

Introduction

Recent philosophical discourses have attempted to explain the rise in belief-polarisation in many contemporary societies through closed-knowledge-communities (Shevchenko, 2025) (CKC henceforth); more specifically, emphasising *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers* (EB and EC respectively). However, little has been said about cases of social-epistemic structures that are neither EC nor EB, and the resulting focus has emphasised the most and least pernicious forms of CKCs represented by EC and EB respectively. This paper argues for a wider taxonomy of CKCs. More specifically, this paper argues for three points: a) that the taxonomy of CKCs extends beyond EB and EC, b) that CKCs comes in degrees of perniciousness, and c) that under certain circumstances, CKCs can evolve to become more pernicious versions of themselves. In turn, my use of 'perniciousness' will describe how receptive a CKC is to the counter-evidence to the shared belief, and more specifically, how they engage with the *content* of the counter-evidence. Finally, I will use the term 'Trump Derangement Syndrome' as an example of both the wider taxonomy of CKCs, their degrees, and their evolution.

Section 1. Closed-knowledge communities

I will begin by characterising what constitutes CKCs, EB, and EC. CKC appears only in Shevchenko (2025) but describes well the broader phenomena of socio-epistemic communities which holds a shared belief(s), with this belief(s) not being impacted by counter-acting evidence to such belief(s). Under this characterisation, both EB and EC fall into the category of CKC.

EB are a 'social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission' (Nguyen 2018, 143). Hence, the group's shared belief that p , is held contrary to the existing counter-evidence as this evidence is not available to the group in question. EB occurs due to the omission of relevant information that may counter-act a shared belief that p . As Nguyen points out, EB are problematic due to this omission, as the resultant information landscape leads to *bootstrap corroboration* (ibid, 145). Corroboration for one's belief that p is often good evidence to increase one's credence in p . However, in EB the corroboration that occurs is the result of the lack of counteracting evidence, not- p . Hence, underlying EB is a pernicious circularity of

corroboration that increases the credence of agent's belief in p , without the consideration of not- p due to its omission (ibid., 144). EBs, hence, do not engage with counter-evidence to the group's shared belief(s). As a result, Nguyen claims, EBs can be 'popped' when the omitted evidence is presented to the group (ibid).

Unlike EB, EC remain standing after exposure to evidence. More specifically as I will argue below, members of the EC are given reasons not to engage with the counter-evidence at all. I will work with Clivenbeard's nihilistic distrust view of ECs for the purposes of this paper (2025). Clivenbeard outlines two features ECs have: i) asymmetrical intra-group trust relationships, and ii) abandoning basic epistemic norms of being open to learn from one's mistakes (ibid, 9-10).

First, i) describes the asymmetrical assignment of trust that members of EC ascribe to epistemic agents *within* the EC. Those who agree with the EC's shared views are viewed as trustworthy, and those who disagree are immediately deemed as untrustworthy. This asymmetry of trust is applied to content arising from both intra and inter-network groups. This results in any counter-evidence being disregarded in virtue of their content disagreeing with the EC's shared belief(s) (ibid). Hence, members of EC exhibit a reactive form of distrust to their disagreeing counterparts. Now to turn to ii), EC's member's absolute commitment to their views 'destroy the possibility of acquiring new knowledge' (ibid, 10). EC's immediate rejection of any evidence that disagrees with shared belief undercuts the values which give rise to knowledge such as the one found in ii). Hence, Clivenbeard characterises EC as *nihilistic*, where epistemic nihilism 'replaces values that produce knowledge like competence or evidence, with values that prevent knowledge, like unconditional acceptance' (ibid, 12). Hence, EC's unconditional acceptance of evidence that corroborates their views, and unconditional rejection of contradictory views makes their approach to inquiry nihilistic. A crucial negation of values that EC are committed to is the negation of the value of norms which govern the sufficiency of evidence, I will touch on this more below.

Hence, there are two key functions that EB and EC fulfill which can be generalized to other CKCs. These are:

- 1) Corroborating the shared belief.

2) Protection of that belief from counter-evidence.

EB achieves 1) through bootstrap corroboration and achieves 2) via omission. EC achieves 1) through asymmetric trust assignments leading to bootstrap corroboration, and achieves 2) through distrusting any forms of counter-evidence to their views. In the next section, I go over other methods of dealing with counter-evidence which fulfills 2) differently. I argue that in virtue of achieving 2) differently, and *without* achieving 2) as EC do, we can stipulate that there are CKCs that are neither EB nor EC, which I will dub CKC*.¹

Section 2: A wider taxonomy and degrees of perniciousness

I will now argue that CKC*s are not only theoretically possible but that they also exist. Moreover, that in this wider taxonomy, CKCs come in degrees of perniciousness with EC occupying the highest end of the spectrum. Further, I argue that the Lackey's 'content-first' view account of belief-polarisation does not serve as counter-arguments to this view.

