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# The Good, the Bad, and the Bizarre: Guiding Beliefs about Climate Change in a Post-Truth Society

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**Abstract:** »Das Gute, das Schlechte und das Bizarre: Leitende Überzeugungen über den Klimawandel in einer Postwahrheitsgesellschaft«. This paper begins with Levy's (2023) premise that our epistemic environment is central to solving the problem of bad and bizarre beliefs, especially about climate change, in a post-truth society. It presents some of the reasons for people holding untrue beliefs and examines two conspiracies about climate change and the harmful consequences thereof. Actions are suggested to counter bad and bizarre beliefs, including interventions to strengthen trust and confidence in credible sources, presenting material that disputes false information in a timely and easy-to-process fashion, addressing people's feelings towards the news they encounter and fostering their sense of agency in evaluating its credibility, and building an open society. This is followed by a discussion of epistemic positions in the field of environmental psychology and how non-epistemic values (typically those of powerful and wealthy nations [Cologna 2023]) could be contested. Ways in which (a critical) environmental psychology can guide epistemic action – how people gather and share information – in a post-truth society are suggested. All members of society who participate in generating knowledge are encouraged to reflect on the epistemic community to which they belong and the extent of trust they may place in it.

**Keywords:** Epistemic environment, epistemic action, climate change, human-environment relationship, post-truth society.

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## 1. Introduction

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Similar to work done in the cognate field of environmental sociology, my work in environmental psychology examines the transactional relationship between humans and their physical environment. I have written this article from my position as an advocate of the notion that people should transform how they think about and act towards the natural world. This relates to how people come to know about their world – how they gather and share information as a society – which can be referred to as their epistemic action. In

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this context “society” refers to any group of people or any community who shares a social structure and interacts with various forms of information about the way the world works, including scientific knowledge. From this perspective, a group that has collective specialist knowledge about a subject, for example, as scientists or academics, produces, shares, and replicates information within their group and also communicates this expertise to external groups such as the general public, referred to here as non-scientists, as the broader audience who receives their claims.

As regards the production of knowledge, it should be kept in mind that both academic and non-academic groups exist in their own epistemic environment that has particular ways of understanding how the world works. Naturally, scientists also participate in processes in the communities that they belong to outside of their professional lives and that may inform the ideas they generate. Therefore, it could be said that theory is constructed in social contexts, a way of producing knowledge that could be critiqued for being relativist if not for the possibility of academia and its external society interchanging diverse perspectives to uphold the credibility of science by consent (Knoblauch 2025, in this issue). Producing knowledge in this way could beg the following three questions: (1) Who in academia is producing knowledge, and for whom? (2) How is this knowledge being received by a broader audience? (3) How can academics anticipate the reception by general society of this knowledge, particularly as people are said to be living in a post-truth society, where misinformation and the belief in opinions over scientific evidence are on the rise, especially about climate change? Distrust between academics and non-academics can lead to a breakdown in shared understandings of reality.

I draw on Levy’s (2023) premise that people’s epistemic environment is central to solving the problem of bad and bizarre beliefs, especially about climate change, in a post-truth society. If the beliefs of post-truth society reflect the replacement of facts with “what feels right” or “what is convenient to believe” (Levy 2023, 95), it implies that many people outside of scientific circles hold incorrect beliefs and show a disregard for facts, a situation that may lead to low trust in science (Cologna et al. 2025). This creates an “us” and “them” narrative where scientists may presume that their understanding of phenomena is correct (superior) and that non-scientists hold false beliefs based on emotion (inferior). In reality, Levy argues, the public’s knowledge is dependent on the subjective evidence presented to it, and if information is generated by untrustworthy sources in which it places its trust, it can fall prey to false beliefs. However, it can be said that surveys and the social media exaggerate the number of people who hold untrue beliefs.

