

## **Four Theories of Knowledge and Fake News**

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Fake news and propaganda are not new, though more recently in an intensely political and faltering religious climate, it has exploded across the US sending many previously sensible people diving empty headfirst into a cesspool of incessant idiocy and lunacy. The purposeful distortion of reality into manufactured falsehoods dates back to the beginnings of many civilization though. It is a well-studied and well-known tool of manipulation, coercion, and political control, but now, with some sort of media in our faces or ears at nearly all times, more people are subject to a relentless, unceasing stream of lies, accusatory speech, and attention-grabbing headlines that a worrisome number of people cannot seem to pull away from nor analyze for validity. With so much information available that explains why fake news is created and how it used to persuade people's thoughts and behaviors, why is it then that so many people are prone to believing media content that has no real connection to truth? Why is fake news so prevalent and why does it continue to endure despite all the knowledge we have gained exposing the nefarious entities known to benefit from purposely using deceitful tactics to incite people to their cause? By discussing the two main goals of epistemology, gaining truth and avoiding error, and the four theories of knowledge we discussed over the course, I will attempt to answer these questions and suggest what can be done to correct the problem of fake news.

"Believe nothing you've been told and do your own research," is a popular sentiment among people who fall for fake news. Science is wrong, the media is lying, the education system is becoming overreaching and immoral, and somehow the only truth that can be found belongs to a political party that is making these claims. In a mission to seek "the real truth," people "research" their way into webs of purposeful misrepresentations and outright lies and join forces with others who have similar goals and mindsets giving a collective, inexorable power to

whatever nonsense it is they believe. Are people who are unable to discern real news from fake outright stupid, or is there something else going on? Bonhoeffer (2011) suggests that people are not stupid but fail in a moral sense to push back against the ignorant forces of tribalism. People give up their autonomy in exchange for the benefits of belonging to a group. This theory partly accounts for the social aspect of what draws people to fake news, but perhaps if people had a better ability to recognize what knowledge is and how to avoid error when seeking it, the leap to the mindless conformity of the hive would not be so enticing or easy.

A major problem caused by the spread of fake news involves people claiming to have knowledge when they only have a partial understanding of a situation or real no knowledge at all. In epistemology, most theories of knowledge require that a claim of knowledge meets the general criteria of being justified, true, and believed. People that fall for fake news may fully believe something is true and could even be justified in their belief, but fail to acknowledge that the information they are basing their beliefs on is either all or partly incorrect. Gettier (1963) raises this issue by showing that people can have beliefs they have reason to believe are true, but outside factors that are unknown at the time can lead to beliefs based on wrong assumptions and therefore the knowledge possessed is not actual knowledge. The fake news hive rejects the relevance of unknowns or omitted information in their attempts to claim knowledge, and instead doubles down on their efforts to stick with increasingly incoherent, unjustified beliefs even when contradictory information is presented, merely choosing to move the goalposts to establish another false set of coherence. They cannot be persuaded by opposing facts or with information that proves their claims untrue.

*Berkeley's Idealist Theory* (1710) states that the existence of objects relies on their ability to be perceived and that ideas about them are imprinted on the senses and formed with the help

of memory and imagination. Those that push false narratives rely on inserting lies into people's subjective experiences convincing them that what they are being made to experience is actual knowledge and are truth even though what they hear, see, or feel can be entirely manufactured to appear a certain way. Entities that produce fake news maliciously employ the use of incendiary language and curated "evidence" to shape people's beliefs and ideas about reality. In order to subvert these tactics, people have to be able to remove themselves from what they perceive and evaluate ideas by opening them up and checking every detail to be sure that what they are being led to believe works according to natural laws. To find truth in a world that is only made of ideas and the minds that form them, means there should be careful attention given when structuring beliefs based on observation to avoid making errors when internal ideas about the world and what is experienced are formed.

To determine if what we know is true, Descartes (1931) says we must get rid of all beliefs, ideas, and thoughts, including those created by the senses, that relate to the physical world along with mathematics, reasoning and logic. Since how we form our beliefs is susceptible to error, all must be discarded and we must start with a blank foundation consisting only of the knowledge that we are a being that is able to doubt and we are not being deceived by some sort of deceptive entity. Fake news is the work of a deceptive malicious entity, causing people to lose their ability to think clearly under its influence. To avoid making errors and get to truth, people must be able to resist the laziness of holding onto ideas which could have been impacted by certain groups whose goals include keeping people under a spell of delusion and self-imposed ignorance. People at large need to fully comprehend that people who have lost the ability to decipher their own thoughts will take whatever information is regurgitated and fed to them no question and this is a problem. The Foundationalist approach could help people better understand

what ideas can be justified through a process of methodological doubt and recognize more clearly if they are being deceived by their own thoughts or something else.

The Reliabilist approach to assessing the possession of knowledge is accomplished by viewing justification as being dependent on the reliability of the processes in which a belief is formed. If the process can be considered reliable and is rooted in good reasoning, perception, and induction and is not derived from a faulty process like wishful thinking, emotional attachment, lucky guessing, or generalizations, then there are good grounds for a belief to be considered justified. Beliefs created from the content of fake news are generally not formed through a reliable process. People latch on to fake news stories that involve racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and malicious claims about behaviors of other people and groups that are rooted in fear, anger, leading them to into developing deep seated beliefs based on purposeful misconstrued ideas which were crafted very specifically to be way beyond their given abilities to rationally examine. So in turn, their beliefs are often unfounded, untrue, and not able to be justified when looked at for reliability. People should look not only at their own processes for forming beliefs, but also to the creators of the information to see if those people are forming ideas through reliable processes as well.

To arrive at what could be considered knowledge, people have to be able to know how to avoid error when seeking truth or they will not find much of anything other than what other people or certain groups of influence want them to believe. If they cannot form beliefs through reliable processes, if they cannot discard ideas that they have reason to doubt, if their beliefs are not collaborative in a set with other coherent beliefs, and if they choose to believe only what they perceive at face value to be real without examination, then the only concepts of truth they will possess will derive from a system substantiated with lies. Introspection and discernment are not

skills many people possess without specific intent to develop but these skills are necessary to combat the problem of fake news and propaganda. Being able to dissect what can be considered reality is not something a lot of people even want to do, they like the thinking to be done for them. With the justification of beliefs, there are problems with perception, regress, induction, the methods in which people test their ideas, etc. and it takes time, dedication, and skill to sort things out. People in the general public who depend on sociality and the comforts of conformity, that are largely trained from birth to think in a line, are not by nature primed for the capacity of thought it takes to doubt oneself or the systems of belief they were likely brought up in.

Through all this discussion of knowledge and the different theories, it's clear that people can come to develop the ability to examine their beliefs and avoid errors when seeking truth, but under the control of fake news and propaganda, escaping the pull of its manipulative force appears to be too much for a large percentage of the population who have been conditioned through a history of expected adherence to religion where it has been demanded to blindly accept through faith while under the threat of punishment things that can't be logically proven. As before in darker periods in history, and at alarming rates more recently, a fake news has been spread with great success among people who are prone to latch on to any message invoking the name of god, and those responsible for the influx of false information know this well.

Educating people at this point is not enough and neither is fervently trying to offer up proof and evidence of where people are wrong because the threat of fake news continues to grow. It's past the point of being able to reason with irrational people because the hold of fake news is proving to be too strong. Referring back to Bonhoeffer, he suggests a forceful liberation has to happen, and I agree, though it would be more preferable for people to come to understand the reality of things in more reasonable ways. But, even then, the effects of clarity would not

persevere and fake news, propaganda, and the fight to remove its hold on people would start again.

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