

# DEMOCRACY VS. FAKE NEWS

*DEMOCRACY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE,  
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## ANOTHER DEFORMATION OF DEMOCRACY?

Perhaps, there is a specific threat – or deformation – of democracy relating to what we might call the epistemic underpinnings of democracy deriving from new developments in the media, especially social media

**My point goes against the initial optimism about the effects of new information technologies**

- a hope that new social media would empower the downtrodden and oppressed in our societies cf. Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Anonymous, Wikileaks
- talk of "democratization of knowledge" and the "increased epistemic autonomy of the citizen"

Perhaps, it is just not true that "If we take care of freedom then truth will take care of itself"  
(Richard Rorty)

## THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

1. The information-level of the average citizen today is deteriorating
2. A legitimate and viable democracy presupposes a well-informed citizenry
3. Hypothesis: To save legitimate democracy, new measures ought to be put in place to secure a better level of information – forms of epistemic paternalism
4. However, there are also dangers connected to using such measures

# QUALITY OF INFORMATION IS DETERIORATING

**Why is the quality of information deteriorating?**

- 1) A long term trend of commercialisation of the news-media has increasingly led to the commodification of information**
  - The truth simply does not sell as well as dumbed-down simplifications or dramatic and sensational half-truths or lies
- 2) The more recent rise of social media**
  - More and more citizens get their news, not from mainstream media, but from social media and thereby bypass the filter of journalistic standards of balance and objectivity

**"A majority of U.S. adults – 62% – get news on social media, and 18% do so often" (Pew Research Center 2016)**

**80% of under-30's do not read newspapers daily. 70% of older Americans do. The median age of TV news viewers is 60 (Mindich, 2005)**

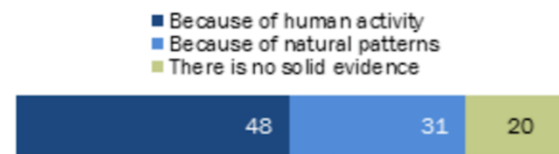
## EXAMPLE: CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2013 report – findings supported by 98% of scientists):

- "the science now shows with 95 percent certainty that human activity is the dominant cause of observed warming since the mid-20th century"
- Yet, less than half of the U.S. population believes this
- And belief is massively influenced by political leanings

### About half of Americans say Earth is warming due to human activity

% of U.S. adults saying climate change is mostly due to human activity/mostly due to natural patterns/there is no solid evidence that Earth is getting warmer

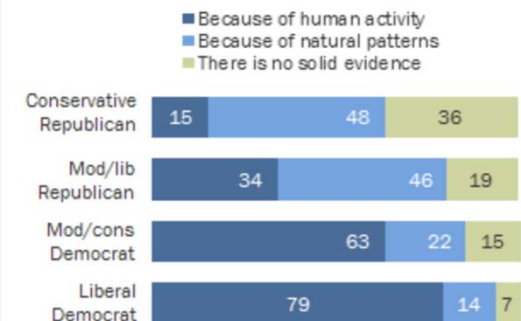


Note: Beliefs about climate change include those who "lean" toward each response. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.  
"The Politics of Climate"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

### Political groups are worlds apart in their beliefs about climate change

% of U.S. adults in each group who say climate change is mostly due to human activity/mostly due to natural patterns/there is no solid evidence that Earth is getting warmer



Note: Beliefs about climate change include those who "lean" toward each response. Republicans and Democrats include independents and other non-partisans who "lean" toward the parties. Respondents who do not lean toward a political party and those who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.  
"The Politics of Climate"

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# INFORMATIONAL CRISIS

- **Polarisation of the media (Fox vs. CNN) – a trend towards "opinionated news"**
- **The formation of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" on the internet**
- **"Balance as bias"**
  - seeking to give both sides of the issue in relation to scientific evidence can be misleading
  - professional journalistic standards cause bias (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004)

## FILTER BUBBLES



(from Wikipedia)

## EPISTEMIC FLAWS

- **Psychological research show that humans generally have many epistemic flaws (Kahneman and Tversky and many more since)**
- **Humans have a general tendency to use bad heuristics and to be biased in their handling of information**