Levy (2023) distinguishes between two kinds of problematic ways of thinking: bad beliefs and bizarre beliefs. The former refers to notions that oppose generally agreed-upon knowledge espoused by an accepted scientific society whereas the latter would require a world that differs significantly from how

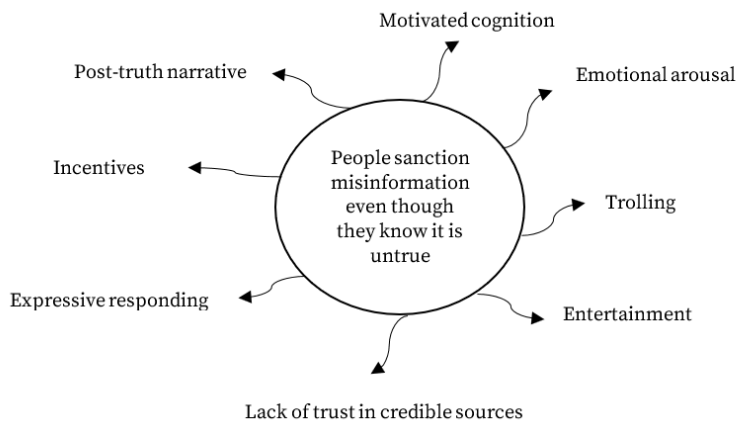
it really is in a number of respects. For various reasons people in general society may sanction ideas that they know to be untrue or peculiar. Some of these reasons are depicted in Figure 1. For example, the post-truth narrative suggests that people may adopt such ideas because they do not need to prove that the ideas are correct (Levy 2023). Another interpretation, proposed by the scholars Schwarz and Jalbert (2020) is that people may be likely to readily accept information that is coherent with their existing beliefs and that is familiar and easy to process. Levy (2023) refers to this as motivated cognition. Other propositions are that people express beliefs in support of a political party or ideology (expressive responding), take pleasure in sharing conspiracy theories on social media and making fun of researchers conducting polls (trolling), and play along with views they do not hold if their lives are not substantially affected by them (Levy 2023).

Important to consider is that emotional arousal may play a role in the strength of a belief. Although the direction of the relationship between cognitions (beliefs) and emotions is a subject of debate in psychology, one school of thought that may be mentioned is that individuals' mental state supplies them with data and focuses their awareness, but that such data, although useful, "can also lead the individual astray" (Frijda, Manstead, and Bem 2000, 5). Accordingly, knowledge (the truth or science) can be distinguished from beliefs (one's psychological reality or non-science) that guide behaviour sensitised by emotions. Humans function well when they believe their good behaviour will result in a positive outcome that will contribute to a trustworthy social order. As Douglas and Sutton (2015, 101) posit, "[t]he key psychological appeal of climate change conspiracy theories, then, may be that they discredit the apparently overwhelming evidence that humans are contributing to the destruction of their own environment." Individuals' belief in conspiracy theories may provide them with a sense of security, alleviating their fear of not being able to manage an uncertain social, political, and economic world, a fear which Glover (2025) describes as a powerful emotion. How people feel about climate change is in all likelihood related to how they think and act in this ambiguous context.

False information is often intentionally created to manipulate individuals' emotions, which can erode confidence among them and can also result in a shared distrust of organisations (Nolan and Kimball 2024). People are more likely to have confidence in a source that they view as credible (Schwarz and Jalbert 2020). Nevertheless, a lack of regard for the truth does not always imply accepting incorrect notions; people's beliefs may mirror their conviction that they are justified in trusting a source, even though the source might be said to be unreliable or false. Poor trust is frequently explained by the fact that those who exhibit it have fewer reasons to believe official sources, and that those who have little confidence in the organisations that are against conspiracy theories are more inclined to stay engrossed in these theories (Levy

2023). This is especially true when people are unsure about their facts and lack the expertise and ability to evaluate evidence on their own, such as in the case of climate change science (Douglas and Sutton 2015). There is a need for science-based solutions to climate change to be widely accepted; therefore, of concern is the finding of a recent survey that participants in 43 out of 68 countries have less confidence in climate scientists than in general scientists, which may be associated with political orientation (Ghasemi et al. 2024).<sup>1</sup> Participants in Harambam and Aupers' (2015, 476) study on the peripheral status of conspiracy theories in the academy claim that "scientists [...] are part of [...] a [global] power elite that protects its own interests and those of others in the 'higher circles'. In doing so, *they* exclude the interests of contemporary citizens." This view reflects the contested nature of what counts as the truth and it stresses the need for scientists to safeguard their scholarship against excessive influence from non-scientists while understanding that scientific practice, as a collection of particular socio-technical systems, is always part of particular historical and social contexts (Niewöhner 2021).

