

Navigating the Marketplace of Ideas

PPE Capstone

The Obligation to Diversify One's News Sources

- What are the obligations and responsibilities of *consumers* of the news media?

1. What media should you consume?
2. How should you respond to the media that you consume?
3. How should you act on the basis of the beliefs you form?

Thesis: "It is wrong for us to consume only, or overwhelmingly, media that broadly align with our own political viewpoints: that is, it is wrong to be politically "partisan" in our decisions about what media to consume."

- **Competitor View #1: Consume Only Unbiased Media!** What is it for a media source to be *unbiased*?

1. *Even-handedness.* An unbiased media source is one that reports what the different views on the controversy are, without seeking to arbitrate between them as to which is true.
2. *Accurate.* An unbiased media source is one that reports that is true (and to the extent that it reports views to the contrary, represents those views as false).
3. *Epistemically Pure.* Unbiased reporting is reporting that has not been influenced in an illicit way by some "non-epistemic" factor.

- **Competitor View #2: Across-The-Board Partisanship!** This is Rini's view, which we encountered last week. Worsnip raises two objections:

1. **Objection 1: Epistemic Subjectivism.** Rini's argument seems to rely on the following premise:

If a co-partisan CP and I agree on very many normative issues, then it is reasonable for me to trust CP's credibility about normative issues.

But, Worsnip claims, this is implausibly permissive. All it takes for it to be reasonable for me to trust you is for me to *believe* that you are trustworthy?

2. **Objection 2: Normative Vs Descriptive Claims.** Even if it's reasonable to trust someone's testimony about *normative* matters, it doesn't follow that it's reasonable to trust them about *non-normative* matters!

Alex Worsnip, "The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media," Forthcoming in Carl Fox & Joe Saunders (eds.), *Media Ethics: Free Speech and the Requirements of Democracy*, Routledge.

Is this obligation an *epistemic* one or a *moral* one? Do we have epistemic obligations governing evidence-gathering?

Observation: Social Media affords us the ability to selectively filter the information we encounter without being wholly aware that we are doing so.

Note: This is less about *what* is said, and more about *why* it is said.

Rini recognizes this worry and addresses it: When a news source is reporting *descriptive* information, its decisions about which descriptive information to communicate is based on *normative* claims about what is *important*.

Worsnip Responds: Even if a source is reliable about which descriptive claims are (if true) important, it doesn't follow that the source is reliable in determining which descriptive claims are true.

○ **Illicit Influences on Belief and Decisions about What to Report.**

1. *Motivated Reasoning*: One lets one's "directional" goals influence one's reasoning about whether *p*, overcoming one's "accuracy" goals.
2. *Newsworthiness & Bias*. In deciding what is "newsworthy," media sources are making normative judgments. Does this make all news sources biased?
 - (a) The reporter picks Story A over Story B because given her normative views, it follows that Story A is more newsworthy than Story B.
 - (b) The reporter picks Story C over Story D because Story D is *inconvenient* for her normative views.

(There's substantial evidence that illicit influences of this kind affect people across the political spectrum.)

○ **Why We're Obligated to Diversify Our Sources.** Worsnip argues as follows:

We should expect publications (and individual journalists) on all sides of the political spectrum to be, to some degree, illicitly influenced in what they believe, and in what they choose to report. When they are illicitly influenced in what they believe, it will be epistemically dangerous to take what they say on trust, without considering arguments and evidence presented by those with different views. . . . [I]llicit influences on what to *report* affect all news coverage. There, the danger is that if publications are prone to omit or minimize stories that aren't convenient for their normative outlook, then reading only news sources from any one side of the political spectrum (even if that side is normatively correct) will result in getting a skewed, incomplete picture of the evidence.

Can you reconstruct the argument? Do you agree or disagree with it?

Worsnip's example of Jayla and Bobby distinguishes between *weak* and *strong incongruence*.

Two beliefs are *strongly incongruent* if they are logically inconsistent or if they evidentially undermine each other.

