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The Collective Underpinnings of Bad Beliefs

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Special Sections

The Democratic Containment of Fake News and Bad Beliefs

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The Collective Underpinnings of Bad Beliefs *

Säde Hormio**

Abstract

Even with events like the Capitol attack, it is misguided to focus too much on the possible epistemic failures of individuals. Instead, the focus should be on the collective underpinnings of bad beliefs (such as false beliefs about a stolen election), and especially on the collective agents who peddle in misinformation. We can divide the collective agents that pollute our epistemic neighborhoods roughly into those that do so for ideological or other such reasons (*misbelievers*), and those that do so for instrumental reasons (*disinformers*), although in practice these categories can overlap. These two motivations impact the responsibility of the collective agents that help to create bad epistemic neighborhoods. While misbelieving is more culpable in a purely epistemic sense, being a disinformer is more culpable in a moral sense. Epistemic institutions present a special case for the responsibility of collective agents. Although collective agents can present us with clear cases of culpability in epistemic matters, when dealing with consumers of fake news and misinformation, we should proceed with a certain level of epistemic humility.

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Summary: Introduction. – I. Bad epistemic neighborhoods. – II. Misbelievers and disinformers. – III. Responsibility of collective agents and consumers of fake news – Conclusion. – Works Cited.

Introduction

On 6 January 2021, thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington, D.C. for a rally in which the president encouraged people to march to the Capitol building, where members of the United States Congress were in the process of certifying election results. The rhetoric used by Trump framed the rally as a necessary response to a perceived stolen election, a narrative that he and his allies had repeatedly promulgated since he lost the election back in November 2020. The claims about widespread voter fraud and irregularities in the 2020 United States presidential election were not based on any evidence. According to a recent lawsuit, the numbers used to back up such claims were instead completely made up, with statistics about voter fraud fabricated by simply making up numbers out of thin air. [1] Although claims about widespread voter fraud were repeatedly refuted by election officials and independent observers, the false narrative about a stolen election gained traction among some segments of the population, contributing to false beliefs about the election being illegitimate. Following the rally, a mob of Trump supporters proceeded to the Capitol, where they had violent confrontations with law enforcement and caused significant property damage. The situation escalated rapidly, resulting in the invasion of the Capitol. The police force was overwhelmed, and the Capitol was placed under lockdown. The attack was widely perceived as an unprecedented assault on democratic processes, and it raised concerns about extremism in the United States, laying bare the need to protect democratic institutions. It also highlighted the potent force of misinformation. Some individuals lost their lives because of the attack. Through the propagation of false narratives about the election, and the amplification of these narratives by the right-wing media and social media, false beliefs contributed to real harms.

Beliefs are all around us. We hold innumerous beliefs about ourselves, each other, and how the world is. These beliefs come with various epistemic credentials. Bad beliefs are beliefs that are false, unjustified, or based on faulty reasoning. False beliefs do not correspond to facts or reality. Unjustified

[1] UNITED STATES OF AMERICA v. DONALD J. TRUMP, CRIMINAL NO. 23-cr-257 (TSC).

beliefs lack credence, that is, sufficient evidence or justification to be considered credible. Beliefs can also be irrational, based on faulty reasoning, and suffer from various biases. The kind of bad beliefs that I will focus on in this paper are beliefs based on misinformation and/or overtly dogmatic thinking. Misinformation usually refers to false information, but it can also be misleadingly and selectively shared accurate information (O'Connor & Weatherall 2019). When we act on beliefs with bad epistemic credentials, or make judgements based on them, we might behave in ways that cause harm or are contrary to how we would behave if we did not hold those beliefs. In addition, what we doubt or do not believe, or suspend judgement on, influences our decisions and actions.

It has been suggested that to counteract bad beliefs, we need to engineer epistemic environments to scaffold better beliefs (Levy 2022). [2] This paper agrees with the assessment and argues that epistemic environments are a matter for shared and collective responsibility. My focus is on the collective agents that can influence epistemic communities and make them epistemically bad in relation to some issue. Collective agents are organized collectives, such as corporations and governments. Their structure lays out their internal policies, procedures, and rules, and influences their collective character, all things which make it sensible to attribute responsibility to them.

Political discourses that demonstrate a disregard for facts and expertise pose undeniable epistemic problems for democracies (Rietdijk 2024). If we are worried about false beliefs for any kind of practical reasons – for example how they contribute to political polarization, or lack of support for meaningful policy measures to tackle important issues – then we must look at the collective level, as it will be the most relevant level in terms of responsibility. Consider someone who has received basic education only (poorly planned and executed at that) with the curriculum devoid of anything on media literacy. They live in a community where the 2020 United States presidential election result is considered a hoax, and this is also what their family and friends believe. Furthermore, they are surrounded by lies and misinformation around the issue, readily available to them via their favorite media sources and suggested to them by algorithms on the internet. Even if there is some degree of blame for the individual, the blame is better directed at the sources creating and contributing to the epistemic environment, such as media organizations and lobby groups.

[2] Levy's suggestion is not to manipulate anyone, but to rather give people reasons to change their minds by changing their epistemic environment.

I suggest that in cases where the epistemic environment plays an important role, the culpability for bad beliefs applies primarily not to the individual party holding such beliefs, but to the agents that cause or reinforce such bad beliefs or ignorance in direct or indirect ways. Examples include state propaganda during wartime, or corporations lobbying against regulation by spreading misleading claims about things like the harmfulness of tobacco. The election fraud narrative also falls into this stream. While questions around individual culpable ignorance or bad beliefs offer interesting epistemological puzzles in themselves, when it comes to issues like wide-spread denialism of some facts, it would not make sense to try to answer such questions in isolation from the epistemic neighborhoods. In such cases, the culpability for individual ignorance or bad beliefs is always a contextual matter.

