

**How should we (including social media companies and governments) respond to the fact that misinformation (e.g. about coronavirus) can be harmful (and even cost lives) while recognising the value of free expression (including online)?**

Misinformation seems to be everywhere. From debates on vaccine safety to questioning whether the Earth is really flat, fake news always finds a way to slip quietly into the argument, and hoodwink hundreds. Misinformation is defined as false information spread regardless of intent to deceive. Recent examples include fake news circulating in regards to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as theories suggesting the virus was deliberately made and released from a lab. One survey showed that in March 2020, 29% of Americans believed the virus was created in a lab. Misinformation about coronavirus especially has cost many lives, as people died in hospital beds or drank cleaning products, hoping to cure the virus. In this essay I will argue that it is implausible and difficult to censor misinformation while still recognising people's right to free expression, and that we should place responsibility upon individuals to form knowledge reliably. I will explore various theories of knowledge which we may use to fulfill this responsibility, beginning with Plato's Tripartite View, showing why it fails, and concluding that Zagzebski's Virtue Epistemology successfully accomplishes this goal.

One response to misinformation, specifically online, could be to censor posts and ban accounts which spread harmful misinformation. An example of this is when Twitter banned Donald Trump from its platform indefinitely, due to misleading posts which incited violence during the 2021 Capitol Riots. After the ban, analysis suggested that misinformation about election fraud fell by up to 73%. If done thoroughly, censoring could be a highly effective method of reducing misinformation online. However, there are issues with this. Even if the internet was to regulate every single post shared (which would be unrealistic, considering the sheer volume of content - Twitter alone produces up to 500 million tweets per day), it would be very hard to censor misleading statements due to the people's legal right to freedom of expression. Article 10 of the Human Rights Act gives you the right to have personal beliefs and opinions, and publicly state or express them without interference. This causes a dilemma over where we should draw the line between free expression and misinformation, and whose responsibility it should be to enforce that divide.

I believe the true issue lies with the way in which we as individuals process and take in information. There has been a recent call for social media companies and governments to regulate online content more strictly, taking responsibility to filter what people may see. But the problem is bigger than just the internet. There are many other sources of misinformation, such as word of mouth, tabloids, and posters in public streets. We are constantly bombarded by information, and censoring everything would disregard the right to free expression as much of misinformation can also be considered opinion. Therefore the only way to ensure that we avoid misinformation is to individually reflect upon the information we take in. As individuals we have a responsibility to ensure that our knowledge is rational and formed from reliable sources. In order to do this we must have a theory of knowledge, in other words, a set of conditions which, when fulfilled, are sufficient to ensure that a view we hold can be considered reliable knowledge.

I will begin by outlining Plato's widely accepted tripartite theory of knowledge. I will argue that the tripartite is not a successful theory of knowledge or an adequate method for us to take in information reliably, but using Zagzebski's virtue epistemology to replace the justification condition produces a successful theory of knowledge which allows us as individuals to consistently make reliable judgements for ourselves of what information may be considered true knowledge, thus eliminating the need for external regulation of every single piece of information that is publicly shared.

Plato's tripartite theory of knowledge describes knowledge to be a justified true belief (JTB).

JTB means:

- If p is true
- You believe that p
- And your belief that p is justified
  - You know that p.

One major critique of JTB is to undermine it with a Gettier problem. Edmund Gettier puts forward a scenario where two men, Smith and Jones, are waiting to see who out of them will receive a job. Smith infers the following proposition (d):

- (d) Jones is the man who will get the job and Jones has 10 coins in his pocket.
  - (d) is evidenced by:
    - 1) The company president has told Smith that the job will go to Jones.
    - 2) Smith had counted the coins in Jones' pocket himself ten minutes earlier.

And from this he concludes that (e):

- (e) The man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket.

Therefore this proposition is justified and believed by Smith. However, unbeknownst to Smith, he will actually get the job and furthermore, Smith unknowingly has 10 coins in his own pocket. Therefore (e) still holds true, and is a JTB as:

- (e) is true
- Smith believes that (e)
- (e) is justified by (1) and (2)

But is (e) really knowledge? As Smith's cognitive state does not match the reality of why (e) is true, he does not have knowledge even if he has a JTB - (e) is only true through "sheerest coincidence," as Gettier says. It was pure luck that Smith happened to have 10 coins in his own pocket. For us, this would mean even an argument with incorrect justification could yield knowledge, so we couldn't critique information based on the sources behind it. Disregarding the reliability of the sources is a fatal error - an example where incorrect justification methods led to severe misinformation is the notorious study by Andrew Wakefield, which suggested that there was a correlation between vaccines and autism. The consequences were catastrophic, as it fueled a movement of "Anti-Vaxxers" - people who refuse to get vaccinated. This is an even bigger issue in light of the Covid-19 crisis, as with so many people refusing to take vaccines, the virus continues to spread and be fatal to those infected. Clearly the failure of the justification condition in JTB is a large pitfall of the argument - in the case of the vaccines, one incorrect source was used to justify a claim despite there being

many other studies from official sources disproving it. In the Gettier case, Smith's justification was incorrect, and furthermore, the company president was his only source of justification. Therefore the justification condition needs to be changed in order to avoid knowledge formed through sheerest coincidence.

