

# The anatomy of denial: Why truth doesn't always win

By Christie Aschwanden

Cross-posted from *The Last Word On Nothing*.

I recently attended the [Science Writing in the Age of Denial](#) conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The event explored the phenomenon of denial and what it means for science writers. How can journalists effectively convey science when its uncomfortable truths face organized resistance?

I walked away from the event feeling both energized and frustrated. Denialism is easy to spot, and conference speakers like [Sean B. Carroll](#) and [Naomi Oreskes](#) were especially adept at characterizing and documenting it. During his keynote talk, Carroll outlined a “denialism manual in six steps,” which he adapted from a [history of chiropractors and vaccination](#) published in 2000.

**Step 1:** Doubt the science.

**Step 2:** Question scientists' motives and interests.

**Step 3:** Magnify legitimate, normal disagreements among scientists and cite gadflies as authorities.

**Step 4:** Exaggerate potential harms (scare the hell out of people).

**Step 5:** Appeal to personal freedom (I'm an American and no government official can tell me what vaccinations I need).

**Step 6:** Show that accepting the science would represent a repudiation of a key philosophy.

As Carroll described this denialism playbook, people in the audience nodded knowingly. Any science writer who has encountered pushback from denialists has seen these strategies at work. But the question remains: How do we counteract them?

And the answer to that question remains elusive. Keynote speaker [Arthur Lupia](#), a political scientist who studies how people make decisions, says that attempts to educate policymakers and the general public on scientific topics commonly fail, and he puts the blame squarely on the messengers. “The problem isn't the audience, the problem is us,” Lupia told the journalists in attendance. “We have unrealistic expectations.” Many journalists and educators assume that if they simply present the facts, their audience will recognize them and change their beliefs accordingly.

As I've [written previously](#), social psychologists call this idea the “[truth wins](#)” assumption — and it rarely pans out. Why? Because people don't assimilate facts in a vacuum, they filter them through their pre-existing belief system. Psychologists call this “[motivated reasoning](#)” — it's the tendency to seek out and view new evidence as consistent with one's prior views.

We seek facts that confirm what we already believe, and reject the ones that contradict our worldview. People deploy skepticism asymmetrically, says social ecologist [Peter Ditto](#) of the University of California, Irvine. “They have stricter criteria to accept something they don't want to believe.”

For this reason, bombarding deniers with more evidence is a losing strategy. It doesn't matter how many facts you throw at them, or how correct your facts are — if those facts threaten someone's self-identity or their worldview, they will find a way to dismiss them. Forget item Nos. 1 through 5 in Carroll's denialism manual, item No. 6 explains everything.

Is there any hope for informing the willfully ignorant? In the session on “persuasive writing in the age of denial,” my fellow panelist [Steve Silberman](#) asked the audience if any of them had ever successfully changed someone's mind with something they'd written. Only one hand went up.

When we convey facts to an audience that doesn't want to hear them, we come to an impasse. The



Photo by Ian Pattinson.

stronger the pre-existing belief, the stronger the motivation to dismiss the contrary evidence and the journalists who convey it. And there's not much journalists can do about this. One of the points that Lupia emphasized was that credibility is bestowed by the audience. He presented the following formula:

Credibility = perceived common interests x perceived expertise.

I asked him how journalists who find themselves at the impasse can find a way to speak to, rather than past, their audiences. He told me that that making a personal connection — showing them that you share common interests or values — can help. But ultimately, it's not entirely about you, it's about how the audience perceives you. And the hard truth is that in many cases there's not a damn thing you can do to change that.