They are *weakly incongruent* if they are psychologically uncomfortably to hold together.

Mill's Defense of Free Speech

1. The central argument can be found in this passage:

... The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.

Reconstruct Mill's argument.

2. **"If the opinion is right, ..."**. Consider the following passages:

- (a) The beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded ... This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being, and this is the sole way of attaining it.

What is Mill getting at here?

- (b) Men are not more zealous for truth than they often are for error, and a sufficient application of legal or even social penalties will generally succeed in stopping the propagation of either.

What is Mill getting at here?

3. **"If the opinion is false, ..."**. Consider the following passages:

- (a) So essential is this discipline to a real understanding of moral and human subjects, that if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them, and supply

them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up.

What is Mill getting at here?

- (b) Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral? . . . Not that it is solely, or chiefly, to form great thinkers, that freedom of thinking is required. On the contrary, it is as much and even more indispensable, to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature which they are capable of.

What is Mill getting at here?

4. **"If the opinion is partly true, partly false, . . ."**. Consider the following passages:

- (a) I acknowledge that the tendency of all opinions to become sectarian is not cured by the freest expression but is often heightened and exacerbated thereby; the truth which ought to have been, but was not, seen, being rejected all the more violently because proclaimed by persons regarded as opponents.

What is Mill getting at here?

- (b) it is not on the impassioned partisan, it is on the calmer and more disinterested bystander, that this collision of opinions works its salutary effect. Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it, is the formidable evil. There is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend to only to one that errors harden into prejudices.

What is Mill getting at here?

A Reconstruction of Mill's Argument

MILL'S ARGUMENT AGAINST CENSORSHIP

- P1** We ought to enable people to arrive at a clear and lively understanding of the truth.
- P2** Censorship will undermine people's ability to arrive at a clear and lively understanding of the truth.
- P3** If Xing will undermine people's ability to do something that we ought to enable them to do, then we ought not to X.
-
- C** We ought not censor.

Mill goes on to defend **P2** by considering three different cases: truth, falsity, and when things are partly true and partly false.

1. "If the opinion is right, ...".

- (4) If we censor the truth, we deny people the opportunity to exchange truth for error.

Objection to (4) #1: Can't we trust the censor to distinguish between what's true and what's false, and to only censor what is true?

Reply: No, not unless the censor is infallible. And we know from experience and from history that no one can be trusted to be infallible. (In fact, the only check against infallibility is to test our opinions by subjecting them to the scrutiny of others.)

Objection to (4) #2: Even if we accidentally censor the truth, the truth will eventually win out over censorship.

Reply: It might, but there's no guarantee of this. Legal or even social penalties can succeed in stopping the propagation of the truth.

2. "If the opinion is false, ...".

- (5) If we censor what's false, our beliefs will be held as "dead dogma" and we will not have a *clear and lively* understanding of the truth.

Objection to (5) #1: We can get a clear and lively understanding of the truth by just looking at the truths themselves. There's no need to consider contrary falsehoods.

Reply: This might be right for *some* truths (e.g., math), but, in most cases, clear and lively understanding is only possible by engaging with contrary positions.

Objection to (5) #2: We can get a clear and lively understanding of the truth without considering contrary falsehoods if there is an epistemic elite who can figure it out and explain it to the rest of us.

Reply: No, everyone needs the ongoing mental exercise of considering contrary positions in order to truly appreciate the significance of the truth. Plus, doing this is good for us; it makes us into better thinkers and better citizens.

3. **"If the option is partly true, partly false, ...".**

- (6) If we censor what's partly true, partly false, then we deprive ourselves of what's partially true and, by not engaging with the partial falsity, we miss out on having a better understanding of the truth.

Objection to (P2): Allowing the dissemination of partial truths will lead to polarization and the entrenchment of opinion.

Reply 1: Maybe, but only at the extremes.

Reply 2: Even still, not censoring is the lesser evil. "There is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend to only to one that errors harden into prejudices."