The main contribution of this paper is normative: a discussion on how collective agents can be understood as culpable for individuals' bad beliefs or ignorance within an epistemic community, and more specifically, how the motivations of collective agents might affect their own culpability. I will explain why the motivations of collective agents are not private in the same sense as that of people and are thus relevant for evaluating the actions of collective agents in the public sphere. While I do not discuss potential real-life implications that identifying such responsibility should have in a legal sense or through other regulatory measures (although I do mention some such possibilities), judgements about the culpability of collective agents would clearly need to feature in any such account. [3] After all, there is nothing to replace the role of normative arguments when it comes to trying to answer the fundamental questions about what we should do and why, what is just and unjust, and how we should organise our lives together, including our epistemic lives. Normative arguments do not merely express personal preferences but, in the words of legal scholar Joseph W. Singer (2009), they are also "evaluative assertions and moral demands we are entitled to make of each other". Engaging with normative claims is thus about more than just stating one's opinions. They are imperative to any real debate about values. So, although I do not present ready-made solutions, clarifying the normative landscape is important, because at the end of the day, legal measures and policy measures both incorporate normative elements.

I begin by discussing the literature on the impact of epistemic environments on individual culpability. This will help to explain why the culpability

[3] For one suggestion on sanctioning epistemic agents that hinder an epistemic environment, see Ryan (2018).

of individual bad beliefs or ignorance is always a contextual matter. I then discuss the responsibility of collective agents, distinguishing between two different motivations for misinformation: mostly ideological or cynical. Both forms can have bad epistemic consequences and have contributed to the current political polarization. However, I will argue that while having bad beliefs based on ideological or other such reasons can be more culpable in a purely epistemic sense, the cynical form of denialism is morally more culpable. I finish by looking at the responsibilities of epistemic institutions and consumers of fake news.

I. Bad epistemic neighborhoods

Ignorance can be an excusing condition when assigning blame to an agent: had they known some relevant fact, they would have acted differently under the circumstances. Yet ignorance does not automatically excuse, and the subject can deserve blame for some ignorance and its consequences. An expert should have read the relevant literature pertaining to their area of specialization, but chose to do something else instead, resulting in a subsequent choice that was wrong or that led to bad consequences (Smith 1983). Culpable ignorance can just as easily relate to everyday life, like being late for an appointment due to a failure to check the address properly in advance. Absence of knowledge or lack of true belief can also be culpable sometimes, but I will not go into the debates over which conditions and under what circumstances this happens. What matters for my purposes is that if enough people are ignorant of important matters or hold false beliefs about them, it can lead to bad consequences. For example, research suggests that exposure to misinformation about climate change makes individuals less likely to want to take action to reduce emissions (Jolley and Douglas 2014), while exposure to conspiracy theories and misinformation about the election was arguably the reason why many took part in the Capitol attack. In short, bad beliefs can lead to bad consequences.

The question arises: are we responsible for trying to ensure that we do not hold bad beliefs? It cannot be the case that we have a responsibility to question each of our beliefs, even when we know that some of them must be untrue. From a psychological standpoint such a position would be untenable: we simply cannot go around questioning everything. Yet it also seems straightforward to say that sometimes we can be held responsible for holding bad beliefs. William Kingdon Clifford famously argued nearly 150 years ago that we

can be blameworthy if we form a belief based on insufficient evidence: if we have come to acquire such a belief because of stifling our doubts around the issue, failing to look into the issue properly, or by ignoring available evidence, we have no right to believe it (Nottelmann and Fessenbecker 2019). [4] Still, it would be unfeasible to demand that we question all our beliefs. William James (1896) noted as much in his response to Clifford, arguing that such a high standard in sufficient evidence would lead to paralysis in action, and that in contrast beliefs can be sufficiently justified based on personal or pragmatic reasons. He agrees with Clifford that one should first engage in inquiry, but if a decision should be made but cannot be made on evidence alone on a non-trivial matter, then one can decide on other grounds.

These days epistemological debates have mostly moved away from a focus on gathering first-order evidence towards issues such as whose testimony we should trust and how to identify expertise. Many things we believe in are based on what others have told us, including what science tells us. It is epistemically reasonable to believe that the trees I see outside my window exist in the courtyard of the building I work in, but it is also epistemically reasonable to believe that I live on the third planet from our universe's sun, although it is not a belief that I can formulate based on looking out of the window. Our epistemic circumstances affect what is epistemically reasonable for us to believe. Bad beliefs should be understood in the context of our current state of (scientific) knowledge about something. We need to defer to other people with expertise in the area in order to have good beliefs. Even so, it seems that stifling our doubts around an issue or failing to look into it properly qualifies for culpable ignorance or bad beliefs, at least if the matter has normative significance.

Apart from failing to investigate properly, agents can also be culpable for showing insufficient concern. Importantly, bad beliefs do not need to boil down to an individual's own epistemic failures only, as a whole community can hold false beliefs about an issue. There is an interesting body of literature on the effect that the environment where a person is raised in has on the culpability of their ignorance and on their responsibility (e.g. Arpaly 2002; Mason 2015; Wolf 1987). We could argue that if a community has failed to know something, this makes those who grow up in it less culpable in terms of their ignorance of that issue. In Nomy Arpaly's (2002, pp. 103-104) example, Sol-

[4] It is unclear if Clifford is making a moral or epistemic argument, or a combination of the two. Haack (1997) lists five different ways in which the relationship between ethics and epistemics could be understood in Clifford's argument.

omon grows up in an environment where women are thought to be less capable than men intellectually, especially when it comes to abstract thinking. Solomon's sexist belief is not irrational, as all the women in his community conform to the stereotype and no one questions it. Solomon leaves this small and isolated community when he receives a scholarship to an excellent academic institution. This means that he also leaves the epistemic environment in which only men are deemed capable of abstract thinking. Once outside his childhood community, Solomon meets outstanding female students and brilliant female professors. According to Arpaly (2002), he fails to respond to relevant moral concerns if he does not change his beliefs about women when confronted with counterevidence daily. By not changing his beliefs, he is irrational and displays bad will.

I give the label *bad epistemic neighborhoods* for those epistemic communities and environments in which you are likely to obtain false beliefs in relation to some issue. For example, if you live in a community where vaccine misinformation abounds, you live in a bad epistemic neighborhood in relation to vaccines. In a similar way, if a social media algorithm regularly suggests fake news about a political party to you, you are in a bad epistemic neighborhood in relation to that political party. Living in a bad epistemic neighborhood in relation to some issue *X* does not mean that all your beliefs are false. It only means that you are likely to hold false beliefs in relation to *X*, like Solomon did regarding the intellectual capacities of women.

