

The Ethical Obligation to Fact-Check

Mark Twain once said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” Except that itself is a lie because he never said that; the quote’s origins can be traced back to 1710, when satirist Jonathan Swift wrote, “Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it (1710).” Most people are unaware of this fact because the consensus that these are Twain’s words has been rehashed on the Internet through motivational images and popular websites like A-Z Quotes, making it challenging to verify their roots. Although these instances are harmless, that becomes less so when dealing with impactful scientific, social, and political assertions that are taken factually without verification, and there is no place where this is more relevant than social media. I define “fact-checking” as establishing the factual accuracy of presented information by researching its sources and validity, and notifying the public about any inconsistencies between what is shown and its source. In this essay, I will argue that people have an ethical obligation to fact-check before sharing information on social media.

To begin, we should examine the philosophical ideas that underpin this position. Immanuel Kant proposed the categorical imperative, that is, “Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law (Kant, 2012).” If you do not provide me with verification of a social media post’s validity you send me, then I should not provide you with it either when I send you a social media post. Hannah Arendt explains how believing falsehoods leads to totalitarian regimes. She writes, “The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism (Open Culture, 2022).” Fact-checking can combat the spread of propaganda from tyrannies. Lastly, Miranda

Fricker outlined epistemic injustice as a disconnect of knowledge because of prejudice and a gap of understanding (Edinburgh Law School, 2020). This causes problems when society is unwilling to listen to a marginalized group, which leads to more discrimination. If a social media post discusses that marginalized group in a certain way, fact-checking is a useful way of knowing if the message is to inform or to fear-monger, and can bridge the gap of understanding. Overall, philosophy supports fact-checking, but we should dissect why fact-checking is a duty individuals have.

People have an ethical obligation to fact-check before they share information on social media. First, virtual activity affects real-world issues. For example, Myanmar conducted genocide against the Muslim group, the Rohingya, and Facebook was a prominent place where hatred against the Rohingya festered as stated, “Many reports particularly focused on material that appeared on Facebook which was considered the most influential social media platform in Myanmar at the time and was reportedly often used to promote hate speech against the group (United Nations, n.d).” If one person sends another an anti-Rohingya news article that fuels unnecessary hate, which most people agree is unethical. Hence, there is an ethical obligation to determine where the article is factual in its discussion of the Rohingya. Second, social media platforms are unreliable for conducting comprehensive fact-checks on a large scale. For instance, according to Steven Lee Myers, “Policing the truth on social media is a Sisyphean challenge. The volume of content — billions of posts in hundreds of languages — makes it impossible for the platforms to identify all the errors or lies that people post, let alone to remove them (2025).” For people who think it is not the sender’s responsibility to fact-check but is for social media outlets, consider that platforms cannot check millions of posts, so individuals should carry some burden, since they can survey the information they interact with, meaning more detected errors. Finally, it

fosters a better-informed community. For example, one person texts their friend about a fake news story on Instagram stating a “health” brand’s supplements will improve cardiovascular fitness without valid evidence, then that friend sends it to a close relative and so on, causing dozens of people to buy these supplements without knowing if they scientifically work. Since that original person was the first one to start the conversation chain, it seems fair that they should be the one to verify it. Some may argue that it is not solely the original sender’s fault that others believe them, and they are also obligated to fact-check the media they consume, but since the original sender was the first one to initiate a conversation, they have more responsibility to be informed. Overall, fact-checking is an ethical obligation because it limits the amount of fake news being spread, promotes media literacy, and reduces mistakes from unreliable platforms.

In 2018, a fact-checker for Facebook outlined four quadrants of shared information types based on the amount of truth and the intent to mislead, which applies to all social media platforms (2018). These quadrants' intentions help explain why people should fact-check information on any social media platform before sharing it. First, there is information with low intent to mislead. If it also has a low amount of truth, the post is simply wrong, but it is right if it has a high amount of truth. Though there is no intent to mislead, people none the wiser can still be deceived with wrong information, so fact-checking serves to correct mistakes. Then, there is information with high amounts of truth with high intent to mislead, like propaganda and cherry-picked statistics, to convince people of a certain view. Though the information is not necessarily incorrect, it still misleads by twisting parts of the truth to fit a false narrative. Therefore, people should have a full context of a situation so they can form opinions without bias. Last are the most serious offenders, the media containing low amounts of truth and high intent to mislead, like hoaxes that deceive people into believing claims with little evidence. These are obvious cases of why fact-checking is

needed because people believing in falsehoods causes people to be manipulated because they trust information without validity. However, people pushing a hoax believing it was true should face less scrutiny than people knowingly misleading because, although they are responsible for verifying, being wrong happens, and others should inform that person and the public. With fact-checking, it is better to be safe than sorry.

Fact-checking's ethics are proven through philosophy, reason, and practicality. Philosophers like Kant, Arendt, and Fricker suggest that fact-checking is vital for building trust and connecting with and understanding different people's perspectives. Outside of philosophy, fact-checking remains an ethical obligation due to the media's impact on society, catches errors more closely than platforms that are too overwhelmed to bother with each post or are outright eliminating fact-checking, and helps everyone be informed. Plus, the different intentions of people posting information suggest that, most times, it is safer to fact-check information before sharing it to limit the amount of lies that mislead people. As Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Therefore, unexamined truths are not worth hearing. Thus, people who share unchecked falsehoods on social media are not worth listening to.

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