

Fake News and Partisan Epistemology

PPE Capstone

Fake News: What Is It?

A *fake news story* is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience.

1. Fake news is *deceptive*; it's not merely false information conveyed by reportage.
2. Fake news is intended for an audience larger than the immediate recipient; it is meant to be *shared*.
3. Creators of fake news *intend to deceive* (at least a part of) their overall audience.

How Prevalent Is It? According to a 2018 paper by Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler, "approximately 1 in 4 Americans visited a fake news website from October 7–November 14, 2016," and that "Facebook was a key vector of exposure to fake news and that fact-checks of fake news almost never reached its consumers."

Testimony and Social Media

Q: Why do people believe fake news?

A: They believe it because it is presented to them via *testimony*, and it's typically reasonable to believe the testimony of others (all else equal).

We don't (and shouldn't) just believe whatever we're told. We take into account (1) facts about the testifiers identity and current motivation, and (2) the plausibility of the testimonial content itself.

Q: Is the transmission of fake news on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) a form of testimony?

A: Yes, but it's a *bent* form of testimony.

Testimony involves making an *assertion*. When a person shares some content on social media (without further comment) is that person *asserting* that content?

Rini: "These are *disputed norms* of communication."

This is Regina Rini's definition of 'fake news'.

Do you agree with it?

Deception might not be the *ultimate* goal, however. There is serious money to be made by producing fake news.

Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler. (2018) "Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign."

What is it to believe something on the basis of testimony?

You believe a proposition *p* on the *basis of testimony* when you believe that *p* because *p* was presented to you by another person.

In other words, is "a retweet not an endorsement"? When you retweet something or when you post a link to a news story on Facebook (without comment) are you vouching for its truth? What *are* you doing?

Partisan Epistemology

Regina Rini argues for the following claim:

Sometimes it makes sense to assign greater credibility to a testifier
because you know you share a political affiliation with her.

What is her argument? (Use the space below to reconstruct it.)

Hints: Consider the distinction between testimony about *normative* claims (that is, claims involving your *value commitments*) and testimony about *descriptive* claims.

Think about when, in general, is it reasonable to defer to the testimony of some over others. How might this be connected to one's *partisan* identity?

Consider what Rini says about "decisions about what is politically *important*". What role is this playing in the argument?

Do you find this argument convincing?

Potential Remedy: Institutions for Accountability

Rini arguments motivates institutional-level reforms for addressing the problem of fake news. She offers a couple suggestions for how to resolve our ambiguous norms governing testimony on social media. (That is, for how to adopt a norm that denies "a retweet is not an endorsement.")

1. Flag suspect content as 'disputed.' (Worry: This is too slow!)
2. Provide infrastructure for tracking the testimonial reputation of individual *users*.

Can you think of any problems with these suggestions? What are some other potential remedies?