

Reclaiming Truth: The Ethical Imperative to Fact-Check Before Sharing on Social Media

In an online world overflowing with information, it is easy to lose sight of the value of truth. Social media platforms allow content to spread around the globe in an instant, regardless of accuracy. This speed is both constructive and harmful. It connects distant communities while spreading false information to wide audiences. The potential impact of these social media platforms poses urgent ethical questions. Utilitarian ethics, which judges actions by their consequences, is particularly appropriate in this dilemma where our central concern is the tangible impact of online activity on real lives. Authors of a study on utilitarianism during the pandemic describe utilitarianism as “particularly salient and important to consider in the face of global threats to health and well-being” (Savulescu et al.). Drawing on these real world examples, I argue that all individuals have an ethical obligation to fact-check information before posting on social media. This duty arises from both the short-term harm of false information and the long-term need for a culture of truth and rationality. I further explain why the burden to fact-check lies on individual users, whose influence is amplified by the unique structure of social media.

The most immediate consideration regarding fact-checking is the potential harm caused by false information. Audiences who receive unchecked information may be inclined to believe it and make misguided or even dangerous decisions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of false information on social media resulted in greater vaccine hesitancy, and consequently, the increase of otherwise preventable illnesses and deaths (Gisoni et al.). A study found that 50.5% of the spread of false information surrounding COVID-19 could be attributed to social media platforms (Dizikes). The act of sharing may seem trivial, but it has profound cumulative effects,

showing just how powerful these platforms are. Fact-checking, therefore, is a low-cost action that is not only prudent but is ethically imperative to prevent foreseeable negative impacts.

Beyond direct harm, fact-checking promotes long-term good by fostering a culture of truth and rationality. Users place implicit trust in social media to deliver content that is true. Unchecked content degrades this purpose. Without fact-checking, there is a loss of trust in other users and in social media platforms. Younger generations increasingly turn to social media rather than news outlets to receive news (Diaz). Therefore, it is imperative that all users post cautiously, so that especially vulnerable audience members receive trustworthy information. Consequences are certainly more important than intentions here, but intentions remain relevant in the long-term. Meaningful intentions result in more permanent cultural change on social media as such actions are genuine, and not externally imposed. As Herbert Kelman notes, influence strategies rooted in internalization, through responsiveness and reciprocity, result in more long-lasting and durable changes compared to strategies rooted in coercion and compliance (Kelman). Ethics is not passive, and choosing not to fact-check is an active decision that supports a culture of mindlessness rather than skepticism. The ethical imperative is not only about preventing harm but also about advancing a discourse based on truth and rationality.

A critical counterargument warrants consideration: the idea that we should place responsibility on audiences rather than posters. Perhaps audiences should be encouraged to think critically about what they read on social media. While consuming information with skepticism is certainly important, placing the primary burden on audiences ignores practical realities. The poster's decision to share information is an active one, representing the poster's own values surrounding truth and reality. Meanwhile, the consumer is often a passive recipient and is merely one of many who are impacted. Every stakeholder in the chain of communication on social

media is significant, but the origin is the most important because it is where actions have the broadest and most far-reaching impacts. Additionally, audiences tend to be less informed than the poster, as the very act of posting is done with the intention of providing audiences with information that the poster already has. Digital communication may be collaborative, but the moral weight is not equally distributed. Each stakeholder plays a role in the spread of accurate knowledge, with the originator of information holding the most ethical responsibility.

Another prominent counterargument is that platforms bear the responsibility for fact-checking. However, the primary responsibility still rests with individuals because of the role individual users play in social media's unique structure. Content goes directly from the producer to the consumer with no mediator, so it is up to the producers to take on that intermediary role between a piece of information and its audience. Researchers at MIT discovered that false news is 70% more likely to be retweeted than true news and reaches a population of 1500 users six times as fast as true news (Dizikes). False news evokes emotion as it is less anticipated (Dizikes). This emotional reaction increases engagement due to shares and reposts, providing momentum. The greater burden, therefore, lies on individual users. Technical solutions alone, such as algorithms targeted towards identifying and preventing the spread of false information, are insufficient. Individual responsibility, implemented through fact-checking, is what could create lasting change and ensure social media's structure does not harm public discourse. Users would demonstrate a true commitment to their audience by fact-checking their posts, eliminating the need for other kinds of intervention.

Certain users have broader or stronger influences over audiences. Celebrities, for example, are the cause of 20% of misinformation and 70% of the attention of users on social media platforms (Dizikes). Nonetheless, the influence of celebrities does not absolve regular

users of responsibility. The cumulative effect of users spreading false information is what contributes to the larger network of knowledge on social media. Thus, whether an ordinary user or public influencer, each individual should take into consideration who their posts might harm and fact-check before posting.

The ethical obligation of individual users to fact-check information before sharing is evident. The result of following this obligation would be reduced short-term harm, a long-term culture of truth and rationality, and individual accountability that aligns with the structure of social media. To build a more ethical digital world and have this world extend to all parts of society, we must reclaim the moral weight of information, regardless of how abundant or easily accessible it has become. The pursuit of truth begins with the quiet discipline of individual users, and this difficult but necessary action is the first step towards seeing visible changes on social media.

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