

On the moral impermissibility of spreading misinformation

Why do we value truth? More specifically, why do we value what we believe to be the truth? What one believes to be true shapes everything they think they know about reality: Our understanding of reality, how we interact with the world, the way we build trust with others, the basis of our views; all of these things are based on a foundation of truth, or at least, what we believe to be true, and the belief that what we think to be true is reliable.

In modern society, with the rise of social media and the ability to share information with people around the world from the comfort of one's bed, our views on the world are constantly shifting and evolving with every new piece of information we encounter. When our beliefs are affected, we must ask ourselves: Who can you trust? We're constantly bombarded with countless perspectives, and it is easy to fall into echo chambers or rabbit holes of conflicting information. In a world where misinformation is just as accessible, and sometimes more appealing, than facts, it is our responsibility to make sure we have accurate information. And, it is important to acknowledge that we are held accountable for the potential consequences of the information we believe in. So, how much effort will you put into finding the truth? That depends on how much you value it. However, when what you believe affects other people, that value is no longer just personal, it becomes ethical.

Ethics, at its core, is about how our actions affect others. And when sharing misinformation, whether deliberately or ignorantly, can lead to real-world consequences, having reliable and factual information becomes an ethical obligation. With social media being a leading

source of information for most people on the planet, claims or statements made on social media grow rapidly, and viral misinformation can cause mass confusion, deepen social divisions, and even potentially risk real harm and violence.

A clear and recent example of misinformation putting public health at risk is the propaganda regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic. Misinformation regarding the effects of the vaccine and the virus itself, which was heavily aggravated and widely spread through social media, undermined public health efforts. Hospitals were over-flooded, medical professionals were overworked, the pandemic lasted longer than it needed to, and people were dying preventable deaths. Those people who contributed to the spread of the misinformation that led to these outcomes, knowingly or not, were implicit in these outcomes. If sharing misinformation has the potential to increase harm or reduce overall well-being, then it is unethical to do so, especially if one could have reasonably foreseen those outcomes and avoided them through credibly verifying information.

Still, despite the moral issues, some would argue that fact-checking everything is an unrealistic expectation and a burden, especially since most people are just casual users of social media. In an age where information is overwhelmingly abundant, we tend to rely on sources we know, or we share what resonates with us emotionally or aligns with our worldview. After all, social media is most often just a place for people to express themselves, it's not always a platform for academic discourse. However, ethical obligations aren't negated by things like convenience or intent, and freedom of expression does not absolve us from responsibility when what we share with the world impacts others. Yes, it'd be unrealistic to expect everyone to

research everything we encounter on the internet, however, before we share something, it is worth considering that our voice has an impact on others and that we should carefully consider what we share.

Furthermore, fact-checking does not have to be extremely in-depth, exhaustive, or even time-consuming to be effective. It can take just a minute to read beyond a headline, or to quickly search for verification from a credible source. Many false or misleading claims are not subtle or difficult to debunk and it isn't overly demanding to dispute them as they often rely on sensationalism, emotions, or bad sources. When verifying information takes just minimal effort, it is morally impermissible to disregard it due to something as trivial as inconvenience when you might be contributing to the spread of misinformation, especially in cases where it can lead to harm. It takes effort to work ethically.

It can't be expected of all topics to have complete and true information, some topics are genuinely complex and convoluted, with incomplete data and conflicting perspectives, interpretations, and narratives that lack sufficient evidence to make definitive truth claims. But this only shows us that it is all the more important and valuable to have a sense of humility, open-mindedness, and a genuine commitment to seeking the truth. Discourse isn't always black and white and answers can come in shades of grey, but it is our responsibility to be well-educated and unbiased in our opinions, and to always strive to seek truth.

People generally agree that intention does play a role in the morality of one's actions. And although malicious intent certainly aggravates moral responsibility, good intention does not

excuse carelessness. You are responsible and morally accountable for the information that you share with the world, regardless of your intentions. Someone might unknowingly share misinformation thinking they are helping others or raising awareness, but if they do so without verifying the facts, they still bear moral accountability for what they share. Ethics requires more than just goodwill, it takes diligence, and good intentions alone aren't enough. Failing to fact-check, especially in situations where harm is a potential consequence isn't just irresponsible, it is negligent.

This isn't just a consequentialist issue, however. From a deontological view, we have an inherent moral duty to share accurate information, even when misinformation doesn't cause clear harm. Truth and honesty are core ethical values, and regardless of whether harm is done, spreading misinformation undermines the integrity of public discourse and devalues truth. The duty to share truthful information goes beyond utilitarianism, it is a core ethical principle that we must preserve to hold our integrity.

All of us play a role in shaping public discourse. We must keep in mind that social media is designed to reward speed, engagement, and virality. Algorithms prioritize viral content that spreads quickly, regardless of its truth value, and this design creates an incentive to share impulsively rather than thoughtfully. The ability to critically evaluate information is not just a useful skill, it is a necessity, an ethical necessity, to preserve the well-being & integrity of ourselves and others.

Of course, nobody is perfect. We all make mistakes. However, Ethics doesn't call for perfection; it calls for effort, self-awareness, and a willingness to be self-critical. The goal isn't flawless knowledge, its rigour. In a world where misinformation goes just as far as truth, checking our facts reflects our awareness of the consequences of our actions, the willingness to uphold integrity over convenience, and our respect for society. When we share information, we participate in shaping what others see, think, and believe, and that carries heavy responsibility. We must ensure that we uphold our intellectual integrity to reinforce productive and honest discourse and communication among society, it is a moral duty.