**Figure 1** Reasons for Holding Bad and Bizarre Beliefs



Source: Author's own illustration.

The next sections of this article deal with the three questions posed earlier. Section 2 outlines a view that addresses the first question on how academia and ordinary citizens come to know in the context of the trusted sources (i.e., their epistemic communities) that they rely on. This is followed by Section 3 that relates to the second question, offering two examples of how scientific evidence is translated by non-scientists into bad and bizarre beliefs about

<sup>1</sup> See Douglas and Sutton (2015), Levy (2023), and Milfont, Sibley, and Osborne (2025) for further considerations of the intersection between political orientation and trust in climate science and scientists.

climate change and some implications thereof. Finally, as regards the third question, Section 4 provides some suggestions for academia on how to guide epistemic action in a post-truth society.

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## 2. How Do We “Know”?

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Moore’s (1997) description of the Western history of knowing in the context of environment-behaviour theories indicates the medieval movement as one of the first attempts to transcend conventional mythology by giving a logical explanation of nature. Subsequently, several philosophers have argued for different ways of knowing, taking previous arguments into consideration. Some refer to this process as the “cumulative nature of science” (Zeigler 2012, 585).<sup>2</sup> As Levy (2023, 102) puts it: “[h]uman beings are epistemically social animals: most of what we know, we know on the basis of testimony.” By implication, scientists have only a limited understanding of a complex world as they too rely on testimony from the past and current input from other scientists to form their belief system. In this sense, science can be viewed as a “communal enterprise” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019, 32) that can be trusted by the public because there is consensus between experts bound by a system with rigorous oversights (Contessa 2023).

The natural sciences, as the “expert” on and voice for global environmental issues, communicates this shared knowledge to members of the general public who are the receivers of this expert knowledge. Information flows in one direction, from scientists to non-scientists, with these two groups being distinguished from each other by their ability to grasp technical concepts of climate science (Dudman and De Wit 2021). From their position as non-scientists, members of the public are dependent on science for knowledge about the climate and science produces this knowledge for the benefit of the public. The public may innocently believe that scientists are unaffected by personal interests and that they produce reliable results using accurate means (Contessa 2023). This is an idealised and unreasonable view of science, a view that is inadvertently perpetuated by the social sciences and one that potentially results in resistance to accept climate change evidence, in particular when such evidence is questioned as witnessed in the Climategate case (Lahsen 2013). The separation between scientific and non-scientific modes of understanding could result in the hierarchical imposition of one form of knowledge about how the environment works (science) on to communities that may have their own systems of interpretation and ways of dealing with

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<sup>2</sup> See Fayemi (2017) and Moore (1997) for a summary of the evolution of African and Western philosophical thought respectively as examples.

climate disasters (non-science) (Dudman and De Wit 2021). Apart from communities who have and share their own understanding of climate issues, there are other stakeholders (e.g., politicians, the media, celebrities, and fellow citizens) who may also contribute to climate narratives (Glover 2025).

What Levy (2023) refers to as outsourcing knowledge, or epistemic dependence, means that the public is susceptible to being exploited or that they could rely on those who are misleading them. Even though people look for signs to determine how reputable and authentic the conveyors of information are, in other words, how much they can be trusted (see also Schwartz and Jalbert 2020), people can be deceived because of the vested interests of others (resulting in bad inputs). According to Levy (2023, 106), the world is “epistemically polluted,” a situation that needs to be addressed by those tackling global crises. This matter is discussed in Section 4. In Section 3, two examples of how epistemic pollution can occur in the public’s reception of knowledge are shared.

