Objectivity Crisis: Towards a New Epistemology of Media

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If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates;
then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.
– David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Introduction:

The Bounds of Critique in Contemporary Media Studies

I. Definition of Critique

Critique is a double-edged sword. Ever since Kant articulated the bounds of reason in his First Critique,[1] Western philosophy has been consumed by questions concerning the limits of rationality, the prospects of metaphysical speculation, the finitude of logical analysis, and the existence of an extra-subjective world. In the past century and a half, from Nietzsche to Wittgenstein to Derrida, the very idea of theory, the act of theorizing itself has been eroded and degraded time and time again. This has especially been the case in the years following the Second World War, where, every few years, the existing paradigm is challenged by one "turn" or another – the linguistic turn, the pragmatic turn, the cultural turn, the material turn. Each of these turns engage, yet again, with a form of critique, defining the limits of and the terms for academic study.

But critique if self-reflexive. For Kant, the bounds of reason were to be determined only through reason itself. Likewise, the very prospects and goals of critical analysis are themselves subject to that same analysis. *Critique is therefore the enemy of critique.* It is its own subject or domain of study.

In many respects, the point of this paper is to work from this starting thesis. If critique is itself subject to critique, then what are its bounds? And if critique is merely a product of some faculty of reason, how far can it go before it extends into irrationality?

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

II. Critique in the Postmodernism Era

For the contemporary theorist, this talk of reason may appear as some residue of a bygone intellectual era, but one would be mistaken to think that their own objects of study are not informed by the notion of critique as I have just laid out. Even Michel Foucault, one of the foremost critics of modernism and humanism in the 20th century defined his larger aims in relation to the Kantian notion of critique.[2] However, Foucault also notes that his criticism of rationalism does not necessitate an endorsement of irrationalism:

> I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers? How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers? One should remain as close to this question as possible, keeping in mind that it is both central and extremely difficult to resolve. In addition, if it is extremely dangerous to say that Reason is the enemy that should be eliminated, it is just as dangerous to say that any critical questioning of this rationality risks sending us into irrationality.[3]

Here, Foucault clearly articulates the notion of critique as double-edged – in both voiding critique or overstating its limits, one risks dangerous social and political implications.

The question is whether Foucault and his contemporaries headed this warning. Some have called his positions relativist. Francois Lyotard has instead preferred to refer to "postmodern" critiques of rationalism as a dismantling the "grand narratives" of Western intellectual history, narratives which were totalizing and oppressive to begin with.[4] The resulting contextualism and historicism promoted by these philosophies was an intellectual breath of fresh air. But, to historicize the historicists, these views were developed in a different time and place.

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[2] Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage, 1984), 239–56.
[3] Foucault, 249.
[4] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

The post-war era was full of threats from multiple totalitarianisms. First, there was the shock and fallout of National Socialism, then of Stalinism. Collapsing colonial regimes and the student protests of May 1968 further challenged longstanding narratives of European geopolitical dominance and the prospects of leftism in the late 1960s. The grand narratives were indeed unraveling.

But since this time, world history has changed. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s led neoconservatives to proclaim the we had reached the "end of history" where capitalist liberal states would flourish unimpeded by leftist movements.[5] A new grand narrative of neoliberalism and capitalist realism had begun. At the same time, our communication infrastructure was experiencing a rapid shift from mass media to new media, and with it, the "imagined communities"[6] developed around broadcasting would give way to pluralist models of media engagement – a universal public collapsing into a family resemblance of multiple publics.

III. An Epistemological Problem for Media Studies

But if postwar developments of critique were meant to protect us from the instrumental rationality of capitalism and the horrors of authoritarianism, perhaps they failed. Perhaps they overlooked something. The collapse of older forms of media and the general global "acceptance" of neoliberalism and Third Way politics did not shelter us from authoritarianism, but rather served as its stepping stone.

By the middle of the 2010s, new forms of authoritarianism had emerged in the US, UK, India, and Brazil. But these forms of authoritarianism did not operate according to the grand narratives of the past – there was no talk of Social Darwinism, historical materialism, rationality,

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[5] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.
[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2006).

or science. Instead, these regimes operated in fear, faith, and lies. In the US, in particular, bolstered by Donald Trump, conservative media outlets and social media users have engaged in widespread misinformation and disinformation campaigns, leading to disturbing threats against very the future of the country.

