

VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE CURBING OF FAKE NEWS MENACE IN THE NEWS MEDIA

AKANDE, Michael Aina, PhD

Department of Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Ojo.

ainaakande@yahoo.com

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OBI, Olajide Abiodun

Doctoral Student, Department of Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts, Lagos state University, Ojo.

olajide.obi@gmail.com

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Abstract

The advent of the internet has brought with it a lot of good and evil, part of the evil the internet brought is fake news. News and information travel these days on social media faster than the conventional media and online news consumers are prone to more fake news than before because many of the sources or agents are hiding. It has become very difficult to know which news is fake and which is real irrespective of where it emanates from. The issue of fake news has become a new trend in political discourse as a means to mudsling opponents. Fake news has resulted in depression, war, manipulation of due process and the like. It is for this reason this work attempts to expose its epistemological import. The question raised in this work is, what does it mean for a piece of news to be fake? How can it be curbed? In addressing these questions, we identified two factors in determining authentic information: the perceptual traits of the media house and the character traits of its agent. The aim is to use indices of virtue epistemology to determine which news we are supposed to be believed as the real news and which one we are not supposed to believe. We argue that motivation, interest and intention of media agents and houses should be taken into consideration as parameters for measuring genuineness of information. This work concludes that inculcating character-traits and perceptual traits as suggested in virtue epistemology to media practices can help to reduce spreading of fake news and its menace.

Keywords: Fake-news, Virtue Epistemology, Intellectual Virtue, Reliable media, Responsible media

Introduction

What we today called fake news is not new. It is an occurrence that has been with us since time immemorial. For instance, it was fake news when the Western powers tried to tell the world about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the basis and need for a Cold War, and the like (Dentith, 2017). What is new is that the advent of the internet, social media specifically, has helped fake news to be more popular, rampant and travel faster. Since internet devices are common with digital features, information travels faster on social media, which makes fake news spread as fast as possible.

The most surprising thing is that fake news does not only come from the masses or online Media alone, fake news comes from authorities and governments in power. A government can use fake news to make it look as if the government is doing fine when the reverse is the case. Fake news can come from the oppositions to tarnish the image of the ruling party or government in power. Aside from governments and opposition parties, fake news can emanate from innocent members of the society or journalists who only got information about an incident from somebody they believe have knowledge of the incident, but not knowing the news is not real. Blind trust in agencies is actually the culprit in the spread of fake news.

The main concern in this work is to use virtue epistemology as a tool to determine whether a piece of news is fake or real. Virtue Epistemology is instructive here in tackling the issue of fake news because virtue epistemology goes beyond the scope of looking at external justification or evidence as a factor in believing a particular event or incident. Virtue epistemology instead of looking at only external justification looks at things such as intention, motivation and the intellectual virtue of the epistemic agent which are internal or can be inferred from the external. In traditional epistemology, it is enough to provide a reason or evidence to exonerate oneself concerning a piece of information or claim since many simply rely on the printed or spoken information but it has been discovered that physical evidence is not enough because, in media practices, it has become very easy to doctor evidence and create non-existing videos with the advent of new technology; one has to probe beyond what one sees or hears.

Virtue Epistemology as a branch of epistemology focuses on the agent reporting the event or incident in relation to what is being reported. The agents in this case are the media house and its human representatives. One can argue that media practices and information from that source rests on the concept of testimony

knowledge. Since media information or report is any claim made either verbally or in written form. For this reason, just like testimony, media reports harbour some moral considerations which include sincerity, trustworthiness and competence. These considerations fulfil the core concern of the two strands of virtue epistemology which are reliabilism and responsibilism. While reliabilism focuses on what can be inferred from the external factors, responsibilism is concerned with the character of the human agent. Virtue epistemology in this wise looks at the genuineness of information in terms of how reliable media house is and how responsibly the source is motivated. The next section of this paper is dedicated to the discussion about Fake News and the difference between Fake News and the claim that "That's just fake news!" as it is being used in political discourse.

Conceptual Clarification of Fake-news

Despite our familiarity with the concept or phrase 'fake news', It is not out of place for some to still ask the question, what is fake news and how can it be identified? On this note, we will describe 'fake news' as a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or deceptions spread in most cases to achieve undesired results via conventional or social media (Leonhardt, and Thomson 2017). Fake news is prominent now that we are in the digital age compared to when the news has to be only in Prints, on the Television or spoken on Radio alone. Dentith, sees fake news as misleading news that contains significant omissions or falsity. He states further that, fake news is a form of lie designed to deceive its intended audience (Dentith, 2017).