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### 3. Bad and Bizarre Beliefs About Climate Change

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When climate science is communicated by scientists to the public, it can be intentionally or inadvertently translated into misinformation (Dudman and De Wit 2021). In this section, I describe two scenarios of epistemic pollution related to climate change that could be classified as bad or even bizarre. The first one relates to the concept of the 15-minute city that Carlos Moreno introduced in 2016 as one way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and thereby limiting global temperature increases (Khavarian-Garmsir et al. 2023) in line with the agreement signed by 196 parties at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris in 2015 (United Nations Climate Change n.d.). The idea of the 15-minute city proposed in academic literature is that residents in a neighbourhood should have amenities within a short distance from their homes and should be able to access them preferably by walking or cycling (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021). Since the adoption of the concept by politicians in Paris, interest in it has grown in other areas of the world especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Khavarian-Garmsir et al. 2023) when it became necessary to restrict people’s movement to limit the spread of the virus (Moreno et al. 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021). As the aforementioned authors suggest, the pandemic has highlighted the shortcomings in the design of sprawling cities that are heavily dependent on cars for mobility and access to basic goods and services. Urban planners believe that a 15-minute city would have positive outcomes including reducing carbon emissions, enhancing healthier lifestyles, connecting people, promoting inclusivity, and, ideally, creating sustainable urban environments in the long-term (Moreno et al. 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021).

Nonetheless, the 15-minute-city model has raised various concerns in academic circles such as its inability to address complex social and economic problems through physical design and its failure to take individual contexts and local systems into account (Khavarian-Garmsir et al. 2023). Of particular concern to the scientific community, however, is evidence that designing neighbourhoods around limited zones has created fear among some residents, which can be ascribed to misinformation propagated by conspiracy theorists (Glover 2025). One journalist reported on his interactions with citizens in Sheffield, England, at a protest against a so-called “clean air zone” programme planned along the concept of the 15-minute city (Hayes 2023).<sup>3</sup> According to the protesters, clean air zones are analogous to “open prisons” where people’s movements in and out of an area will be controlled, an idea that Hayes refers to as “bizarre” or, in other words, fake knowledge.

The second scenario relates to Levy’s (2023) contention that it is bizarre to believe that there is a conspiracy among scientists to make climate change seem real when it is not. Yet more fantastic are the recent allegations in the media that meteorologists are causing natural disasters, in particular the devastating hurricanes Milton and Helene that hit the USA in 2024. According to these media reports, people believe that meteorologists are able to create and control the weather, and because of the belief in conspiracy theories such as these, climate scientists have faced insults and even death threats from members of the public (Milman 2024; Nolan and Kimball 2024). Furthermore, these beliefs may be promoted and encouraged by politicians who use this strategy for their own gain as is evidenced by extreme actions being perpetrated against climate scientists in the USA. In the opinion of Levy (2023), these politicians can be referred to as nefarious epistemic actors.

Even though Harambam and Aupers (2015) contend that dismissing conspiracy theories is a display of academic epistemic authority,<sup>4</sup> I would argue that some knowledge claims are more dangerous than others. What the kind of misinformation described above does is divert people’s attention away from the climate emergency that we are facing as a consequence of our behaviour towards the environment. Such misinformation prevents people from acting to change their future (Douglas and Sutton 2015), a scenario that Contessa (2022, 2942) refers to as “*the problem of harmful distrust*.” Fortunately, as Levy (2023) suggests, it is possible to change people’s beliefs. The section that follows considers some of these possibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> See De Wit and Haines (2021) about the role the media plays in shaping people’s ideas about climate change.

<sup>4</sup> Some disciplines, such as anthropology, approach conspiracy theories from a relational perspective to understand how people make meaning within a larger cultural context. Other disciplines, such as urban planning, face allegations of designing spaces to benefit a select few and are thus more vulnerable to distrust (Glover 2025).

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## 4. Guiding Epistemic Action in a Post-Truth Society

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The ideas I present in this article first occurred to me when I presented a paper at the joint CRC1265/SMUS workshop about guiding epistemic action in a post-truth society, which was held at the Technical University of Berlin, Germany, in June 2024. A question that one of the presenters at the workshop asked me prompted me to think about what solutions psychology would suggest for addressing bad and bizarre beliefs about climate change. I asked myself how we as scholars could anticipate the public's reception of our knowledge and its possible misinterpretation/re-interpretation. In the first place, education on its own does not bring about change; telling people as well as governing organisations and institutions that their epistemic environment is polluted does not lead to transformative thinking and actions. On the contrary, it may even have the opposite effect. As Jasanoff (2022, 30) proclaims, "[t]ransformation, by definition, must run deep."

