenged. This is the reason why many people avoid, or nullify the claims made by the activists and scientists about climate crisis and its catastrophic outcome. This type of escapism promotes climate denial. According to The Climate Reality Project, an online resource that aspires to stimulate a global solution to the climate crisis by igniting collective and urgent action in every sector of

the society, people indulge in climate denial due to their unwillingness to face the crisis. They have captivated themselves into information silos and fail to confront disagreement regarding any issue. This online project also discusses two important psychological reasons for climate denial; confirmation bias and backfire effect. According to McIntyre confirmation bias is a “tendency to give more weight to information that confirms one of our pre-existing beliefs” (173). He further explains the backfire effect as a, “psychological phenomenon where the presentation of true information that conflicts with someone’s mistaken beliefs causes them to hold those beliefs even more strongly” (173).

Another significant reason for climate denial is the mounting narrow-mindedness, fear of truth and endless greed. Writers like Naomi Klein, Peter Kalmus, Noam Chomsky, Robert Pollin and Amitav Ghosh strongly believe that the rising tide of capitalism, apathy of those in power, greed of the few who manipulate the truth about climate crisis and the growing impact of fake news in the post-truth era have promoted denial and cynicism among people at large. Ghosh goes a step further and alleges that when the future generations will look back at this era they will certainly conclude that this was an age when art and literature were used as “modes of concealment” to keep the people away from the real gravity of the issue of climate crisis. He also declares that this age will be referred to as the “time of the Great Derangement” (15). According to the writers and scientists’ sustainability cannot be achieved if economic greed is not kept under control and a constructive dialogue is not initiated.

Solutions to climate denial are catalogued by many environmentalists, activists and writers, but serious action needs to be initiated in this sphere to save the environment and the human race. The most primary source of curbing climate denial is by means of conscientious storytelling. Biological anthropologist and environmentalist scientist James Holland Jones raises an important query, “Can Stories Lead to Social Action?” He answers this question by stating that stories have the potential to transform into social action and bring about noticeable changes. He divides his views into two categories ‘factual’ and ‘instrumental.’ In the factual category he places the stories because according to him stories can have a greater impact than facts alone. In the instrumental category he places fiction that allows us to be futuristic about a better world and can allot textual space to many different voices. On the other hand, Turkish-British novelist and political scientist Elif Shafak maintains that if an individual is unable to tell a story, then this is dehumanizing for that individual. It creates a “profound and existential anxiety in us” (9).

It is the power of storytelling that can change situations and spark transformations in those who are apathetic towards the issue of climate crisis. Adam Trexler in *Anthropocene*

*Fictions* extensively studies the genre of novel during the era of climate change. He focuses on how the, “novel must bring fact into dialogue with fiction” (29). Trexler studies how truth about climate crisis can be conveyed to the people by the novelists, the ways in which a fictional space can be created for this purpose, in what way the political face of the climate crisis can be portrayed by the novelists and the ways in which they can focus upon the economic aspect of the issue. He concludes that, “climate change is not just a theme in fiction” (233). He believes that gradually contemporary fiction is “becoming climate fiction” (233). According to Michael D. Jones and Holly Peterson, narrative persuasion and storytelling is an effective communication strategy for confronting climate denial. Storytelling by means of novels can reduce climate denial and sensitize people at large. Another solution to climate denial that The Climate Reality Project proposes is to begin a “conversation,” “give facts,” and have “hope.” When a conversation is started about climate denial people begin to participate in it, they are provided with factual information, so as to retain their trust and give them relevant information. It is very important to be hopeful in such a situation and replace despair with action.

Environmental journalism is also a solution to the problem of climate denial. This form of environmental journalism focuses on the different aspects of environment with specific focus on the impact of human activity on climate. These journalists engage a vast audience by means of extensive coverage. Though environmental journalists face widespread opposition from various political and social networks, yet they continue to work and raise awareness among the people about the ongoing climate crisis. They confront local and global barriers to convey the truth and to give the larger picture to the people. Some famous environmental journalism books by Indian authors include P. Sainath’s *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, Keya Acharya’s *The Green Pen*, Saumya Roy’s *Mountain Tales*, Viju B.’s *Flood and Fury* and Mridula Ramesh’s *Watershed*. In an insightful work by Deepti Ganapathy titled *Media and Climate Change* she affirms that, “The story of climate change is a global one” (4). She further claims that the, “Press narratives have inspired a cultural shift with artists and musicians using climate change, the most pressing problem of this generation to communicate through their works” (4).

Awareness against climate denial can also be created by means of visual language. By creating visual stimulation, the various aspects of climate change can be put forth before the people. The strategy of using street art for creating awareness gives massive scope to the artists for conveying their ideas to the audience. It is an easily acceptable mode of expression that can educate even the common people who often do not have means to information regarding climate crisis. This direct communication is very useful, approachable and has ignited massive

change in people. The street artists are rewriting the story of climate change and driving away the sense of hopelessness that has crept due to climate denial. Murals are being made across the globe by the street artists. Some such globally acclaimed street art projects focusing on climate crisis include, Brazilian street artist Thiago Mundano's mural in Sao Paulo that was painted by using the ashes collected from the burning Amazon rain forest, Banksy, an anonymous street artist's spray painted words "I don't believe in global warming" that were painted next to a canal in London, Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra's photorealistic street art, Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's installation of the Arctic ice art in form of icebergs in Paris and Naziha Mestaoui's virtual forests in Paris. In the Indian context street art is being revolutionized by various government projects and schemes across cities and villages. Street art foundations like St+Art India and many more are creating murals across cities to raise awareness. Indian street artists such as Chandra Bhattacharjee, Vibha Galhotra, Gigi Scaria, Svabhu Kohli, Manav Gupta and Rohan Chakravarty indulge in creating sculptures, paintings, installations, street art, murals and films documenting the climate crisis more democratically.

The trajectory of climate denial creates a woeful scenario for all those who have accepted the contemporary climate crisis and its impending impact. Every effort in this direction is important if this woeful situation needs to be reversed. The atmosphere of dismay can only be eliminated and steered away if everyone is allowed to participate in the climate crisis dialogue. Reasoning and logic should replace fake news and subjectivity in this regard, meaningful conversation needs to be initiated, doubts of deniers should be tactfully addressed and not overlooked because that would only worsen the situation. Climate activism can act as a catalyst in bringing about change and in encouraging the people to participate. Narrative strategies can also be employed by the writers across the globe to sensitize the people towards building a more sustainable society. Storytelling can have an impact on a large number of people because the stories stir their conscience. Sustainable methods can be adopted to make better use of the natural resources and lower the anthropogenic damage to the ecosystem. A lot of hope was attached to COP27 that took place in Egypt between 6th to 18th November 2022. Though the backdrop of COP27 was a grim one with heatwaves scorching Europe, massive flash floods wreaking havoc in Pakistan, terrifying typhoons in Bangladesh and severe wildfires in North America, yet the world waited for some landmark solutions. The consequences of climate change call for urgent and meaningful action on a global scale. Collective responsibility and commitment to transform the state of numbness into that of vitality can ensure a better future for the coming generations and can save our race. The

following words of American philosopher, peace activist, writer and radical historian Howard Zinn are a perennial source of inspiration for sustainable development.

“Small acts when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.”

–Howard Zinn

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