In most cases, fake news is always a form of misinformation on social media but occasionally finds its way to the mainstream media as well. The history of fake news in the 20th century was traced to the agents of the U.S.S.R., in the late 1930s when they challenged the findings of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials otherwise known as the Dewey Commission (Dentith, 2017). The advent of the internet is a great contributor to the increase in fake news because information on the internet travels so fast. So, if somebody posted something majority of the people do not bother investigating if such a post is true or false they just accept it hook, line and sinker and continue to spread it. Though for some fake news, there are always some elements of truth, in most cases those who spread the fake news on social media do not know the real truth about the incident or if there is a kind of misunderstanding in terms of communication and this makes some events to be

misreported or underreported. Just like we have in Nigeria on government television NTA, which can be called political fake news not because it televises falsehood but it exaggerates the positive ones and under-reports or neglects the negative ones.

Nevertheless, Fake news is in most cases fabricated news meant to deceive its intended audience, but it must be known that not all news tagged as fake news are fake news. There is fake news that has some element of truth but lacks credibility when it comes to fact checks. There are also allegations of fake news which are referred to as "That's just fake news!" 'That is just fake news' according to Dentith, is a phrase mostly used by political office holders to refer to some news about them or their political parties which are basically true. But because of the effect of such news on their political career, they will refer to such news as 'just fake news. An example of 'that is just fake news' in Nigeria was when the minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Muhammad said the leader of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky is being fed with 3.5 million Naira monthly. The minister denied the News and said 'that is just fake news' until the video went viral and the news took another shape.

Fake news can be so annoying when it is discovered because it is a play on one's intelligence and might have caused lots of damages. For instance, a church was set ablaze by angry youths in Nigeria, the Ondo State capital, Akure, when they heard that the corpse of a one-year-old boy that was missing some times ago was found in the Church. Later it was discovered that it was fake news, fabricated to indict the leader of the church. When one is caught napping as a spreader of fake news, it can lead to distrust in news generally. For this reason, it is expected that anybody who is reporting an incident should investigate properly and be sincere by doing their best to get the story straight, and to report accurately their findings. The consumers of news have a role to play by considering the authenticity of the news they were fed with to know if it is true or not and most importantly critically assessed the source of the News in terms of the reliability and what actually motivates the poster of the news. This is the aspect where the virtue epistemology will be applied as we shall see in the next section.

What is Virtue Epistemology?

We shall devote this section to the questions: What is intellectual virtue and how can intellectual virtues be used to determine the status of information? Or how can one know which News is fake and which is real? These are the questions

most people have failed to answer. These questions are however, epistemological questions, it is therefore necessary to tackle the menace of fake news with a theory of epistemology that looks beyond evidential justification of true belief or information. While we agree that perceptual evidence is a necessary ingredient of knowledge, this work concludes that it is not sufficient ingredient for such knowledge.

Information publishing about somebody or an incident has to do with the publisher laying claim to the knowledge of such person or incident. Which means the three ingredients of traditional account of knowledge must be present. That is, there must be a belief, the belief must be true and there must be a justification for the true belief. But how justified is the justify information? This has been an issue in epistemology which has led to different theories of justification like foundationalism and coherentism.

However, an American philosopher at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Edmund Gettier, who is best known for his short 1963 article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" attempt to expose the problem generated by the traditional account of knowledge and the idea of justification. It can be inferred from his analysis that externalism of justification of information is not sufficient though necessary in grasping the essence of truth. In other words, perception and reason as the factors of justification are not enough when the moral factor is not considered.

In solving the Gettier-problem, Linda Zagzebski, Ernest Sosa, John Greco came up with the idea of virtue epistemology which focuses on motivation behind a claim rather than justification. In regards to fake news, virtue epistemologists shift attention from the object of knowledge to the epistemic agents. This goes with the evaluation of the agent's intellectual virtue and most importantly it tries to decipher if truth is what motivates the agent or other considerations like jealousy, hatred, competition, anger, religious bias, ethnicity or racism.

Contrary to traditional epistemology that focuses on belief justification, virtue epistemology focuses on the justification of the epistemic agents through the evaluation of their character-traits. According to Zagzebski, the concept of justified belief should be defined in terms of the concept of a person who is motivated by intellectual virtue (Battal, 2019). Factors like motivation and interest will be considered to determine the true value of the information. It is a truism to assert that there is always a motive for every investigation and dissemination of information. Motivation by intellectual virtues rather than vices confers reliability and responsibility on agency.

