

The Digital Age of Agency: Epistemic Harm and the Responsibility to Fact-Check

In today's digital age, the ease of sharing information on social media has made misinformation a pervasive moral issue. However, while some falsehoods are spread deliberately, the complexities of fake news stray far from simple malice, towards a greater debate about intent, responsibility and harm: namely, *is moral blame always justified towards one that does not fact-check?* Fact-checking is the process of verifying the accuracy and truthfulness of information before publishing or sharing it. In this essay, I argue that individuals always have an ethical obligation to fact-check before sharing information online regardless of intent, consequence or institutional failings. Grounded in deontological ethics, this essay defends that we have a duty to respect individuals as rational agents entitled to truth, addressing key objections based on free speech, ignorance, and collective responsibility under this Kantian framework.

1. Kant and Ethical Violations of Epistemic Agency

During the COVID-19 pandemic, false claims about life-ending vaccine dangers spread rapidly across social media, misleading many, by fear-based, unchecked misinformation, to not get vaccinated. From a consequentialist view, which holds that the morally-right thing to do is actions that minimizes total negative consequence, the moral failure was clear: preventable deaths occurred because individuals did not fact-check before posting.

However, consequentialism alone is unable to ground the obligation to fact-check for two reasons. Firstly, we cannot predict the consequences of our misinformation in reality, and secondly, because most misinformation is more mundane—political memes, celebrity gossip, overexaggerations for clickbait and views. Even in such minimally-invasive cases, those who

knowingly perpetuate false beliefs without fact-checking are still ethically responsible, because deception in any way treats others as mere means by undermining their rational decision-making and thus, their autonomy.

Kant argues in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that rational beings possess free will, which ground their ability to be autonomous and possess agency, and, according to the categorical imperative, to not be treated as mere means, but ends themselves. Autonomy in this context would be the ability to make informed, voluntary choices based on truth. Thus, sharing unverified content—regardless of whether it may be true or false—violates another person's basic agency and autonomy because:

1. It has the possibility of coercing others to form beliefs on false premises, thus manipulating their understanding of reality
2. You strip them from accessing autonomous, consent-based choice by depriving them of the factual information needed to make informed choices
3. You are employing them as a means to achieve one's own ends.

Following, the individual who does not fact-check must be held ethically accountable in undermining another rational agent's free will, agency and autonomy.

An objection may claim that consumers are responsible for their own beliefs, especially on social media where users rarely take content at face value. However, this objection fails to acknowledge both Kantian moral duties, but also the epistemic duties of both the consumer, and also, importantly, the sharer. According to Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice occurs when the conditions for forming beliefs are unfairly distorted. Sharing unverified information, then, is not only a moral failure, but also a violation of epistemic justice, since it corrupts the truth behind

the information we take as true and form beliefs based on, thus undermining our duties as epistemic agents to uphold integrity of knowledge. Just as a supermarket agency promoting false information about a brand of apple being the best apple in the world remains blameworthy despite the naivety and poor judgement of buyers, a sharer's obligation remains to not interfere with others' agency by distorting their access to truth.

2. Objections: Why Intent Does Not Matter

Beyond the insignificance of consequence, another insignificant, yet trivial factor absolving moral responsibility, is intent. For instance, many anti-vaxers do not spread misinformation maliciously, but rather since they genuinely believe in the truth of their perspective, thus believing fact-checking is unnecessary. Yet, as Lorraine Code emphasizes in *Epistemic Responsibility*, rational agents have a duty to ensure their beliefs are well-grounded and to hold epistemic humility- understanding that confidence in a claim does not guarantee truth, and that we as individuals hold many gaps in our knowledge. As such, good intentions do not eliminate moral responsibility, since by ignoring the possible falsehood of the information you post on social media, you are in turn responsible for not taking due diligence in ensuring truth. In other words, as Gideon Rosen posits in *Culpability and Ignorance*, even if you don't know you're doing something wrong, you're still blameworthy if your ignorance is due to negligence.

Some may further argue that our freedom of speech allows us to express any ideas we want. However, freedom of speech still does not remove responsibility to fact-check, since freedom is not without limits, especially when it harms both someone else physically, as well as their capacity for autonomy. As previously analyzed, regardless of intent, the beliefs expressed when

we enact “freedom of speech” without fact-checking still inevitably influences others the second it is shared on social media. As “respecting others as ends” requires acknowledging their capacity for informed choice and how our actions may infringe on this, we must enact the harm principle and extend the definition of “harm” to also harming other agent’s capacities to access autonomy. Therefore, just as my right to swing my fist ends at your nose, we are free to speak so long as it does not harm others or impair their ability to make fully autonomous decisions.

3. Institutional versus Individual Moral Responsibility

Finally, a noteworthy objection points to the role of social media platforms in perpetuating, breeding and promoting a culture of poor fact-checking through algorithms and prioritizing sensationalism over truth. While the platform itself does contribute to the problem, this again does not absolve users, who remain active agents that create and share content, of moral responsibility. Moral agency is not displaced by context, but rather distributed. For example, as how the existence of fast fashion does not absolve us from the ethical implications of our participatory choices, the design of online platforms, though encouraging misinformation, does not excuse our own failure to fact-check, especially because sharing online is a voluntary act and not a coerced one.

This dual responsibility implies that both social media platforms and individuals must do their part, with platforms implementing fact-checking systems, and users fact-checking when sharing claims presented as facts. Users are free to share unchecked information as opinions, which are a preface of subjectivity, but never present them as facts due to the risk of violating their epistemic responsibilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all individuals have an ethical obligation to fact-check before sharing information on social media, regardless of consequence, intent or other's responsibility. This duty, stemming from Kant's definition of agency and respect for others as autonomous individuals, ensures that us as rational individuals and content consumers, are able to make truthful, informed choices, While free speech and social media platforms enable such a spread of misinformation, they do not negate individual responsibility. To prioritize our worth as ends in ourselves, fact-checking remains a necessary moral act to be incorporated within our social media usage.

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