

What and How Do We Know? Data and Discourse on the Internet

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NATIONAL

Nation shuts down waiting for nation to shut down due to snow

27/05/2013 at 5:02 pm

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Some of my research interests

1. What encourages and undermines meaningful & productive public discourse?
2. What enables individuals to participate in communicative & epistemic life, and to do so responsibly?
3. What enables individuals to perform genuine communicative & epistemic actions? I.e., to support their epistemic agency?

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% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site

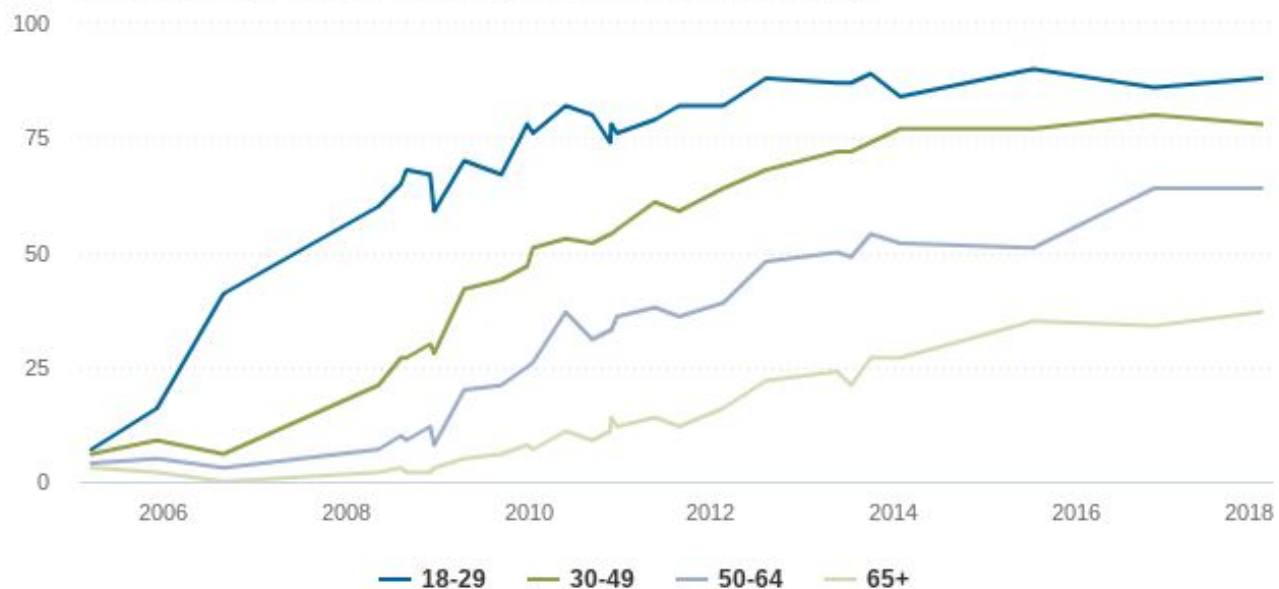


Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site, by age



Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2018.

Plan

Is there a duty to warn about
online epistemic risks?

- Are there online risks?
- Are there online *epistemic* risks?
- When do we have to protect against risk? An argument about clinical trials
- Undermining epistemic agency and epistemic community — understanding *social epistemic* risk

Keyword search on four popular media websites

What kinds of issues are being discussed that are related to concerns about public discourse & epistemic agency?

1. “Online discourse”
2. “Filter bubble”

“Online discourse”

(Click titles for links)

[In this grim age of Trump and Brexit, online fury is a dead end for the left \(2018\)](#)

[Is it too late to stop the trolls trampling over our entire political discourse? \(2016\)](#)

[Zuckerberging Public Discourse \(2017\)](#)

[Our Evolving Discourse: Communication in the Age of Social Media \(2013\)](#)

[How Platforms Are Poisoning Conversations \(2017\)](#)

[Trolls Are Winning the Internet, Technologists Say \(2017\)](#)

[The Coming Speech Wars Online \(2017\)](#)

[The Jihad Online: A case of pointless litigation \(2016\)](#)

“Filter bubble”

(Click titles for links)

[How social media filter bubbles and algorithms influence the election \(2017\)](#)

[Bursting the Facebook bubble: we asked voters on the left and right to swap feeds](#)

[Google, The ‘Good Censor’ \(2018\)](#)

[Why Facebook Wants You to Be Happy \(2014\)](#)

[Everybody's in a Bubble, and That's a Problem \(2017\)](#)

[What Facebook Did to American Democracy \(2017\)](#)

[Mitt Romney and the Liberal Media Bubble \(2016\)](#)

[Viewpoint Discrimination with Algorithms \(2018\)](#)

Issues with online discourse from scientific research

Trust issues

(Click blue text for links)

- We may not notice when companies advertise, but we do when political parties do – and we distrust them

[“Consumer responses to promoted tweets sent by brands and political parties”](#) (2016)

- The internet is lowering our trust in traditional media sources
- Some cautious estimates suggest that between 9-15% of Twitter accounts and ~60 million Facebook accounts are bots
- Social media is designed to optimise engagement over quality

[“The science of fake news”](#) (2018)

Quality control issues

(Click blue text for links)

- Lies (rumours) spread faster than the truth online

[“The spread of true and false news online”](#) (2018)

- Exposure to fake news sources is heavily concentrated

[“Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election”](#) (2019)

- Anyone can become a troll, not just bad actors

[“Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions”](#)

(2017)

(Click blue text for links)

Humility & open-mindedness issues

- Debates around filter-bubbles & echo-chambers

[“What kind of news gatekeepers do we want machines to be? Filter bubbles, fragmentation, and the normative dimensions of algorithmic recommendations”](#) (2019)