One cannot deny that character-traits which results in intellectual virtue are made virtuous by some relation they bear to justified beliefs or knowledge which has been observed by people over time. This is what prompted Zagzebski to say that, the property of knowledge is the property of being a belief that results from an act of intellectual virtue (Battal, 2019). For Sosa, the exercise of virtues makes one's beliefs internally appropriate, and makes them count as bits of animal knowledge. A belief is justified, according to Sosa, if it has its source in an intellectual virtue (Ernest. 1980).

Socrates must be very correct when he says knowledge is virtue, because defining knowledge in terms of virtue makes knowledge more reliable than when it is defined in terms of justification or evidence. Considering the way Heather Battal put it, if virtues have motivational or social components, perceptual knowledge will cease to be paradigmatic and more complex cases of knowing will succeed, one will agree that virtue is foundational to knowledge of reality.

Virtues should be considered as determinant of justified belief or knowledge. They should be what we will be looking for as what make beliefs true or what count as knowledge. Though, in some cases, this idea of virtue of the epistemic agent might really not be enough to justify what is knowledge or fake news. Zagzebski said that much when she asserts that ethical theories of this type which "focus on the agent and her traits as a way of determining what is right, do not maintain that what is right is right because it is what a virtuous person would do (Zagzebski, 1996). In this sense, this work is not saying that once we identify a virtuous person whatever s/he claims must be knowledge. It rather stresses the point that whenever anyone adopts necessary virtue to attain true belief, such virtue confers reliability on the claim and makes the agent a responsible claimant.

In epistemology, a virtue theory is a systematic account of the relationships between belief evaluations, and the virtues and vices and that which is good from an epistemic point of view that establishes the primacy of the virtues (Zagzebski, 1996). Understanding the intellectual virtues is crucial for expanding our grasp of the human cognitive experience and for promoting our efforts to be "epistemologically responsible" knowers. Kvanvig believes that the virtues are important for beings that need socialization in order to function successfully in an information-sharing society (Zagzebski, 1996).

Character and Perceptual Traits in Media and Information Sector

As stated in the introduction, sourcing information from the media is in the realm of testimonial knowledge. This presupposes that certain traits are needed to build trust on the informant. One of the reasons we are often justified in believing the testimony of others is because in the past, when we have been able to crosscheck, we have usually found the statements made by others to be true. The principle of reliabilism under this circumstance places premium on any method that yields truth most of the times even when there is a possibility of being mistaken. So, this work recognizes the fallibilism of relying on second-hand information, it nevertheless believes that there are traits or characteristics one should look for in information sector, to help reduce the risk of spreading fake news.

As Sosa remarks, we are “an information sharing social species.” In other words, we heavily depend on quality information, and we heavily depend on each other to get it (Ernest. 1980). What this is telling us is that, as Human beings, we act as individuals and in groups, and engaged in various practical activities that require accurate information. The society where getting real information is a problem will surely not develop because information sharing is a key to social development.

In the case of fake news, as we have been looking at from the beginning of this chapter, focus should be on who relay the news and where the news is coming from to determine the fakeness or the realness of a news. Let’s take for instance, the news that President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, has taken a new wife in person of Hajia Sadiya Umar Farouq.

A lot of Nigerians already believed this news before it was confirmed to be fake news. When people were asked why they will believe the news, reasons were given to justify their belief. One of the reasons given was that the first lady had been away for some months which is unusual of the first lady. Another reason given was that Ms. Farouq was responsible for cooking all the meals Buhari and the Cabal always eat during political meetings and campaigns. In traditional epistemology evidence of this nature will lend credence to this news; until maybe there is a new development that falsifies the previous knowledge.

In the case of Virtue of Epistemology, the onus of proof is on the epistemic agent who is the first person to relay the News. This can be tested using the idea of intellectual virtue in terms of its two modes, as advocated by virtue epistemologists. The Reliabilism mode as briefly mentioned earlier will focus on

the pictorial or video evidence of the supposed marriage while responsibility will infer from character traits of the reporter and principal actors in the supposed report.