Could there be an obligation for people to reach outside their epistemic communities in order to challenge their beliefs on normatively important issues? While we cannot directly control what we believe, we can take many actions that will indirectly influence our beliefs, like choosing to expose ourselves to new epistemic sources. Maybe epistemic agents could be blamed for not testing their beliefs, at least to some degree and when the stakes are high. While this sounds reasonable, there needs to be an outside spark of some kind to facilitate such questioning. After all, there are many beliefs that we do not even consider questioning in our daily lives. If you think that there is no need to examine an issue more carefully, it could be that agents are only partially responsible for their bad beliefs (Robichaud 2017).

You can easily imagine many kinds of epistemic neighborhoods in which questioning some belief, even with important normative force, would not even cross a person's mind. However, for a bad epistemic neighborhood to shield you from responsibility in relation to your bad beliefs about an issue, you must not have any inclination that it might be a bad epistemic neighborhood in relation to that issue. If you have a nagging worry that it might be and thus have

an incentive to not to investigate further to not to risk bursting your bubble, then your behavior could be blamed for a number of epistemic reasons (e.g. Piovarchy 2021). With any contentious or high-stakes issue, there is likely a spectrum of epistemic neighborhoods where in some you should question your beliefs, while in others the epistemic effect of the environment is just too strong to make demands on individuals. If an individual lives in an epistemically bad neighborhood in relation to some issue their whole lives (and the community does not change its epistemic outlook on the issue), we might disapprove of their beliefs, but we do not condemn them. Even so, we might want to condemn the neighborhood and those responsible for creating and upholding it.

Bad epistemic neighborhoods come in different varieties, depending on the issue. They can be real geographical areas or online communities, large or small, influential to outsiders or not, more or less robust, on so on. They can also take the form of media bubbles, like hyper-partisan news sources. Their grip on their members will also vary. In an influential paper, C. Thi Nguyen (2020) distinguishes between epistemic bubbles, in which certain relevant voices are omitted, possibly accidentally, and echo chambers, in which such voices are actively discredited. Solomon's childhood community could be described as an epistemic bubble, where some pertinent viewpoints have been excluded. These bubbles do not let in certain kinds of evidence, leading to "a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission" (Nguyen 2020, p. 143).

In contrast, in an echo chamber, other voices are actively discredited, and the bad epistemic neighborhood is thus purposefully created and maintained. Echo chambers seek to epistemically discredit non-members, labelling them as unreliable or dishonest, while amplifying the epistemic credentials of members (along with a core set of beliefs), duly creating "a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members" (Nguyen 2020, p. 146). It could be that with election result denialism, we are dealing with echo chambers in which inconvenient truths are systematically rejected, or perhaps with epistemic bubbles within echo chambers. The 2020 election result denialism could even be constructed as an echo chamber within a larger right-wing echo chamber, where insiders have been systematically taught to distrust views that go against the status quo within the echo chamber. At least in the United States, the present-day partisan divisions seem to lend support to such a thought, with echo chambers existing on both ends of the political spectrum.

When deriding established news sources such as *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Trump has frequently used the phrase 'the

fake news media' as an umbrella term to refer to such media outlets (Gelfert 2021). Nguyen (2020, p. 142) argues that the mechanism of systematically discrediting outsiders is like that of indoctrination into a cult, in which members are left "overly dependent on approved inside sources for information". As outside voices are pre-emptively discredited, it is not enough to be exposed to new sources of information, as people have been actively encouraged distrust any evidence or anyone they view as outside sources. This means that the question about culpability of bad beliefs or ignorance becomes even more of a contextual matter. If there is a way out of the grip of an echo chamber, Nguyen (2020) suggests that it must be through repairing trust between members and non-members in some way.

Some have argued that the effects of echo chambers are overestimated. They point out, for example, that most people in the US prefer to watch news on channels without a strong partisan bias (Guess, Nyhan, Lyons and Reifler 2018). Still, even if only a minority of people consume partisan media sources, the impact of these sources can be amplified through inter-personal discussions in the real world when people who consume partisan media discuss the partisan point of view with others, persuading those who do not watch or listen to them (Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018). Importantly, it has been suggested that the indirect polarizing effect on the opinions of people who do not consume partisan media, but discuss them with those who do, could be larger than the polarizing effect of consuming the partisan news sources directly (Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018). The research suggests that this is most likely due to the social pressure to conform to the common epistemic position in a homogenous group: by going along, you are signaling to others that you belong to the group. This underlines the importance of remembering the effects that our social circles and face-to-face communication have on our epistemic neighborhoods, even in the age of social media.

The distinction between echo chambers and epistemic bubbles has also been challenged. One such criticism is that Nguyen focuses too much on cognitive explanatory mechanisms. When we form beliefs about issues, what matters is not just the background attitudes, credibility assignments, and disagreement-reinforcement mechanisms, but also how we are motivated to take epistemic positions that express our social group memberships (Munroe 2023). Such mechanisms are affective rather than cognitive. Interestingly, it has been suggested that the main drivers behind climate denialism are biases based on group membership (e.g. Carmichael, Brulle & Huxster 2017; Kahan, Peters, Wittlin, et al. 2012). This means that people are already motivated to

look for in-group signals about who to trust and use their social identities in deciding who the experts are (Munroe 2023). On top of important social factors like signaling, it also "feels good" for psychological reasons to engage with news on social media that fits one's existing preferences and biases (Garz, Sörensen & Stone 2020). You get satisfaction for getting affirmation for your beliefs.