## BAD HEURISTICS AND BIASES

- **Trusting anecdotal evidence and generalising from too small samples**
- **Stereotyping**
- **Wishful thinking and self-serving bias**
- **Confirmation bias**
- **Framing effects**
  - People are more likely to buy a drug presented as 20% successful than a drug presented as 80% unsuccessful

## PRELIMINARY STAGE SETTING

- **The quality of policy-relevant information – in terms of its objectivity and balance – available to voters is low and set to deteriorate further**
- **And the voters are generally likely to process information badly due to epistemic flaws built into the very nature of humans**
- **(There has always been ignorance and misinformation, of course. The claim here is that it is spreading and accelerating)**

## A PRIMA FACIE CASE FOR EPISTEMIC PATERNALISM?

**“When the conditions of public discussion with respect to important and central issues allow for, even foster, widespread states of irremediable ignorance (as well as resistance and alienation), asserting the value of “free exchange of ideas” is no more than the expression of a shallow, habitual piety”  
(Phillip Kitcher)**



## DEMOCRACY AND PREFERENCE

No matter whether the democratic procedure is justified as

*intrinsically valuable* (the procedure directly expresses some value)

or as

*instrumentally valuable* (the procedure produces outcomes that are independently valuable)

the democratic procedure necessarily assigns a crucial role to the preferences of the citizens

## DEMOCRACY AND PREFERENCE

**A democratic procedure is: “.....a method of determining the contents of laws such that the preferences of the citizens have some formal connection with the outcome in which each counts equally” (B. Barry)**

## DEMOCRACY AND INFORMATION

**Democracy is a procedure for passing laws that assigns a pivotal role to the preferences of the citizens**

**But what preferences?**

**1. Raw preferences – whatever preferences the citizens happen to have, no matter how ill-informed**

**2. Informed preferences – the preferences that the citizens would have, had they been informed of the relevant facts**

## THE GENERAL WILL OF THE UNINFORMED?

**The view that the aggregated raw preferences of the citizens somehow express the general will of the people most authentically is, I shall argue, hopeless**

**As is the related view that individuals are always the best judges of what their own real interests are**

- **This may be true of basic needs (food, shelter etc), but not much beyond that – and especially not when complex factual/scientific information informs preferences**

## IRRATIONAL WANTS

1. I may be mistaken about what it takes to satisfy my want due to false instrumental beliefs
2. I may want something that I do not actually need
  - I may be brainwashed into believing that I want something
  - Cf. adaptive preferences or “false consciousness”

## EXAMPLES

**I may want something on the basis of a false instrumental belief.**

- **E.g. I want to quench my thirst. Therefore, I come to want to drink the water in the glass in front of me due to the instrumental belief that it will safely quench my thirst. However, the water is poisoned.**

**I may have been brainwashed by commercials into wanting to be insanely thin – something that I do not have an interest in at all**

# FREE SPEECH AND DEMOCRACY

**Many have pointed to a paradox**

**On the one hand, we do not allow unlimited free speech in the courtroom or classroom**

**On the other hand, when it comes to the really important arena – the government of our society – we allow a total free for all!**

**“There is no free speech [for laypeople] in the courtroom, and (almost) no one thinks there should be..... By contrast, when these same laypeople are asked to choose a President, someone who will decide American tax policy, whether to go to war, the correct approach to climate change, and who should get healthcare, the basic constitutional posture in the US is that everyone (whether person or corporate entity) should be able to say almost anything, and without any meaningful restrictions on the advantages that accrue to those with wealth and access to the major media of Communication”. (Brian Leiter, 2016)**

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

Clearly the aggregated preference of the citizens relevant for a democratic decision must be constructed from the informed preferences of the citizens

Just as democracy, for its legitimacy, requires respect for democracy-related rights (freedom of the press, expression, association and assembly),  
so democracy, for its legitimacy, requires that certain epistemic standards are upheld – i.e. that the quality of information available to citizens is reasonably high

## EXAMPLE: IRRATIONAL PREFERENCE BASED ON MISINFORMATION

Someone performing the following line of practical reasoning based on false information (2) forms an irrational preference (3)