There are five questions that Schwarz and Jalbert (2020, 74) suggest could be asked to evaluate whether information is true, one of which is "Does it come from a credible source?" Given the justified scepticism about the trustworthiness of some authorities, academia needs to encourage society to question who they place their trust in to obtain valid information about environmental problems. For Levy (2023), restoring faith in genuine agents is a crucial step in ameliorating the situation that certain knowledge sources uphold bad beliefs. To achieve this, one approach may be to utilise the public's perceived congruence of their political ideologies with those of scientists (Ghasemi et al. 2024), and also the public's confidence in whether authorities will act to solve the climate emergency (Hadler et al. 2024). The field of psychology may also provide a few solutions to improve the situation that Levy refers to.

Evidence of the way in which humans process information suggests that it is best to emphasise the facts and not to repeat falsehoods in an effort to remedy them, to present material in an appealing way, and to create immediate doubt about the validity of a message so that people do not forget the details later on (Schwartz and Jalbert 2020). If it is accepted that emotions create cognitions that induce behaviour (Frijda, Manstead, and Bem 2000), interventions to change epistemic action would need to deal with people's feelings towards the evidence that forms their psychological reality. Nolan and Kimball (2024) posit that people observe their emotions when they read information that provokes strong feelings especially when it may be false messages that are spread on media platforms. As academics we also need to promote a more open society that fosters citizens' sense of agency (especially regarding their emotions about their negative impact on the planet) and encourages them to question truth claims (Douglas and Sutton 2015).

Not paying enough attention to the lack of trust in the work of scientists as reflected in the views of conspiracy theorists may leave the academy vulnerable to public irrelevance (Harambam and Aupers 2015). Notably, participants in Harambam and Aupers's study argue that knowledge is constructed by academics who have vested interests in the findings they generate. Science may, after all, not be as trustworthy as the public may believe it to be especially if citizens rely on the idea of a neutral knowledge seeker (Contessa 2023). The human need to trust may extend to a confidence in non-human sources in the future such as artificial intelligence (Hancock et al. 2023). Although we, as scholars, may favour epistemic values that support our scientific practice, we also possess non-epistemic beliefs that reflect our personal positions and shape how we conduct research. These ideologies can have a significant influence on the way academics look at societal issues if they are aware of and reflect on how they play a role in research, how they understand human behaviour, and how they formulate policy (Cologna 2023). The social and political processes involved in producing empirical evidence need to be investigated and disclosed in ways that clarify to the public that the complete dismissal of such evidence is not merited (Lahsen 2013).

Psychological research makes meaningful contributions in gaining an understanding of how to communicate climate science (Clayton et al. 2016); how and why people trust others (Hancock et al. 2023); how the perception of similarity leads people to adopt misinformation (Posten and Gino 2021); how people's emotions and sense of control over precarious circumstances in their daily lives play a role in guiding their thoughts about and behaviour towards climate change information (Douglas and Sutton 2015; Glover 2025; Nolan and Kimball 2024); and how economic, political, cultural, and social structures shape society's belief systems about the environment (Wullenkord and Hamann 2021). Even though the input of psychologists is essential in guiding humanity's approach to climate change amelioration, regrettably, environmental psychology's research agenda has largely been inspired by the ideologies of wealthy industrialised nations (Clayton et al. 2016; Cologna 2023), which tend to exclude external communities from creating knowledge about important issues such as adapting to the consequences of the Anthropocene. Such exclusion, says Werkheiser (2017), amounts to epistemic loss. This reflects the general marginalisation of oppressed societies in the construction of knowledge, impeding efforts to bring about meaningful transitions in the way that people connect with their planet (Cologna 2023; Werkheiser 2017).

If environmental psychology is associated with practices that maintain epistemic loss, can it play a role in transforming current circumstances? As a field of psychology that deals with the relationship between humans and their environment (both built and natural) it has been criticised for assigning the responsibility for the climate emergency to individual actions (with interventions aimed at behaviour change) instead of studying the role that larger