Regardless of the exact mechanisms behind them, bad epistemic neighborhoods can overlap and most of us probably occupy several of them. After all, misinformation abounds in our current world, which is both complex and interconnected, and overflowing with information and misinformation alike. If you live in a bad epistemic neighborhood in relation to some normatively important issue, this arguably reduces the culpability for your ignorance related to that matter. It can even make you a victim of these neighborhoods in a way. The prevalence of post-truth narratives, including fake news and bullshitting, has been argued to make people feel confused, disoriented, and powerless (Rietdijk 2024). It has also been suggested that in some cases, the inability to distinguish real experts can excuse false beliefs, and that the individual people who are active disseminators of misinformation can be at the same time the perpetrators and the victims of epistemic injustice (Tappe and Lucas 2022).

There are two predominant strategies for addressing the spread of misinformation: (1) emphasizing individual consumer responsibility, and (2) promoting technological interventions aimed at reducing the cognitive load on individuals, particularly by modifying how information is presented online (Gelfert 2021). Examples of the latter include measures such as automated fact-checking or the labelling of questionable content on social media platforms. However, such technological interventions pose the risk of creating an 'arms race' between the social media platforms and producers of fake news because any viable algorithm designed to detect misinformation can be exploited or circumvented (Gelfert 2021).

Emphasizing individual responsibility neglects the broader context of bad epistemic neighborhoods, focusing instead on measures targeted at individuals, such as enhanced media literacy. This overlooks the fact that reasoning abilities can be employed in self-serving ways: people tend to engage in motivated reasoning and be very good at coming up with justifications for their bad beliefs and actions. In addition, lamenting about the reduction in critical thinking skills is at odds with evidence suggesting that it is older consumers, rather than younger ones, who are more likely to share fake news (Gelfert 2021). Individualistic focus is also problematic for a more general reason: it leaves the picture of epistemic responsibility incomplete (Millar 2021). It also

underestimates the collective phenomenon of 'backfire effects,' where individuals, when confronted with criticism, often become more entrenched in their beliefs (Gelfert 2021). One of the primary forces that leads to the omission of relevant epistemic sources is selective exposure: the tendency to seek like-minded sources (Nguyen 2020). Selective exposure can also be about our social circles, the people whose testimony we trust (Rini 2017). Both ways of ending up in a bad epistemic neighborhood can be unintentional and unmalicious, or both.

Because the question of culpability of individuals within bad epistemic neighborhoods is contextual, my inquiry hereon focuses on the responsibility of the collective agents who impact the epistemic neighborhood.

II. Misbelievers and disinformers

I now turn to the responsibility of collective agents who systemically spread misinformation, distinguishing two motivations for it. I will furthermore propose that these motivations have an impact on their responsibility. While motivations of individual people are often inherently private, and thus cannot be easily publicly verified, this is different with collective agents. In most cases, collective agents must base their actions and assertions on discussions and debates between members about what to do and what to say. Thereby their motivations can be detected from things like their external communications, shareholder or stakeholder meetings, or collective policies. Such documents and actions form a certain narrative about the motivation of the group agent, which means that the motivations of collective agents can often be narratively stipulated from the outside (Hormio 2024). [5] The narrative might be contradictory, of course, but this only means that the position of that group agent is contradictory in relation to that issue.

Internal communications are often more revealing than external, but these too can be made public through leaked reports, whistleblowers, and so on. Naturally, some collective motivations remain a secret, for example due to a secretive corporate culture, but my point is that this is not always the case.

[5] I have argued earlier (Hormio 2024) that we can distinguish honest and mistaken group assertions from those motivated by lying intentions by tracing their narrative roots. This includes looking at if the group statement conflicts with group knowledge on the matter, and if the process of gathering new evidence to form the group position behind the statement is formed in good faith.

Another example is provided by the discovery phase of pretrial procedures, where the parties exchange information and evidence about a case, and may request (among other things) copies of written documents and other internal communications, such as text messages and emails. I will return to this example later in this section.

Although assigning individuated blame is not always helpful when there are many actors involved, especially when the causes are complex and partly systemic, it is still possible to identify some actors that have clearly acted in bad faith. While it does not take away the need to address structural features and to build better epistemic scaffolding in societies, highlighting the role of collective agents in creating bad epistemic neighborhoods locates the discussion at the appropriate level, away from questions relating solely to individual epistemic agents. The collective level is also important because large collective agents can be held to more stringent epistemic standards than individuals. As collective agents like states or corporations have a much larger capacity to process information than individuals, we should not expect the same things epistemically from individuals as we can from collective agents (Vanderheiden 2016). Compared to individual people on the lookout for fallacies, many large collective agents have completely different resources at their disposal to gather the information and expertise necessary to form and express informed views about issues that pertain to their area of operation. This gives them both epistemic power and additional responsibilities, or so I will argue. I should add that even when we cannot access the motivation of a collective agent in some context, the discussion in this paper can still be relevant for political purposes also, such as evaluating the actions of collective agents in the public sphere. This is because it aims to draw up the general outline of how different motivations affect responsibility of collective agents, which is relevant to drawing up both policy and legal measures. The discussion could also provide a basis for collective agents' self-reflection.

Although the agents who create misinformation can be individuals or collectives, I will focus on collective agents. After all, it is exceedingly rare for an individual to be influential enough on their own to affect a large epistemic community without the backing of some collective entity or other that helps them the reach a wide audience, and/or without the power that a role gives them, making them a representative of a collective agent. [6] An epistemically influential individual does not have to have an official role in a collective, but

[6] Individuals can of course go rogue and fail to act within their roles, but I leave this issue aside here.

even then their epistemic platform is usually provided by a collective entity, such as a social media app. Naturally, having an institutional role will significantly amplify an individual's reach. This was the case with Trump: his made-up statements about election fraud gained prominence precisely because of his position as a president.

Deliberately deceptive misinformation can be called *disinformation*. This sub-category of the wider category of misinformation refers to cases in which the agent is deliberately issuing misinformation. To illustrate this difference, consider a new cult that is created solely to make its inventor and leader a rich man. He makes up the story for the cult and slowly starts indoctrinating followers to the story. The story coming from the leader is disinformation, as it is deliberatively misleading. However, that same story coming from a brainwashed cult member is misinformation, since the cult member is genuinely trying to get outsiders to 'see the truth', so there is no deliberate misleading of others involved. I use this distinction to highlight two different kinds of motivations for collective agents who have polluted epistemic neighborhoods.