[“#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media”](#) (2018)

[“The echo chamber is overstated: the moderating effect of political interest and diverse media”](#) (2017)

[“Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on facebook”](#) (2015)

[“The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you”](#) (2011)

We're losing the ability to have quality discourse and media

Some people are ruining it:

- Trolls
- Online shaming or abuse
- False or fake information
- Uncharitable debate

Some algorithms are filtering it:

- Ideological moderation
- Filter bubbles
- Echo chambers
- Promoting viral - not truthful - talk

These are all *social epistemic* risks and harms

- We are collectively worried about how the Internet is making it harder to get to the truth
 - By undermining meaningful and productive public discourse on issues that matter to us
 - By encouraging intellectual vices like dogmatism and closemindedness
 - As a result of information pollution

Many of us would like to “offload” epistemic responsibility

- We only do this if what we offload onto actually meets our epistemic standards
- One way to offload is epistemic trust – but we need to be epistemically responsible in deciding who to trust

Learning from others: testimonial knowledge

- Most of what we know, we learn from others
- This is risky!
 - In many areas of life, we have safeguards in place:
 - Peer review, statistical standards, replication, etc.
 - Advertising & broadcasting standards
 - Norms around giving testimony to others

Learning from others *online*

We are increasingly relying on the Internet as a primary source of information

1. We still rely on institutions, companies, and real people, but we now *access them* online and this changes things
2. We now learn from *algorithms* online, and from *new media* that have come with the Internet

Do we give up on the “great democratiser of knowledge”?

- It would be hasty to give up completely – we get all kinds of good, useful information from the Internet!
- There’s a tension between our epistemic ideals, and companies’ goals
 - It might be stronger than this: our epistemic *expectations* may outweigh the goals of companies

Many online platforms are risky places – they can cause social-epistemic harm

- Do we have a duty to protect people from social-epistemic risks?
- Is there a duty to – at a minimum – disclose social-epistemic risks?



Duties to disclose risk

Argument that we ought to disclose (biomedical) risks

1. Individuals have a human right not to be put at risk of harm without first giving informed consent
2. Therefore, there is a moral duty not to put others at risk of harm without their informed consent

Applying this in medicine

3. If adverse clinical trial results are not disclosed to prospective participants, then they are placed at risk of harm without their informed consent

4. Therefore, there is a moral duty to disclose adverse clinical trial results to prospective participants in clinical trials

Liao, Sheehan, & Clark. (2008). "The duty to disclose adverse clinical trial results".

The moral

- We have a human right not to be put at risk of harm without informed consent
- Informed consent requires we are made aware of all of the risks of a practice or activity

The question, then: are the social-epistemic risks of the sort we've been considering risks of harm?

Requiring informed consent before putting someone at social-epistemic risk

- Wikipedia provides us an example of what this can look like – under-citation warnings, single source warnings
 - Isn't this just an epistemic risk? The “risk” here is one of false beliefs or unjustified beliefs and that kind of risk isn't harmful

It's not just an issue of getting false or unjustified beliefs

- We risk undermining our own social-epistemic agency
- We risk undermining our ability to be in control of our epistemic capacities
- We risk undermining our ability to create the epistemic community we desire

We risk undermining our own social-epistemic agency

- By relying on social media for our news, we risk being subject to information pollution, biased sources, fake sources, etc., undermining our ability to access epistemic goods
 - One can choose to put oneself at risk, but we need to understand what that risk is first so that it is an *informed choice*

We risk undermining our ability to be in control of our social-epistemic capacities

- Non-rational persuasion
 - Advertising & personalisation
 - Being exploited by bots to spread enticing fake news
 - Emotional persuasion (*Academia*)
 - Appeals to cognitive biases
- Epistemic corruption
 - Using platforms that encourage intellectual vice like dogmatism and close-mindedness

We risk undermining our ability to create the epistemic community we desire

- Epistemic estrangement: we may be more likely to assume that those we disagree are irrational, that they hold the caricatured views uncharitably attributed to them, and fail to recognise the areas of overlap between us

We risk undermining our ability to create the epistemic community we desire

- Debate chilling: if people's primary place to engage in important debates is online, then consistently low quality and abusive discourse may prevent them from engaging or limit the range of people they are willing to talk with

“Social media and political discussion: when online presence silences offline conversation”

(2017)

Looking at terms, conditions, and guidelines

While companies like Facebook might stipulate how they expect you to engage with their platform and ways that they will mediate content,

And these may be motivated by safety concerns,

They don't warn you about particular epistemic harms you might experience as a result of using their platform.

The argument to disclose epistemic risks online:

1. Individuals have a human right not to be put at risk of harm without first giving informed consent
2. Therefore, there is a moral duty not to put others at risk of harm without their informed consent
3. If the social-epistemic risks of online services are not disclosed to prospective users, then they are placed at risk of harm without their informed consent
4. Therefore, there is a moral duty to disclose the social-epistemic risks of using online services to prospective users

Who's responsible for disclosing online epistemic risks?

- The companies who run the platforms have a duty not to violate our right to informed consent
 - I've argued that epistemic risks must be disclosed in order for us to meaningfully consent to using their services without being put at risk of epistemic harm
 - Thus, at least the companies have a duty to disclose the epistemic risks of using their services
- There might also be a duty to promote users rights to full disclosure of the epistemic (and other!) risks of these platforms
 - This could give rise to a duty for a wider range of potential disclosers
 - Researchers might have a duty to ensure that their results are communicated to companies & to users

Kia ora
Thanks for listening!