In light of these developments, our contemporary socio-political climate meets not only the requirements of a "legitimation crisis" – where institutional trust has all but receded,[7] but also what I call an *objectivity crisis* – an epistemic formation where corrective political measures to restore legitimacy are obscured by false claims, where any and all information is subject to either impossible demands of justification or conversely, to no such demands whatsoever.

The objectivity crisis places media studies, in particular, in a precarious position. In order to fight the growing effects of misinformation, scholars must be able to, first and foremost, define misinformation as that which is false. But what does it mean to even be false? Some of these scholars have openly taken constructionist views towards either truth or towards the news media in years prior which makes it difficult and awkward for them to suddenly assert a mea culpa when the politics doesn't go their way.[8] On the other hand, to stick to constructionism may play into conservative hands. While certain scholars assert that "there is no truth" or that "the news media is biased" others in different domains of study (and perhaps even the same scholars) are pushing technology companies and platforms to regulate certain types of false speech, which begs the question as to what epistemic standard they are using to determine what constitutes false speech in the first place. The problem is that if scholars assert a dissolution of truth to power,

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[7] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis.* (London: Heinemann, 1979).
[8] For discussions of the prominence of constructionism in media studies see Yigal Godler, "Why Anti-Realist Views Persist in Communication Research: A Political Economic Reflection on Relativism's Prominence:," *Critical Sociology*, May 16, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516645935; William Gamson et al., "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 373–93.

there isn't much that they can say about misinformation, other than their own beliefs and opinions towards the content. In this way, we'd be saying "misinformation isn't content which is false, it is content that we, as scholars, *feel* is false." This is unacceptable as a standard, and it plays into conservative cultural politics about how academia is more concerned with power-play than truth-telling. However, on the other hand, if we were to reassert a clear notion of truth into scholarship, we risk conflicting with the decades of critiques given against journalism to our own detriment.

The problem here is potentially a fatal one. It is the problem underlying this whole project. In essence, how can we define the epistemological underpinnings of media studies without 1) compromising or backtracking on our own positions towards the news media, positions which are still very much in play within critical and activist circles as well or 2) giving intellectual credibility to right-wing claims of alternative facts, media bias, and science denialism, claims which sometimes bear semblance to our own from prior decades?

IV. Media Studies or Philosophy?

The solution to our problem is to look elsewhere for the answers. For Kant, the solutions to his philosophical woes were found by performing a dialectic between two opposing camps: the skeptics (the Empiricists) and the dogmatists (the Rationalists).[9] Likewise, to solve this issue, I argue that we need to look to other forms of scholarship which are more prone to assert epistemological and scientific realism, contrary to the likes of Foucault and Lyotard. For this position, I turn to analytic epistemology, performing what may be the first explicit cross-over between media studies and analytic philosophy in North American scholarship.

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[9] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 99.

However, the end goal of this unprecedented cross-over, conversely to that of Kant, will not give way to some grand totalizing solution to all theoretical dilemmas. Instead, I adopt a position first articulated by John Dewey, that traditionally-conceived philosophy is disposed to conservatism – "not necessarily, in proffering solutions, but in clinging to problems."[10] The goal of any informed inquiry then, is not to recycle the solutions to old problems but to identify new emerging problems in contemporary contexts. The problem I address is that of truth in an age of post-truth. And the solutions I can only hope to give will themselves yield new hurdles that must be overcome.

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[10] John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude,* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917), 3.

Chapter 1

The Objectivity Crisis

In February 2020, during a national lockdown issued by the Italian government to fight an outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19), philosopher Giorgio Agamben published a controversial statement downplaying the virus as "alleged' and urging caution against the "frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures" issued by his government.[11] Given Agamben's status as a leading political philosopher, especially on issues of state power, the article immediately prompted several responses. One commentary from the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* buttressed Agamben's statement with a passage from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in which Foucault recounts how plagues in the seventeenth century were used to excuse the formation of disciplinary power; in his words "rulers dreamt of the state of plague."[12] Other scholars were not so impressed with Agamben's remarks. Jean-Luc Nancy regarded the government response to the virus as legitimate in the face of an unknown viral threat.[13] Others expressed concern that the statement only applied to the Italian coronavirus response and did not extend to the US and UK, which privileged their economies over human lives.[14]

Indeed, the most worrying aspect of Agamben's statement is that his reasonings appeared dangerously congruent with an emerging right-populist sect of public discourse in the United

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[11] Giorgio Agamben, "L'invenzione di un'epidemia," Quodlibet, accessed November 7, 2020, https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia.