One way to strengthen the justification condition is through the theory of infallibilism. This states that:

- If p is true
- And I cannot be mistaken that p
- Then I know that p

This means that you can only know infallible truths - which cannot possibly be false. Therefore they must be self-evident truths, such as  $1 + 1 = 2$ . Hence infallibilism is not open to Gettier style critiques which rely on inference. Infallibilism makes no assumptions, so justification guarantees truth. The issue with only being able to know self-evident truths is that a lot of what we think to be known would no longer be knowledge, especially scientific claims, which could feasibly be disproved. To put this into context, we could use the "Flat Earth" theories as an example. A statement such as "The Earth is spherical," which the majority of us consider fact, could no longer be knowledge as it is fallible - a single instance in which the Earth is observed to be flat would prove it wrong, and so it is not self-evident as it relies upon external justification (Physics, maths, observation of the horizon, etc.). Therefore infallibilism is not a very good way of strengthening the justification condition as it limits the scope of knowledge too much.

Instead, the justification condition may be successfully replaced by Linda Zagzebski's virtue epistemology (VE) to form a coherent and successful theory of knowledge. Zagzebski states knowledge to be "true belief arising out of intellectual virtue." Intellectual virtue is a state attained through an individual consistently behaving in an "epistemically conscientious" manner. This means that they are cognitively self-aware, actively reflecting upon their sources and how trustworthy they are. The idea is that a 'knower' (person) who has intellectual virtue is far less likely to be wrong as they are self-aware enough to have a reliable process of developing beliefs. If Smith in the Gettier problem had intellectual virtue, he may have consulted more sources than the company president, reflected on previous information given by the president and the reliability of it, all of which would steer him towards a true belief based on a wider and more accurate range of information. Similarly, if the 'Anti-Vaxx' movement looked at a larger variety of reliable sources, they'd likely conclude that vaccines were safe. This shows that VE successfully replaces the justification condition of JTB as it ensures that only reliable beliefs from a 'knower' with intellectual virtue may be knowledge, without overly limiting the scope of what we may consider knowledge like infallibilism does. Hence, Zagzebski's virtue epistemology forms the most reliable theory of knowledge, which we may use to ensure that what we believe is reasonable. It avoids Gettier style issues yet does not overly limit the scope of knowledge, and we may use it in daily life to regulate our own thought processes, and ensure information is reliable before we share it.

In conclusion, while it is an unrealistic goal to solve the issue of misinformation by regulating every source of potential knowledge and censoring others, we may self-regulate on an individual basis using virtue epistemology to ensure that information which we choose to

believe is sufficiently reliable before sharing it. Therefore by taking individual responsibility for how we gain knowledge, it is possible to reduce the harm caused by misinformation while still allowing freedom of expression.

- Gauri Narendran

## References

- “Adverse Effects of Vaccines: Evidence and Causality.” *The National Academies Press*,  
<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/13164/adverse-effects-of-vaccines-evidence-and-causality>. Accessed 25 January 2022.
- “Flat Earth.” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flat\\_Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flat_Earth). Accessed 25 January 2022.
- “Flat Earth: How did YouTube help spread a conspiracy theory?” *BBC*,  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-49021903>. Accessed 25 January 2022.
- Fox, Chris. “Social media: How might it be regulated?” *BBC*, 12 November 2020,  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-54901083>. Accessed 22 December 2021.
- “Gettier Problems.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/gettier/>. Accessed 25 January 2022.
- Ghosh, Shona. “Misinformation Fell 73% After Trump Was Banned Across Social Media.” *Business Insider*, 17 January 2021,  
<https://www.businessinsider.com/misinformation-fell-73-after-trump-was-banned-across-social-media-2021-1?r=US&IR=T>. Accessed 22 December 2021.
- “Human Rights Act 1998.” *Human Rights Act 1998*, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1>.  
Accessed 12 December 2021.
- “Increasing exposure to antibody-stimulating proteins and polysaccharides in vaccines is not associated with risk of autism.” *PubMed*, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23545349/>. Accessed 25 January 2022.
- Jenkins, Jonathan, and Matthias Steup. “The Analysis of Knowledge (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 6 February 2001,  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/>. Accessed 25 January 2022.
- ““Misinformation” vs. “Disinformation”: Get Informed On The Difference.” *Dictionary.com*, 15 May 2020,  
<https://www.dictionary.com/e/misinformation-vs-disinformation-get-informed-on-the-difference/>.  
Accessed 12 December 2021.
- “Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump.” *Twitter Blog*, 8 January 2021,  
[https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/suspension](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension). Accessed 25 January 2022.
- Roxby, Philippa. “Don’t be taken in by anti-vaccine myths on social media.” *BBC*, 1 November 2018,  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-45990874>. Accessed 25 January 2022.

Gauri Narendran

Schaeffer, Katherine. "Nearly three-in-ten Americans believe COVID-19 was made in a lab." *Pew Research Center*, 8 April 2020,  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/nearly-three-in-ten-americans-believe-covid-19-was-made-in-a-lab/>. Accessed 22 December 2021.

"Social Media Companies Should Self-Regulate. Now." *Harvard Business Review*, 15 January 2021,  
<https://hbr.org/2021/01/social-media-companies-should-self-regulate-now>. Accessed 25 January 2022.

Spring, Marianna. "Coronavirus: The human cost of virus misinformation." *BBC*, 27 May 2020,  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-52731624>. Accessed 25 January 2022.

Turri, John, et al. "Virtue Epistemology (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 9 July 1999, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-virtue/>. Accessed 25 January 2022.

Wakefield, Andrew J. "RETRACTED: Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children." *The Lancet*, vol. 351, no. 9103, 1998. *The Lancet*,  
<https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/home>. Accessed 12 December 2021.

Worldometers. *Internet Live Stats - Internet Usage & Social Media Statistics*, <https://www.internetlivestats.com/>.  
Accessed 25 January 2022.