1. I want that we leave the planet in a decent shape for human life for the sake of future generations
2. Continuing with the current level of carbon emissions is compatible with leaving the planet in a decent shape for human life (**FALSE** instrumental belief)
3. I want that we continue with the current level of carbon emissions

## HOW INSURE THAT CITIZENS ARE BETTER INFORMED?

- **Strategy 1 – Do nothing – trust the free marketplace of ideas**
- **Strategy 2 – More education**
- **Strategy 3 – Market self-regulation – flagging bad information**
- **Strategy 4 – Subsidies for media and state flagging**
- **Strategy 5 – Epistemic censorship? (Epistemic paternalism)**

## STRATEGY I: TRUST THE FREE MARKET

Perhaps, Adam Smith's invisible hand will in the long run deal with fake and distorted news in free market place of ideas?

But, what we have seen is a much more effective spread of false information

Cf. Brexit, Trump, climate change denial

## STRATEGY 2: EDUCATION

Maybe education of the citizens can make them more resistant to the effects of bad information?

- General education (publicly funded) to further critical skills and respect for (scientific) evidence, including specific education in critical use of the media
  - But, even well-educated citizens are easily misled (remember cognitive biases)
- Education of journalists on how to deal with and portray scientific information accurately



## STRATEGY 3: STATE SUBSIDIES AND FLAGGING

**1. Perhaps, strengthening public service media with subsidies will do the job?**

- a) Subsidies for state media with a public service obligation**
- b) Subsidies for private media that take on a public service obligation**
  - Notice that this can be done pluralistically without favouring some political factions over others, e.g. let the subsidy follow the consumer and give subsidies to private media according to number of subscribers

**However, as mentioned before, social media are taking over the role as source of news!**

**2. State intervention in the form of fact-checking and flagging (mild version of epistemic paternalism)**

## STRATEGY 4: MARKET SELF-REGULATION

Can private media sector's own measures do the job? (e.g. Facebook's "fact checking system" for flagging fake news)

- But, ultimately, profit will be the goal and commercial interests and truth often conflict
- Ineffective – fake news has already gone viral before tagged
- It may even prove to be seriously counterproductive. (Facebook's flagging of fake news in some cases promoted, rather than stopped, the spread of fake news!)

## STRATEGY 5: EPISTEMIC CENSORSHIP

Could new legal checks on media – outlawing misinformation in extreme cases, introducing “epistemic policing”/strong forms of epistemic paternalism – be the way forward?

- The advantage is that legal sanction can be imposed after misinformation has gone viral and therefore can function as a deterrent
- There are existing laws that limit free speech based on epistemic grounds to protect moral goals (laws against Holocaust denial, political campaign ads on TV or publication of polls on election day and alcohol, cigarettes and extremely thin models in commercials)
- Some have suggested that climate change denial should be outlawed (Lavik 2016)

## STRATEGY 5: PROBLEMS

1. How do we decide who get to be the epistemic censors?
  - Fairly easy when it comes to matters of science
  - Less easy with facts about current events
2. Powers to censor can be abused by those in power – a slippery slope to authoritarianism?
  - But, slippery slope arguments are notoriously bad – it is rarely made clear what the exact causal mechanism behind the proposed inevitable slide is (Shauer 1985)
  - We are already (always) situated on the slope and we don't seem to be on an necessary slide (countries with bans on political commercials do not seem to be sliding into dictatorship)

## STRATEGY 5: PROBLEMS

### 3. Threat to perceived legitimacy of democracy?

- Censorship breeds mistrust and automatic resistance – “if they are trying to withhold this information from us, it must be because there are truths that they want to hide from us” (cf. Facebook flagging caused increased attention to the news flagged)
- e.g. much anti-immigration sentiment in Europe is fueled by the perception that those in power do not want the truth to come out

## CONCLUSION

**Legitimate democracy presupposes that certain epistemic standards are upheld**

**Perhaps, even forms of epistemic paternalism should be introduced (strategies 2 to 5)**

**The protection of knowledge in the public square should be regarded as a “legitimate aim” for limiting free speech – due to its “necessity for democracy”**

**When democracy malfunctions, it is the marginalized and the powerless that suffer**

THANKS FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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