[12] Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Sergio Benvenuto, "Coronavirus and Philosophers | European Journal of Psychoanalysis," accessed September 29, 2020, http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/.

[13] Michael A. Peters, "Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek," *Postdigital Science and Education*, April 29, 2020, 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00117-4.

[14] Peters.

States, one which urged against the deployment of protective quarantining measures for the sake of protecting bodily autonomy and personal freedom. These responses erupted in lieu of epidemiological concern over public health and were implicated in spreading misinformation concerning the coronavirus' origins and regarding a supposed deep state's plans to undermine the political legitimacy of then-President Donald Trump.[15]

But the push-back against quarantining efforts was just the beginning of a true political catastrophe. By the end of the November 2020 elections, Donald Trump was already touting unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud, and just four days after the election, these claims had convinced 70% of Republicans that the results were illegitimate.[16] Two months later, on January 6th, 2021, the situation went further out of hand, as crowds of pro-Trump protestors stormed the US Capitol during a Congressional session to certify the electoral vote in favor of his opponent.[17]

1. Material Failures: Legitimation Crisis in the United States

For some scholars, these events were not the result of a sudden and radical surge of outrage. Rather, they were the apex of a longstanding economic fallout which had been brewing for decades in the post-Cold War West. Nancy Fraser, in particular, finds that the contemporary iterations of capitalism are contradictory and bound to create tension.[18] In 2015, she noted that the politico-economic contradictions of the West should lead to one of two types of crisis: an

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[15] Matt Motta, Dominik Stecula, and Christina Farhart, "How Right-Leaning Media Coverage of COVID-19 Facilitated the Spread of Misinformation in the Early Stages of the Pandemic in the U.S.," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 2 (June 2020): 333-334, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000396.

[16] Catherine Kim, "Poll: 70 Percent of Republicans Don't Think the Election Was Free and Fair," POLITICO, accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/09/republicans-free-fair-elections-435488.

[17] Jim Rutenberg et al., "77 Days: Trump's Campaign to Subvert the Election," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2021, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/us/trump-election-lie.html.

[18] Nancy Fraser, "Legitimation Crisis? On the Political Contradictions of Financialized Capitalism," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (September 1, 2015): 157–89, https://doi.org/10.1086/683054.

administrative crisis or a *legitimation crisis*.[19] Fraser defines the former term as a situation where:

> …public powers lack the necessary heft to govern effectively. Outgunned by private powers, such as large transnational corporations, they are blocked from making and implementing the policies needed to solve social problems, including problems that, if left unaddressed, would endanger long-term prospects for capital accumulation.[20]

For her, the prime example of an administrative crisis is the US response, or lack thereof, to climate change.

But on the other hand, a legitimation crisis, originally theorized by Habermas,[21] concerns the effectiveness of state power, not in relation to private entities, but vis-à-vis the public sphere. In this manner, Fraser defines a legitimation crisis as a situation where:

> …public opinion turns against a dysfunctional system that fails to deliver. In that case, popular forces mobilize to oppose the capture and hollowing out of public powers. Withdrawing legitimation from existing arrangements, these actors seek to (re)constitute political agencies that can serve the public interest.[22]

In this notion of legitimation crisis, we can see how economic conditions may embolden political outsiders like Donald Trump to make their way into the system. If the system is failing, popular support will reject the powers that be and will look elsewhere for someone or something that can more adequately meet their demands.

Several columnists have jumped onto the idea that the 2020 US Presidential election constitutes a legitimation crisis of this kind. Writing prior to the election, Charles Lane notes that while about 80% of Americans used to hold trust in their government in the mid-1960s, several events, starting with the public outcry against military intervention in Vietnam, have pushed

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[19] Fraser, 165.
[20] Fraser, 165.
[21] Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis.*
[22] Fraser, "Legitimation Crisis?," 165.

these numbers below 20%.[23] He argues that the 2020 election would serve to either rebuild institutional trust or would eradicate the last remnants of this trust entirely. Even more pessimistically, professor Yascha Mounk, writing in September of 2020, notes that some kind of "crisis of legitimacy" would likely be inevitable following the election.[24] At the same time, he remained hopeful, stating that the event would be a "test" for the US's political future.