Misbelievers are engaged in spreading misinformation for ideological or related reasons. The goal of their public communications is to try to convince other epistemic agents to share their ideology and to push back on facts which they cannot accept, for example to deny that the election result was accurate and not a result of widespread voter fraud. They thus want others to become believers in the narrative of a stolen election. Naturally, if they sincerely believe the falsehoods, they will not conceptualize it in such a way themselves.

A possible example of a collective agent falling under the category of a misbeliever in relation to the 2020 election is One America News Network, or One America News (OAN) for short. While it does not have the same audience size as Fox News or other established news channels, it experienced a significant boost in viewership during and after the 2020 presidential election, particularly from the segment of viewers who were not happy with the mainstream media rejecting Trump's narrative about widespread voter fraud (Mitchel 2021). OAN has been described as far-right channel (Robertson 2024, Sneed and Cohen 2023), as it has given ample airtime for conspiracy narratives and other baseless claims circulating in far-right circles (Bode 2020). Among its staff, OAN employs several people known for their far-right views and for subscribing to various conspiracy theories (Breland 2020). After the election, OAN's founder Robert Herring accused the Democrats on social media of cheating in the election (Bode 2020). According to a defamation lawsuit by an employee of Dominion Voting Systems, pro-Trump cable networks like OAN and Newsmax overstepped legal boundaries by promoting

and seemingly endorsing blatant falsehoods (Birkeland 2021). [7] The non-critical support given by OAN to lies like these about the rigging of voting machines, its hiring of several conspiracy theorists, as well as the unsubstantiated claims made by the network's founder about the election being falsified, all indicate bad beliefs about a stolen election motivated by ideological reasons. Of course, it is impossible to confidently make such an assessment without seeing internal communications of the network, or other such materials. What matters for my purposes is that it is plausible that some of the collective agents involved in the election misinformation were in it for ideological reasons, at least for a large part.

Other potential examples of misbelievers can be found when we look at antagonism towards climate science and especially towards its conclusions that urgent and large-scale systemic change is required to tackle the problem. Such misbelieving can be rooted, for example, in a distaste for environmental regulation, which is seen as a threat to the idea of a free market society (Dunlap and McCright 2011; Lewandowsky, Cook & Lloyd 2018). There are many obvious candidates for collective agents that have impacted epistemic communities on climate change. One of the most prominent examples is provided by The Heartland Institute. Their numerous activities include hosting "skeptical" conferences and other events on climate change science, as well as editing, publishing, and promoting reports by their own Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC). The latter produces books with misleading titles such as *Why Scientists Disagree about Global Warming*, to coincide with reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and United Nation meetings to discuss climate action. The Heartland Institute distributes its materials in many ways, including targeting groups like policymakers and teachers. Ideology can leave denying or discrediting the scientific consensus as the only cognitive and argumentative option (Lewandowsky, Cook & Lloyd 2018). The Heartland Institute could be an example of this. This kind of psychological denialism can be compared with anti-vaxxers, who spread misinformation because they sincerely believe that vaccines are dangerous. Misbelievers could themselves be products of bad epistemic

[7] Dominion Voting Systems is a company that provides election technology like voting machines and software to various jurisdictions across the United States. These include key swing states such as Georgia, which became a focal point of Trump's anger. Dominion and its employees were subsequently at the centre of various conspiracy narratives. There are several similar defamation lawsuits either pending or settled, spearheaded by Dominion itself or another voting machine company Smartmatic. Both were targeted in the right-wing media in relation to the 2020 presidential election.

neighborhoods. One could speculate, for example, about the role of McCarthyism or Cold War propaganda in response to the threat of the Soviet Union vis-à-vis the distaste that many people in the U.S. have for so-called Big State and regulation.

The second motivation for agents contributing to bad epistemic neighborhoods is more cynical, as the agents know that they are engaging in disinformation. They wield disinformation as a tool for some end, such as gaining power, or concerns over profit. I will call these agents *disinformers*. An example is a local politician who knows that the election results were not tampered with but peddles with disinformation because they think that it appeals to their voters and boosts their party's chances in the next election. The motivation is power, disinformation is just an instrument to get there. Another obvious motivation for disinformation is that there are major business interests at stake. Some well-known examples include the tobacco industry, fossil fuel companies, and the sugar industry (Oreskes & Conway 2010). Here disinformation is utilized as a tool to delay meaningful policy measures that could hurt their bottom-line. Disinformers, like the fossil fuel corporations involved in stalling the progress of UN treaties knew the real state of affairs early on, and acknowledged the truth of climate science internally, but chose disinformation as a strategy to protect their profits in the short term (Cook et al. 2019, Dunlap and McCright 2011, Oreskes & Conway 2010). [8] The sophistication of the misinformation techniques used can affect how robust the bad epistemic neighborhoods are.

An example of a disinformer in relation to the 2020 election result is provided by Fox News, a prominent conservative news channel in the United States. It too has faced defamation lawsuits in response to its coverage of the election and famously paid a $787.5 million to settle a lawsuit brought against it by Dominion (Debusmann 2023). As part of the pre-trial discovery process, Dominion gained access to Fox News' internal communications. Through presenting materials drawn from sources such as internal emails and text messages, the lawsuit details evidence that Fox News knew that the allegations against Dominion were not true. [9] Its own personnel referred to the election fraud claims with terms such as "crazy" and "ludicrous", with at least some of

[8] In doing so, they have utilised the tobacco industry's playbook; an industry that was forced to make concessions only after activists successfully pushed for a framework of distrust towards the Big Tobacco (Derry and Waikar 2008).

[9] Dominion Voting Systems v Fox Corporation, Superior Court of the State of Delaware, Brief in Support of Dominion Motion for Summary Judgment on Liability of Fox News Network, Case No. N21C- 03-257 EMD.

them also clearly understanding how damaging they could be to democracy. Initially the network kept to facts and did not give credence to the stolen election claims. However, this soon changed. The internal communications reveal that although Fox News found no evidence to back up the election fraud claims, the channel was worried about declining viewer figures. In particular, many channel insiders expressed worry over losing the trust of their audience, especially in relation to the damage done to their brand after Fox News (accurately) calling Arizona for Biden. Although top executives like Rupert Murdoch were aware that the network was reporting falsities, they continued doing so for financial reasons: to retain those viewers who were drawn towards the more right-wing context offered by OAN and Newsmax. The lawsuit depicts a news network who recklessly and intentionally disregarded the truth for profits. It served disinformation to its audience for instrumental reasons: to protect its profits.