First, I stated above that what differentiates EB from EC is their interaction with counter-evidence. I now outline two, non-exhaustive, methods of interacting with evidence that preserves the shared belief of the CKC. In virtue of doing so, these CKCs are CKC*s.

- I) **Disproportionate scrutiny:** Kelly (2008) argues that we are less receptive to counter-evidence to our views because we disproportionately scrutinize arguments and evidence which disagrees with our view. Given we take what we believe to be true, we are less inclined to scrutinize what we believe. But we are disposed to view counter-evidence and argument to our beliefs with more suspicion and scrutiny, making it more likely for us to find faults with the disagreeing position.
- II) **Explaining-away:** As noted by Flores (2021), explaining-away occurs roughly as such: subject *S* holds belief that *p*, when exposed to counter-evidence that

¹ There are possible ways in which i) is achieved as well, especially if the corroborative feature *interacts* with the exclusionary feature. However, for the sake of brevity, I will only touch on ii) in this paper.

not- p , S stipulates an explanation that allows for p and the counter-evidence to cohere. EC's discrediting is a form of explaining-away.

An example of II), that does not involve the nihilism of EC, which will be revisited later, is when Mike Johnson claimed that Trump was an informant in the Jeffrey Epstein's child-sex trafficking case (Levine 2025). With growing evidence of the decades-long close relationship between Trump and Epstein, a way to neutralize this evidence from painting Trump in a negative light is to explain this close relationship without compromising Trump himself (to establish coherence between the counter-evidence and the held belief). One creative way, per Johnson, was that Trump was an informant. Given that many in the MAGA CKC accepted this line of explaining-away, we can suggest the existence of CKC*s. Namely, CKCs, which neither omit evidence, nor are committed to epistemic nihilism.

2.1 Lackey's account of CKCs

As 'content-first' views of EC threaten my argument that EC are necessarily pernicious, I will address their claims here.

Lackey (2021) argues against the 'structural-fault view' of EC, arguing that the problematic nature of EC are contingent and not necessary. That is, EC are problematic if their shared belief is false, or relies on sources that are unreliable (207). On the other hand, an EC can be healthy, she writes 'if I consult one highly reliable media outlet, [...] rather than a number of conflicting ones, I will block out a lot of noise' (ibid, 215). Moreover, if the fault of EC lies in its structure, it could be said that an EC which derives its source from one reliable outlet is as problematic as an EC which does the same with an unreliable one; Lackey argues this clearly is not the case (ibid, 216).

Lackey's criticism of the 'structural-fault view' of ECs extends to views of ECs like Nguyen's. As evidential preemption, the process by which counter-evidence is preempted and negated prior to its introduction to a CKC, (which Nguyen points to be the structural issue of ECs) can be found in healthy epistemic communities as well, such as preemptively distrusting an unreliable news source (Clinkenbeard 2025, 5; Nguyen 2018, 147). However, Lackey's criticism fails to extend to the nihilistic view

proposed by Clinkenbeard. Their structural fault lies not within having the source of their evidence monopolized by one outlet, but rather of their filtration of evidence in virtue of their content. This filtration occurs in virtue of the nihilism of EC and their abandonment of epistemic values. I will now further consolidate this claim through the exposition of EC's abandonment of evidential standards.

2.2 EC are ipso facto the most pernicious CKC

As Clinkenbeard argues, ECs are nihilistic as the values which produce knowledge are replaced by those which hamper it. ECs filter out evidence which disagrees with their view and admits those which do. This process of filtering evidence in virtue of their content requires the abandonment of standards with which evidence is assessed. Any epistemically healthy group has an evidential standard *S*, such that any evidence that meets *S*, is counted as evidence as meeting *S* deems the evidence sufficient (Clinkenbeard 2025, 12).² Importantly, this standard cannot discriminate evidence based on the *content* of the evidence, that is whether the evidence disagrees or agrees with the CKC's view. As if so, it violates the norm mentioned in ii), making new knowledge acquisition impossible.

This reiterates the nihilism of ECs, as their evidential standard filters on the basis of content. Specifically, evidence is admitted if the content of the evidence agrees with the shared belief, and discarded if the content of the evidence disagrees with the shared belief. Clinkenbeard gives the example of flat earth conspiracists who accept photographic, testimonial, and digital evidence of flat earth, but rejects these same evidence if they support a round one (ibid). Given that the counter-evidence to the flat earthers were of the same standards as their supporting evidence, a healthy community would have engaged with the content of both of the evidence. However, ECs do not in virtue of their structure and is another consequence of their epistemic nihilism.

