

Before You Share: The Ethics of Truth in a Society of Screens

As social media becomes deeply woven into the fabric of modern life, shaping how we communicate, learn, and engage with the world, questions about civic responsibility, harm, truthfulness, and the role of individuals in shaping collective well-being—once reserved for physical societies, now extend into the digital realm. Social media platforms are no longer just tools of self-expression; they have evolved into vast, interconnected communities that mirror features of real-world societies. In such spaces, where a single post can influence many, shaping public discourse, beliefs, and behavior, a quiet ethical dilemma emerges about what responsibilities individuals bear for the truthfulness of the content they share. For the purpose of this essay, I define social media as any digital platform that enables users to create and share content or to participate in social networking, fake news as false or misleading information presented as fact, and fact-checking as the process of verifying the accuracy/credibility of information. I believe that users have an ethical obligation to fact-check before sharing information on social media, because social media functions as a digital society, and citizens in any society have a moral responsibility to act for the collective good and make choices that minimize harm to others.

Foundationally, it is necessary to establish the status of social media as a society, which allows us to attribute the moral responsibilities of an ethical citizen to social media users. A Society is characterized by four core parameters: a culture of shared behaviours and norms; interconnected relationships that form networks of interdependence; established institutions and hierarchies which provide organization

and governance; and a defined territory. Firstly social media users have adopted shared behaviours like liking, sharing, posting, commenting, etc. Second, social media enables interconnected virtual relationships that form networks of interdependence. There are various different social media platforms to maintain personal, professional, and communal connections that provide support and collaboration opportunities, mirroring the social bonds found in physical societies. Third, social media companies function as institutions, creating and enforcing rules like terms of service, content moderation, and etc, to govern. Additionally, social media creates hierarchies through one's follower count, engagement level, verification, and etc, mirroring conventional societal power structures. Finally, social media establishes a defined virtual territory like apps, for interaction. Therefore, although unconventionally social media can be characterized as a society, perhaps a "digital society", and users as citizens of digital society. This status allots them two core individual responsibilities, which well-known philosophers like Aristotle, Bentham, and Plato, considered crucial for fostering a good society.

The first individual responsibility is acting in a way that benefits the whole society, in Aristotle's words, works towards "the common good". In *The Politics*, Book 1, Aristotle describes a good society to be consisting of a "friendship amongst the citizens". Where individuals wish others well, and ensure that they and their fellow citizens live well, by taking actions, aimed at benefiting all the members of society, in other words, aimed at pursuing the "common good". Today, social media is becoming a critical part of our "news diet", particularly amongst young adults. According to Pew Research Center 54% of U.S. young adults say they get news from social media. The implications are

dangerous, because fake news can gravely distort our society's decision making, leading people to make incorrect choices in essential aspects of life, since people base their decision on the information they consume. For instance, fake news often exploits divisive topics, promotes extremism, and expresses hate speech, creating/deepening conflicts, leading to a polarization that weakens societal cohesion. Additionally, it can invent/exaggerate threats, leading to unnecessary fear, panic, or even harmful actions, like hoarding supplies during a crisis. Finally, fake news poses a significant threat to democracy, as inaccurate or manipulative information during elections can mislead voters, distort public opinion, and erode democratic processes. This list solidifies the importance of preserving true information on social media, through fact-checking. Overall, it is our moral obligation to fact-check, because as citizens of a "digital society" that is us taking an action towards the common good, which is preserving everybody's right to authentic and factual information.

The second core responsibility of "digital citizens", or participants of any society, is to act in a way that minimizes harm for others. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham introduced "the principle of utility", stating that "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question", meaning that the moral correctness of an individual's action is determined by how much happiness it produces for how many people. This moral philosophy affirms that moral participation in a society requires acting in a way that maximizes happiness for the greatest number of

fellow citizens. As seen earlier, in our “digital society”, fake news perpetrates only harm. Here, a something is better than nothing approach can be applied, fake news causes unhappiness and doing nothing about it doesn’t change the status quo. Contrarily, fact-checking attempts to eliminate fake news, thus eliminating the harm caused by it. According to Bentham’s principle, fact-checking is the morally right action, as it promises to produce the greatest good out of the two choices a user can make.

Some say, fact-checking on social media risks over-regulation, leading to censorship, particularly of minority perspectives or unconventional ideas that challenge mainstream narratives, which suppresses freedom of expression and creates digital environments that resemble controlled “echo chambers”. For instance, during the early days of the #MeToo movement, many individuals shared allegations of harassment or abuse on social media. Some claims were contested or dismissed as “unverified,” yet these voices played a crucial role in exposing systemic issues and igniting global conversations about gender-based violence. Although these concerns are valid, the responsibility to fact-check before sharing information on social media can still be framed as a moral imperative, precisely because misinformation often harms the very groups it claims to support. Unverified claims, even those shared with good intentions, spread false narratives that undermine legitimate causes, erode public trust, and create unintended consequences. For instance, during the #MeToo movement, while most stories were genuine and sparked necessary societal change, a few false or “unverified” accusations received disproportionate attention, fueling backlash against the movement and allowing critics to discredit survivors broadly. Fact-checking doesn’t silence voices

but rather strengthens them by credibility, ensuring they are less vulnerable to scrutiny and dismissal.

In conclusion, fact-checking before sharing on social media is a moral responsibility. As citizens of a digital society, users must uphold two core duties: to promote the common good by ensuring only truthful content spreads, and to minimize harm caused by misinformation. While some fear fact-checking may over-regulate and suppress minority perspectives, it actually strengthens them through credibility. In an age where information shapes reality, fact-checking is the line between integrity and chaos.

Sources

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