Of course, it is almost impossible to tell from the outside with a certainty if a collective agent is a misbeliever, or if its actions and statements are mixed with some degree of being a disinformer. While lawsuits that go into discovery can provide fascinating access to the inner workings of an organization, it can be hard to make a clear assessment of when a collective agent knowingly makes false statements. In practice, these motivations might mix. Support for climate change action has been delayed by cynical disinformation campaigns, which were amplified by misinformation efforts driven by ideological reasons. Something similar could arguably be said for the attempt to overthrow the election. There could also be additional motivations, like creating a sense of epistemic safety for members (Furman 2023). A collective agent could also be culpable for displaying other kinds of negligent epistemic behavior, apart from misbelieving or disinforming. For example, epistemic pollution can be created as a side effect of things like wanting to generate more traffic to one's website through promulgating fake news and thereby gaining more profits (Fallis and Mathiesen 2019). Denying facts is not at the center of such behavior. Collective agents can also make epistemic neighborhoods worse without intending to do so. Sometimes bad epistemic neighborhoods are generated as an unforeseen side-effect of some other activity. Some of the most significant examples of epistemic pollution have arguably been unforeseen side effects of new information technology. One example is YouTube's algorithm designed to increase revenue by recommending other videos that viewers might like, duly ending up exposing people susceptible to conspiracy thinking to new conspiracy theories (Landrum, Olshansky & Richards 2021). Still, my focus is on misbelieving or disinforming, because I believe that they represent the two

major motivations for misinformation (even if not necessarily the main sources of it).

More generally, any large-scale changes to our epistemic environment will likely have epistemic costs as well as benefits. With the rapid development of new information technologies, we are often playing catch-up with the broad picture of the impacts. While it is given that social media companies and other such tech companies should work to fix their algorithms once problems arise (and are blameworthy if they fail to do so), the degree to which technology companies should be able to predict the impacts of their innovations before they are launched is an open question that falls outside the scope of this paper. There will also be collective agents who have not done anything to make epistemic neighborhoods worse, but who have the power to make it significantly better and who could arguably have a forward-looking obligation to improve the epistemic neighborhood.

If one bad epistemic neighborhood can indoctrinate you to another, or lowers the threshold for starting another, the original culprits instigating bad epistemic neighborhoods could have done so with "good" intentions. In other words, if we allow for the agent's motivations to impact on whether something is misinformation or disinformation, misbelievers could have engaged in misinformation (albeit without realizing this), rather than disinformation, even when they are creating echo chambers or other mechanisms, perhaps based on affective reasons. Individuals and collectives impact each other and can create their own feedback loops that strengthen certain beliefs. An example would be the local politician trying to appeal to their base by denying the election results. This will be seen by some as further evidence that the election was stolen, thereby increasing support from voters for candidates that deny the results, which can then affect the official party line on the matter (at least locally), again affecting the beliefs of individual voters, and so on.

Be that as it may, epistemological culpability needs to be separated from moral culpability based on epistemic concerns. I will discuss this next, with focus on the responsibility of collective agents who specialize in knowledge.

III. Responsibility of collective agents and consumers of fake news

This section discusses how the motivations of collective agents might affect their culpability for bad epistemic neighborhoods. The two different motivations for misinformation, ideological and cynical, both have bad epistemic

consequences and have contributed to the current political polarization. I will argue that while misbelieving is more culpable in a purely epistemic sense, being a disinformer is more culpable in a moral sense. I furthermore suggest that while collective agents can present us with clear cases of culpability in epistemic matters, when dealing with consumers of fake news and misinformation, we should proceed with a certain level of epistemic humility.

Epistemic institutions present a special case for the responsibility of collective agents. The unifying feature of all epistemic institutions is that knowledge is at the core of their operations (Miller 2022). [10] In what could be called as knowledge institutions (Hormio and Reijula 2024), the purpose of the collective agent centers around knowledge, whether this is acquisition of new expert knowledge or dissemination of knowledge. Examples include universities, intelligence agencies, schools, and think tanks. We hold such collective agents to higher epistemic standards than other collective agents. Media institutions are clearly also epistemic institutions, but we do not hold them quite to the same level of epistemic standards as knowledge institutions. For example, magazines and journals focusing on hobbies or lifestyles are in the business of disseminating knowledge, but their focus is more on practical know-how, information and opinion, not necessarily getting to grips with the truth of the claims. In contrast, the focus of news outlets is more strictly on claims that can be verified. Correspondingly, we tend to hold news outlets to quite high epistemic standards. However, this is not the same standard as for knowledge institutions. The very nature of reporting on breaking news and developing stories necessitates that we should not set the epistemic standard so high that the speaker should be able to guarantee the truth of the claims, although the reporting implicitly contains the idea that the reporter can vouch for their belief that the claims presented are veridical (Gelfert 2021), that is, they coincide with reality.

We rely on institutional expertise in many areas of our daily lives, including in epistemological matters. For democratic social systems to work, we rely on collective agents not to deceive us in matters such as election results, science, healthcare, infrastructure, and numerous other things. As Neil Levy (2022, 94) puts it: “Without heavy-duty social and environmental scaffolding, even virtuous agents can’t reliably acquire knowledge about difficult and complex issues”. With many important issues, such scaffolding can be patchy at best, with disinformation lurking even within prima facie respectable epis-

[10] According to Miller (2022), social media providers are not so much epistemic institutions as disseminating institutions.

temic sources like news channels and speeches by politicians. Institutions within democratic systems arguably have an obligation not to deceive us, especially when they have more information about an important issue than we do and they are viewed as trustworthy sources of information, but as we have seen, some of them do so regardless.