² Epistemic health' here is used as understood by Piovarchy and Siskind (2023). They describe epistemic health as 'how well an entity is functioning with regard to a range of epistemic goods or ideals' (Piovarchy and Siskind 2023, 5). Here, the epistemic goods under consideration would be knowledge, and the deriving goods of evidential norms, and standards.

This filtration process of evidence is what comes to define the EC. Thus, contra Lackey, EC are necessarily pernicious. Moreover, the dismissal of counter-evidence in virtue of the fact that they disagree with the shared belief makes any meaningful engagement with the counter-evidence impossible. The content of the counter-evidence are not engaged with by the members, but rather dismissed out of hand due to their disagreeing content. This feature, the refusal to engage with the counter-evidence, makes EC the most pernicious in comparison to other CKCs.

2.3 CKCs come in degrees

Having stated that ECs occupy the highest end of the spectrum of perniciousness of CKCs, I will now argue why CKC*s are not as pernicious. The two examples of evidence-resistance, I)-II), are not as pernicious as ECs as their handling of evidence does not necessarily violate any epistemic norms. Say a scientist has a large data set, all of which except a handful of data points follow a trend which was hypothesized by the scientist. It could be permissible for the scientist to perform explaining-away such that the abnormal data sets can be made coherent with the larger data set. Moreover, disproportionate criticism of counter-evidence can also be permissible given that through these criticisms, substantial reasons to doubt the validity of the counter-evidence is uncovered. In effect, I)-II) can be permissibly performed by epistemic communities given that there is good substance/ reasons behind these maneuvers.³

CKC*s can perform I)-II) in impermissible ways if they lack good substance/ reasons behind their usage. Johnson's 'Trump was an informer' is a good example of II) being performed impermissibly. When questioned for substantiating evidence, Johnson withdrew his claim. That is, his explaining away lacked evidential backing, and as a result was merely a conjecture. Disproportionate criticism can also be unhealthy. For example, say a media platform *M* unfairly presents a political candidate in a negative light, disproportionate criticism can unearth this unfairness and give valid reasons to doubt the legitimacy of *this* counter-evidence. However, if this doubting is not limited to

³ I will not go into detail the specific nature of the permissibility of these moves. My point is rather that some instances of I)-II) can abide by epistemic norms, and that there are certain reasons which allows I)-II) to be performed permissibly.

the domain of *M* and extended to other media platforms which also criticises the political candidate for other, valid reasons, then this would be an impermissible form of I), as the reasons for doubting *M* are restricted to *M*, and not beyond.

That said, CKC*s occupy the conceptual space between EC and EB in the perniciousness spectrum. Moreover, we can stipulate that healthy epistemic communities occupy the lower-end of this spectrum, and the unhealthy instantiations of I)-II), for example, occupy the higher-end. Nevertheless, these unhealthy instantiations of I)-II) are still less pernicious than EC as members still *engage* with the substances of the counter-evidence, and as a result their engagement can be criticized as unfair, invalid, or unsubstantiated (exemplified by Johnson's conjecture). Hence, CKC*s still somewhat share a commitment to the common ground of inquiry, where there are certain epistemic norms which help govern epistemic procedures (evidence-deliberation, argumentative moves, etc.); and in virtue of sharing this common-ground can be *effectively* criticized if CKC*s deals with evidence in impermissible ways. EC, as argued earlier, abandons the values and standards which structure this common ground in the first place, as a result their methods cannot be effectively criticised, as any forms of counter-evidence is dismissed in virtue of their counter-acting content. This results in the lack of engagement with the counter-evidence in EC.

Having laid out this framework for a wider taxonomy of CKCs, the next section will use *Trump Derangement Syndrome* (TDS) to further exemplify this taxonomy, and to also illuminate the final feature of my argument: that CKCs can evolve into more pernicious versions of themselves.

Section 3. TDS and degrees of perniciousness

I will now turn to my final point. That CKCs can evolve to become more pernicious. Roughly, a CKC maintains its identity when evolving into a more pernicious version of themselves iff they maintain their shared belief, and the way they deal with the counter-evidence becomes less receptive. The case study I will be using involves the MAGA movement, which I will roughly understand as a CKC which shares a belief along the lines of 'Trump is the best person to be the president of the United States.' I will argue below that the MAGA CKC held on to this belief while their approach to counter-

evidence/ criticism to this belief became more pernicious. This evolution eventually reaches the highest end of the spectrum I've outlined. The CKC becomes an EC exemplified by the notion of TDS. TDS' ostensive definition can be found in a bill introduced to the Minnesota legislature to diagnose TDS as a mental illness. It defines TDS as 'verbal expressions of intense hostility toward [Trump and] overt acts of aggression and violence against anyone supporting [Trump] or anything that symbolises [Trump]' (Hoffman 2025). TDS in its usage and application has been broader however; being used to neutralise many criticisms of Trump's presidency. Examples of TDS being used to dismiss counter-evidence will be touched on later.