systems play in people's unsustainable lifestyles and formulating approaches that challenge dominant powers. This is a further portrayal of how the values that scientists hold could be directing their research agendas (Cologna 2023). The values guiding an individual approach prioritise personal accountability. In such an approach, the questions asked include "How can individuals be persuaded to change their behaviour towards/relationship with the environment"? The consequence of this ideology is that interventions remain on the level of the individual and do not consider the structural causes of environmental problems. Furthermore, ordinary citizens who may not have the capacity to grasp complicated facts bear the responsibility for correctly translating knowledge that is transmitted by scientific communities. These citizens may not necessarily possess the capacity for making effective changes on a global scale. The knowledge may also fail to convince citizens that science is trustworthy if they mandate misinformation (Contessa 2023). In contrast, a systemic approach would value the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature and ask questions such as "How can relational connections within and between (expert and non-expert) communities and the ecosphere be developed"? The consequence of this ideology is confronting conditions at a societal level where justice and respect for a diversity of identities, knowledge, and practices take precedence at the risk of not understanding how individuals come to function in certain ways.

Two contrasting approaches are followed by what Cologna (2023) terms the "environmental research community." One approach is to focus more on individual characteristics whereas the other one, which is a socio-ecological approach (deep transformation), reflects the interaction between humans and eco-systems (see Clayton et al. 2016). This binary situation presents an either-or position for researchers to take. However, Wullenkord and Hamman (2021) propose the construction of a bridge between the individual and the systemic perspective. Conversely, researchers could view the differences between these perspectives as lying on a continuum dependent on the context and function of understanding where to intervene in addressing environmental challenges.

As academics we need to ask ourselves what the implications are of our role as spokespersons for the biosphere and as interventionists in the human-environment relationship especially in a post-truth society. Trust in climate scholarship can be enhanced by moving away from the idea of science as the sole and flawless authority towards what De Wit and Haines (2021) might term mutual encounters between different knowledge systems. This can be described as an empirical hermeneutic approach characterised by knowledge communities exchanging various interpretations of climate change to build consensus about how this crisis came to be and what action needs to be taken. It is a process of knowledge co-creation and trust-building that transforms different views into an interconnected web of ideas.

Further to the proposal by Wullenkord and Hamman (2021) regarding the construction of a bridge between the individual and the systemic perspective, Niewöhner (2021) suggests a triangular collaboration between natural scientists, social scientists, and stakeholders to increase the validity of solutions to socio-ecological problems. Stakeholders may be understood to include communities because solutions to environmental problems can have a great impact on them. The immediate physical environment holds great significance for humanity as a whole. Therefore place-based approaches that take individual contexts and lived experiences into account are particularly relevant to mapping responses to environmental issues (Clayton et al. 2016; Glover 2025; Westermann and Rohr 2015). This contextual perspective should embrace marginalised forms of knowledge that provide a wealth of ideas about solving environmental problems that have an impact on local communities. The ability of indigenous groups to create their own practices and expertise (epistemic self-determination) to deal with specific climate change issues needs to be appreciated and supported by scholars working in this field as a necessary step towards environmental justice (Werkheiser, 2017). In closing, it may be said that psychology continues to make progress in learning how to place justice for marginalised communities at the centre of human-environment relationships (Klarmann and Barnes 2022).

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## 5. Conclusion

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This paper presented some thoughts on epistemic action in a post-truth society and on how academia may guide beliefs about climate change in this environment. Selected proposals include finding ways to strengthen the public's trust and confidence in credible sources, presenting material to non-scientists that counters false information in a timely and easy-to-process fashion, addressing people's feelings about the news they encounter and fostering their sense of agency in evaluating its credibility, and building a trustworthy and open society.

As scientists we need to acknowledge that our values affect our research, and we need to be conscious of how they affect society. Adopting an individual approach that focuses on changing individual behaviour may prevent achieving necessary structural reforms, whereas adopting a systemic approach to ensure the credibility of climate change beliefs may suggest pursuing a collective agenda without understanding underlying personal motives. Scientists need to collaborate across disciplines and epistemic communities to construct more valid knowledge claims about ways to address climate change that are not damaging to either humans or nature and that will have real (from both individual and systemic positions) impacts on the crisis the world is facing. Although a global plan to find solutions is imperative, the

significance of humans' experiences of the earth signifies in particular the necessity of adopting place-based approaches that focus on specific environmental problems and the inclusion of diverse voices. In conclusion, all members of society who participate in producing knowledge may do well to reflect on the (familiar) epistemic community to which they belong and on the extent of trust that they may place in it.

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