Seana Shiffrin (2014) has argued that the primary wrong in lying is that it abuses the mechanism by which we provide reliable testimonial warrants to each other. [11] We need this mechanism to cooperate with each other, so the distinctive wrong in lying is the abusing of this mechanism. In other words, she underscores undermining testimonial trust as the main wrong in lying, rather than the deceptive effects that the lie might have on its audience. According to Shiffrin, testimonial practices based on sincere speech are "fundamental components of a social environment that supports the moral agency of thinkers" (2014, p. 117), and damage to these testimonial practices also jeopardizes the rational basis we have for supporting them. After all, if lying becomes common practice, it erodes social trust and makes cooperation increasingly difficult or even unsustainable. The election denialism and the Capitol attack showed how harmful false beliefs can be and how bad epistemic neighborhoods can erode social cohesion. This trust in the testimony of others is more fragile when what they tell us poses a threat to our existing ways of living. Therefore, attacks on things like the scientific consensus on an important matter should be made in good faith: only when you actually believe what you are claiming.

Am I then suggesting that attacks on election results or on climate science by misbelievers are somehow less harmful than those made by disinformers? Not really: both form of denialism can be equally polluting, regardless of if the intention is to be misleading or not. If false claims become standard practice in news, we can no longer trust the news. Misbelieving could even be more harmful than being a disinformer, because ideology can make messages more potent within an already ideologically susceptible epistemic neighborhood.

Although I have focused on the false beliefs of people within an epistemic neighborhood, the pollution also has other harmful effects. For example, by refusing to participate in an open debate about their claims, the polluting agents are putting obstacles in the path of a genuinely pluralistic dialogue through repeating already dismissed claims (Shaw 2021). Moreover, this is

[11] This argument has Kantian roots, as it aligns with Kant's emphasis on truthfulness as a fundamental duty in communication and the preservation of trust in social interactions.

linked to an important phenomenon, affective polarization, which refers to emotional division between political groups and leads to a rise in mistrust toward the political outgroup. This type of mistrust is primarily driven by emotions and feelings rather than grounded in a rational, shared understanding, or a logical narrative that explains why members of the opposing party should not be trusted (Munroe 2023). In this case, mistrust is based on personal aversion to the outgroup rather than on substantive disagreements or evidence-based critiques of their actions or policies. While bad beliefs and harmful narratives can enforce the phenomenon, it is a step away from the kind of reasons we are used to looking at in epistemology.

Still, the upshot of my argument is that collective misbelievers are less culpable moral agents than disinformers, if they are honestly mistaken about the beliefs that they hold to be true. My suggestion is that while the moral culpability of misbelievers might be reduced to some degree by their motivation, as epistemic agents, collective misbelievers are clearly culpable for their bad beliefs. Due to their greater epistemic capacities, the epistemic culpability of collective agents is often a clearer issue than with individual agents. This holds even if their members are indoctrinated by bad epistemic neighborhoods. With the overwhelming consensus among climate scientists, it would be hard to argue that misbelievers like The Heartland Institute and others are engaging with available evidence in good faith. Its members and supporters might be ideologically motivated by wanting the science not to be true, as the need for climate change regulation goes against the stated goal of the institute to defend limited government. But as collective agent specializing in information (a think tank), they are being an epistemically irresponsible knowledge institution if their output is clouded by their ideology. The same arguably goes for OAN and other collective agents who disregard the facts over affect in their output, even when they present themselves as a news outlet.

Fox News as a disinformer is more careful as an epistemic agent when forming its beliefs, compared to a misbeliever, as it has taken the facts seriously when looking into the matter. After all, it clearly knew that the election fraud claims were false, and chose not to report on them initially. However, by being intentionally deceptive and engaging actively in disinformation, it is also arguably a more culpable agent in moral terms. It clearly should have known better. Fox News knew what it was involved in and was not under any ideological delusions, like saving democracy from some conspiracy or another. This example shows that careful epistemic agents might nonetheless be morally culpable agents on epistemic grounds. In other words, epistemic blame and moral blame based on epistemic reasons can come apart.

If you recall, Fox News was worried about losing viewers and felt like they should cater to their audience by giving airspace and therefore credibility to false claims about a rigged election. Fox News arguably saw themselves as catering to a customer demand. The question arises: should consumers of fake news and misinformation bear some of the burden for their bad epistemic habits (Croce and Piazza 2021)? I argued earlier than within many bad epistemic neighborhoods, an individualistic starting point for such questioning is not particularly fruitful. However, we can look at the issue from the point of view of consumers of fake information as a group. The group will not be a group agent, but rather an unstructured group whose constituents share a normatively important feature: they consume a lot of fake news and misinformation. Do unstructured groups such as far-right Fox News and OAN viewers share responsibility for supporting a news outlet that peddles in misinformation?

The relationship between individuals and collectives is complicated. Not only do collective agents comprise of individuals-in-roles, but they are also made possible by individuals. These individuals are not just the powerful leaders of the collective agents, but also their customers and other supporters. Take The Heartland Institute as an example. According to their website, approximately 70% of their funding comes from individuals. [12] This gives rise to an interesting question about the extent to which individuals donating to the institute are responsible for creating misinformation. In broader terms, consumers of fake information and news could be culpable of creating a demand for misinformation. After all, agents within a bad epistemic neighborhood can both consume misinformation and contribute to creating it. This further complicates matters for individual responsibility as many of these people might epistemically buy into denialism, so they are not contributing to deceiving others intentionally. Rather, they could simply be mistaken; it is possible to sincerely believe in a falsehood, especially if you are deeply in thrall to some ideology. This is why it seems bit too demanding to argue that citizens in democratic states have a shared responsibility to counter false information, and that citizenry can reasonably be expected to take steps towards restricting the spread of false claims (like Millar 2021 does). Some sections of the citizenry, certainly, but also those deeply in thrall to ideology and misinformation? It does not sound feasible for the kinds of reasons discussed earlier in relation to individual culpability. At the same time, it seems that we want to

[12] According to www.heartland.org (accessed 14 April 2021), in 2017 the think tank had approximately 5,000 supporters, with 70% of its income coming from individuals, 22% from foundations, and 6% from corporations.

describe some kind of shared responsibility to those who actively seek out false narratives, or who fund think tanks that work to discredit science. Even if this is so, it seems disingenuous to put the blame on consumers alone, or even for the most part, as consumer demand is often created and sustained by collective agents. [13] Yet we do not want to let all the individuals of the hook, especially those who fund or otherwise enable misinformation for malicious motivations, like racism or misogyny. Be that as it may, such a responsibility debate will have to be contextual.