Over time, communication experts have researched into how people can identify and differentiate fake news from the real news. This action becomes necessary because even the main stream medias due to their negligent and laziness has fallen into the ditch of fake news. Some identifiable ways are shoddy, un-researched, (anonymous based confirmation of news) and error-filled reports (Kiely and Robertson, 2016, our emphasis). Also, the virtue of patience is mostly lost because of financial reward in pushing out breaking news. Many news organizations want to be seen as being the first to break a news item and as such do not take enough time to verify and confirm their news from primary sources. This scenario played out recently when many news media in Nigeria reported that the Vice chancellor of University of Lagos, Nigeria was indicted of corruption. Major media organizations without seeing the original report of the investigative panel published this news just because the governing council chairman who was the accuser misinformed the media.

Open-mindedness is another virtue that can help in writing a good news. This trait is sometimes lost because of ethnic, religious or racial bias; the major culprit being business competition. In the view of this readers should always do fact-check by checking if other news outlets carry the same news. A little background check of the author of a news is not out of place because consistency matters in the way and how a reporter project his/her ideas. Some authors or reporters have political or other affiliations that affect their reports. Whenever readers see anything suspicious irrespective of how viral it has gone, they can recheck using check engines like FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, the *Washington Post* Fact Checker and PolitiFact.com to know the genuineness of the post.

Jason Baehr in his book titled *The Inquiring Mind on Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Baehr, 2011) differentiated between being intellectually virtuous and being intellectually vicious. According to him, an intellectually virtuous person is one who thinks, reasons, judges, interprets, evaluates, and so on, in an intellectually appropriate or rational way, while an intellectually vicious person is one who is deficient or defective in this regard. So, to Jason, truth cannot be attained without intellectual virtues. It is an essential ingredient to a successful pursuit of the truth. Jason further substantiates his claim when he wrote:

A person with the virtue of curiosity, or whose mental life is characterized by wonder, is quick to notice and be inclined to investigate issues or

subject matters of significance intellectual virtues entails things like attentiveness, sensitivity to detail, careful observation, scrutiny, or perceptiveness. Intellectual Virtues consist of fairness, consistency, and objectivity it can also require virtues like impartiality and open-mindedness. To avoid the mire of self-deception, a kind of cognitive integrity is needed. Such integrity bears on how we confront and process new evidence and on how we treat or regard evidence we already possess (Baehr, 2011).

Aside these character traits mentioned above, some perceptual traits too can help to avoid believing false news. For instance, perceptual trait like the URL of the sources of information is important when dealing with online media. When the website of a media source has <http://> rather than <https://> which designates a secure site is used then one should be suspicious of any news from there. When a report contains numerous exclamation marks at the end of a sentence, with furious judgment, it is often fake news of some sort. Also readers should be sceptical of an abundance of spelling or grammatical errors (Smith, 2021).

Furthermore, ordering of domain name has some approved format. For example a url that reads <https://abcnews.com.co/Obama-executive-order-ban> because there is a popular and dependable corporation site <https://www.abc.net.au/news> in Samantha Smith's words, is often a sign of a website that shares fake news. In other words, some of the fake news websites try to mimic the URL, logo, and design of legitimate news websites, in order to trick readers. One contribution that sets virtue epistemology apart from traditional epistemology is the need to separate a knower from a learner or copyist. The fact that two people are in possession of justified true belief does not make the two of them knowers. If one agent copy or learn from another, the person who discovered the information has epistemic superiority in relation to the one who copied because they are motivated differently. The motivation to discover the truth seems better than the motivation to retain or accept the truth. It is for this reason plagiarism is frowned at in intellectual matters and investigative journalism is prized by the news media.

Conclusion

The advent of the internet no doubt brought with it a lot of goods and evils, and part of the evil the internet brought is the fake news. With the help of the internet, news and other information especially the social media platforms travel

faster than the speed of light which makes online news consumers prone to more of fake news than before. It has now become very difficult to know which news is fake and which is real irrespective of where it is emanating from. With the knowledge of the virtue epistemology as shared in the work, consumers of online news and print media should to a larger extent be able to differentiate between a fake news and a real news.

It was said that in epistemology, a virtue theory is a systematic account of the intellectual virtue of the epistemic agent and this is used to solve the problem of justification caused in the search for truth or knowledge. Understanding the intellectual virtues is crucial for expanding our grasp of the human cognitive experience and for promoting efforts that make one an "epistemically responsible" knower. Likewise, virtues are important for beings that need socialization in order to function successfully in an information-sharing society. So, the intellectual virtue of the reporter of the news which comprises of character-traits and cognitive faculties and abilities should be in consideration before accepting any news.

If the lessons of virtue epistemology are used in checking the traditional media practices genuine knowledge will be served. What this means is that, the ingredients for knowledge should be 'Justified True Belief with Agent's Intellectual Virtue.

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