Intellectual Vice and Social Networks?

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In "Fake News, Conspiracy, and Intellectual Vice" Marco Meyer (2019) presents findings from an investigation of the role of intellectual vices—intellectual arrogance, intellectual vanity, boredom, and intellectual fragility—in the uptake of conspiracy theories and fake news. Using online survey tools, Meyer administered an instrument designed to test for intellectual virtue/vice. He then asked participants whether they agreed with various conspiracy theories ("President Obama was not really born in the United States") and the degree to which they thought various news items (fake and real) were credible. After controlling for a host of variables, including age, gender, education, religion, and political affiliation, Meyer finds that intellectual virtue/vice correlates significantly with response to both fake news and to conspiracy theories. These findings seem to support a claim that those with these intellectual vices are more susceptible to misleading content, including online misinformation.

The Perspective of Formal Social Epistemology

While Meyer is most interested in the implications here for vice epistemology, including claims from Quassim Cassam (2016) that conspiracy theorists suffer from intellectual vice, I am interested in implications for formal social epistemology. This branch of theorizing uses techniques from social modeling—including network theory, decision theory, and game theory—to study the spread of information and theory, especially in scientific communities. It has drawn heavily on work from social epistemology more broadly (Goldman and O'Connor 2019). More recently, formal social epistemologists have gotten interested in online misinformation, dovetailing with modelers from economics and the other social sciences.

In large part, modeling work in this vein treats individuals as cognitively identical. This may seem strange given how much diversity and variety we see in real world communities. This is, firstly, a modeling assumption that grants some simplicity and tractability. The assumption also plays an important role, though, in the sorts of inferences that can be made from these models. In particular, it is typical to ask questions like: how can the structure of social networks *alone* influence the adoption of consensus (Zollman 2007)? Can groups of ideal reasoners nonetheless form sub-ideal groups (Mayo-Wilson 2011)? How do social biases in isolation, like conformity bias, influence the spread of belief (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019)? In other words, throw out all the details about which people are better or worse at reasoning about evidence. Ask what social effects can do to group belief all by themselves.

This approach makes sense for attempts to gain causal control of complex phenomena. Successful investigation will have to isolate just some causal factors when so much is at play . The focus on only social factors also makes sense given how important these factors are when it comes to the spread of belief. In Meyer's study, he found strong correlation between response to misinformation and both political affiliation and strength of religious belief. These factors, notice, correspond with what sorts of social networks respondents are part of, and what sorts of information they are regularly exposed to via these networks. Likewise, Guess et al. (2019) find conservatives were more likely to share misleading content on

Facebook, presumably at least in part because of the social environment these individuals are in.

Meyer's paper makes clear, though, that individual differences cannot be forgotten if we want a more comprehensive account of factors that are important to the spread of misinformation. There are differences like those he identifies—that we think of as at least semi-stable character traits—that matter. In addition, recent work has found a startling difference in the likelihood that individuals in different age classes will share misleading items on social media (Guess et al. 2019). This suggests that individuals can learn to deal with misinformation, and familiarity/experience with media platforms may improve responses to it.

Intellectual Virtues, Vices, and Networks

Models of the spread of information might usefully look at both sorts of variability. In particular, I am very interested in the question of how and whether intellectual vices interact with the structure of social networks. Do people with intellectual virtues/vices connect to those who share their virtues/vices? (One might imagine this happening on the conspiracy theory subreddit, for instance.) Alternatively, does the sort of social network one is in lead to the development of intellectual virtue/vice? For instance, do we imitate those around us when they engage in intellectual vice, thus becoming more vicious ourselves? Do older people tend to self-segregate in social networks, and can this help explain the misinformation sharing that Guess et al. (2019) report?

These sorts of questions cannot be answered using models alone. But a combination of methods like those Meyer employs, those from formal social epistemology, and those currently in use to study the workings of real social media networks might expand our understanding of how intellectual vice interacts with social structure. Given the complexity of these issues, it is not likely that we can ever fully understand the processes of information spread online. But perhaps we can get a better picture of how the parts of the elephant connect.

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