Populist rhetoric can make it harder to contain fake news, as it makes a sharp division between the people and the elite, who is allegedly corrupt. Even so, I think that liberal democratic governments must be careful on relying more on experts' advice to counterbalance denialism and other epistemic failures among voters. A shift towards more epistocratic governance is only likely to exaggerate the underlying problems, such as lack of trust in institutions, in addition to raising questions about justification. Narrow technocratic framings can also lead us to look for solutions in the wrong places.

I find that a better response is a certain level of epistemic humility. In our polarized world, it might be what we need in our daily interactions with other individual epistemic agents. The kind of epistemic humility I have in mind is akin to intellectual humility, which encourages one to acknowledge the boundaries of one's knowledge and accept the possibility of being mistaken. It involves an understanding that one's beliefs, perspectives, or assumptions may be flawed or incomplete. Once we adopt such an attitude, it fosters a willingness to listen to others and to re-evaluate one's own views. I like the idea presented by Elisabetta Galeotti and Federica Liveriero (manuscript) that intellectual humility is similar to moral responsibility that is associated with one's social and epistemic privileges (rather than just an epistemic obligation tied to a fallibilist approach to knowledge). Because of their privileged position, reasonable individuals bear the responsibility of addressing social imbalances when it comes to epistemic matters, such as misinformation and conspiracies. In other words, the initial steps toward rebuilding mutual trust and fostering a cooperative democratic environment lie with those who are capable of adopt-

[13] Examples of demand creation include mobile phone companies introducing new models to get consumers to update to the latest model even when their existing phones are still working, or fashion brands pushing for ever-shorter cycles on clothing trends. Something similar could be argued to apply to misinformation, for example through the way in which social media algorithms tend to favour high emotion polarising content, including conspiracy theories, and click-bait journalism.

ing such an attitude—specifically, individuals whose belief systems are not anchored in personal commitments or identities.

This does not mean that we should adopt a similar attitude towards collective agents, though. Collective agents, especially epistemic institutions, such as news channels, can and should be held to more stringent epistemic standards than individuals. Although news does not claim to disseminate knowledge, they should mirror what the reporter believes to coincide with reality. With misbelievers, misinformation could be based on bad beliefs that the reporters and the head of the network themselves have. Such news channels fare poorly as epistemic agents. In real life, this can be reflected in market-based consequences, such as marginal viewer figures or being dropped by cable channel providers, both of which have happened to OAN. Policy measures to prevent such channels from presenting themselves as news outlets could also be needed.

Disinformers are often more careful epistemic agents, as they know that what they are claiming is false. However, they are also morally more culpable agents, as they place profits or other such motivations over honesty. Such a stance is especially harmful when the collective agent is an epistemic institution. Fox News was able to give credibility to baseless claims precisely because it is viewed as a reputable news organization based on its past performance. It still employs ambitious journalists who subscribe to high standards in their reporting. The problem is that by attaching to the same channel, the more far-right views got the kind of legitimacy that OAN or other epistemically inferior collective agents would never have been able to give them. Fox News chose to trade its credibility for money, giving a powerful platform to dangerous accusations that eroded public trust in democracy. There should be measures to penalize such actions by a news organization through means other than just by going through the courts to bring on defamation lawsuits. [14] Some possible measures include critically evaluating broadcasting licenses of news outlets engaged in disinformation, but such measures should be utilized only through extreme care. Freedom of speech is paramount for democracy and for media actors to be able to act as independent watchdogs for the government within democracies. In a highly polarized landscape, like the United States at the moment, such measures could easily backfire and be taken to extremes. It is important to keep in mind that a balanced democracy needs conservative and progressive voices both, although no democracy needs poorly run news organizations.

[14] Defamation law has a limited capacity to bring justice to the public for misinformation, especially as the agreements lack disclosure and accountability (Levine 2024).

A big issue looming in the background is that sometimes bad epistemic neighborhoods are not the root-causes of bad beliefs. Rather, they are the symptoms of something else that has gone wrong in a society. Bad epistemic neighborhoods can certainly amplify and harden polarization, but they are not necessarily the cause of it. Other large-scale trends, such as widening inequality of opportunities, could be driving the polarization. The rapid rise in the availability of AI technologies, coupled with social media algorithms that favor items that raise the pulse of its audience, means that convincing misinformation is easier and less costly to manufacture than ever before, even by isolated individual agents, making it easier for fringe views to gain wider audience. Such wider trends need to be tackled in tandem with measures that target bad epistemic neighborhoods.

Conclusion

The collective agents that create and amplify bad epistemic neighborhoods can be divided roughly into those that do so mostly for ideological reasons (*misbelievers*), and those that do so for instrumental reasons (*disinformers*), for example to gain more power or monetary profit. These two motivations impact the responsibility of the collective agents that help to create bad epistemic neighborhoods. While a disinformer of facts might be more careful as an epistemic agent than a misbeliever when forming its beliefs, by being intentionally deceptive and engaging actively in disinformation, it is also arguably a more culpable agent in moral terms. Furthermore, I have argued that even if there is some degree of blame for the individuals who holds bad beliefs or are ignorant of normatively important matters, the blame is better directed at the collective agents creating and contributing to bad epistemic neighborhoods, such as media organizations and lobby groups. More generally, we should not be too quick to judge and ridicule the views of our fellow citizens, as that often only leads to further polarization. We should instead aim for a certain level of epistemic humility: we all have some bad beliefs, and we all occupy some bad epistemic neighborhoods. This does not mean that bad beliefs are harmless or that they should not be criticized. They should, but the criticism should be directed more towards the collective level, and our energies are better spent when focused on improving the epistemic scaffolding in our societies.

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