The MAGA movement from its birth, the candidacy and the election of Trump into the White House in 2016, can be aptly described as unhealthy and pernicious as a CKC. Evidential preemption was especially pertinent as Trump declared war on 'fake news', and constantly discredited the validity of media coverage of him. Moreover, his constant criticism of the media could be interpreted as disproportionate scrutiny of the counter-evidence provided against him. These maneuvers from Trump would have given certain reassurances and methods of dealing with counter-evidence to the MAGA CKC. Nevertheless, these approaches to counter-evidence, however epistemically unhealthy, were not necessarily problematic. As Lackey and Clinkenbeard observed above, evidential preemption can often be justified if the distrust of the source of evidence itself is justified. That is, they still rank below EC in their perniciousness as they still engage with the counter-evidence provided. Their explanations as to why these counter-evidence were not valid may not have been valid themselves, but these are room for criticism that could still be levied against the MAGA base.

It could be suggested that since early on the MAGA base were ECs already, and that these maneuvers occurred after the evidence was rejected in virtue of their content. However, these maneuvers still left room for engagement with counter-evidence by the members of the MAGA CKC, and it is plausible that there were many yet to have fallen into epistemic nihilism. Moreover, TDS being used as a tool to dismiss counter-evidence and criticism *conceptualises the very structural mechanism with which EC function*. That is, TDS emblemizes the nihilism of ECs. TDS now allows for a method of neutralising

counter-evidence that requires no engagement with their content at all. For example, Scott Bessent dismissed criticisms of Trump's tariff policy by JP Morgan, economists, and Goldman Sachs as TDS, in this instance as (tariff derangement syndrome) (McLaughlin 2025). In another case, Fetterman claimed that those who opposed, and criticised Trump's \$400 million ballroom suffered from TDS (Bolton 2026). Neither of these responses actually engage with the counter-evidence given. Hence, the previous the MAGA CKC, which was a CKC* with high perniciousness, solidified, and definitively evolved, into an EC with the introduction of TDS. TDS affords members the conceptual tools to dismiss any counter-evidence, in virtue of their disagreement to their belief in Trump's competency as president.

But why hold on to a belief set to the extent of nihilism? Empirical literature shows that people are most resistant to evidence when the evidence targets a *closely held* belief (Flores 2021, Mandelbaum 2019). From this, the evolution of CKCs could be explained as such. Say a person, *S*, holds a belief, *p*, very closely such that they do not want to give it up. When faced with counter-evidence, *S* can either give up *p* or not. If they choose not to, they ought to give an explanation, or a reason for not accepting the evidence – this could involve I)-II) or other methods. However, if there is an increasing number of valid, and strong counter-evidence to *p*, not only will *S* have to deal with more and more evidence, but the avenues left for *S* in dealing with them in a healthy manner shrinks. If this continues such that counter-evidence against *p* is overwhelming, *S*'s only viable options left to hold on to *p* would be the collapse into epistemic nihilism, that of an EC.

As Nguyen points out, the formation of EC tend to be guided by authoritative figures in the CKC (2018, 149). With the MAGA EC, Trump and his administration plays this role, where there is a constant affirmation to their shared belief by creating constant opposition between their CKC, and political movement with others. Such that the nihilistic denial of any counter-evidence becomes more reasonable and acceptable, given the opposition is viewed as malicious and deceptive. The method of facilitating CKC's evolution in perniciousness seem to be one of constant guidance. In which our

non-doxastic motivations to hold on to our beliefs are encouraged and affirmed. Such that we value these motivations over any forms of epistemic values.

Conclusion

I have argued for a wider taxonomy of CKCs, which EB and EC fall under, and that this wider taxonomy can be laid out into a spectrum measured by the CKC's perniciousness. I argued that EC occupy the highest end of this spectrum as their structure halts any engagement with the content of the counter-evidence, resulting from EC's epistemic nihilism. Other forms of neutralising the counter-evidence to the shared belief of a CKC, however healthy, as a result are not as pernicious as the nihilistic EC. Therefore, they occupy the conceptual space between EB and EC. Finally, through the example of TDS, and the MAGA CKC, I have exemplified the wider taxonomy, and that CKCs can evolve into more pernicious versions of themselves. Though my example agrees with Nguyen's suggestion that the aetiology of EC tend to be the result of intentional action, the overall picture I've painted also may provide the basis for aetiologies of ECs that arise without malicious guidance. Nevertheless, my hope is that the wider taxonomy of CKCs could ground further insights into belief-polarisation and other inquiries in social epistemology.

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