Unfortunately, the resulting events were even worse than what was theorized. If the United States was being tested, it surely failed. And even though the return of Democratic leadership under Joe Biden may be seen as a return of the political insider, under Fraser's account of capitalism, such a leader is unlikely revive public trust without radical and immediate efforts to instigate social and economic change.

2. Culture Wars: Postmodern Conservatism and Leftist Relativism

However, contrary to the above accounts, a term like 'legitimation crisis' does not fully manage to capture our contemporary ills. In calling our dilemma a legitimation crisis, we appear to say that a large portion of the US public has turned to right-wing populism as a *corrective measure* to reestablish better methods of economic governance. While this may be true in some respects, it does not explain the predominance and importance of misinformation as part of the right's political strategy. What about post-truth, fake news, and alternative facts? If we are to truly read the contemporary right as a kind of economic corrective, why then does the right need to rely on such measures in the first place?

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[23] Charles Lane, "Opinion | America Is Facing a Legitimacy Crisis," *Washington Post*, accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-facing-a-legitimacy-crisis/2019/05/06/2925ecd0-701b-11e9-8be0-ca575670e91c_story.html.
[24] Yascha Mounk, "The Coming Crisis of Legitimacy," The Atlantic, September 14, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/coming-crisis-legitimacy/616340/.

In response to this challenge, we should perhaps consider some of the cultural interpretations of the contemporary political climate. These interpretations rely on understanding how and why the rejection of truth and assertion of affective politics is important to the contemporary right. They are also prone to implicate the Left's cultural politics as a causal factor in populism's rise as well.

This critical interpretation of the Left is the kind I hinted at in the introduction to this chapter, where Foucault and Agamben can be read more as conservative reactionaries rather than as progressive intellectuals. However, this comparison is not unprecedented. In the 1980s, Jürgen Habermas issued a criticism that Foucault's "antimodernism" aligned itself with the "premodernism" of conservative political opinion far more than it manifested a legitimate ground for social critique.[25] Even Fraser, who reads Foucault more sympathetically, has admitted that this interpretation is valid in many respects.[26]

However, it will do no good to assert the comparison between critical scholarship and right-wing rhetoric without making some further distinctions. On one hand, we could argue that the contemporary right is, itself, a kind of postmodern apparatus, disavowing rational politics in favor of the safety of the status-quo or of past idealisms. On the other hand, we could note how past critical scholarship itself tends to either defend positions similar to those of conservative figures or hold positions which are contradictory to progressive aims. In this section, we will briefly outline the potential for each of these options. We will first look at how contemporary conservatism reflects postmodern positions and then, at how postmodern scholarship, in turn, reflects and protects conservative ideologies.

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[25] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981): 12-13, https://doi.org/10.2307/487859.
[26] Nancy Fraser, "Michel Foucault: A 'Young Conservative'?," *Ethics* 96, no. 1 (1985): 165–84.

Postmodern Conservatism

In order to articulate the possibility of a right-wing postmodernism, we first must define

what we mean by 'right-wing' as a political ideology. Here, perhaps the most useful definition

comes British philosopher Michael Oakeshott who in his famous essay "On Being Conservative"

states that to be conservative is:

> …to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.[27]

Of course some may say that a figure like Trump exhibits more tendencies towards fascism or

nativism than the conservatism of Oakeshott. However, as McManus argues, Oakeshott is a

central figure in the contemporary right's turn to postmodernism.[28]

This importance is best seen when we explore Oakeshott's use of 'utopian' and its

political implications. In his earlier essay "Rationalism in Politics," Oakeshott argues that

'utopian' ideals are explicitly tied certain forms of rationalist politics. He states that this

rationalist stand of politics takes the form of a perfectionistic method which never applies to its

own ends: "the Rationalist is not always a perfectionist in general, his mind governed in each

occasion by a comprehensive Utopia; but invariably he is a perfectionist in detail."[29] Here,

Oakeshott mocks attempts to engineer society according to certain preestablished principles; to

him, no matter how "rational" the means are, the utopian end goal is always surely irrational. In

essence, Oakeshott's conservatism is a rejection of all rationalisms in favor of traditionalism, or

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[27] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen & Co, 1962), 169.
[28] Matthew McManus, *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
[29] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays,* 5.

to use Habermas' distinctions, an acceptance of "premodern" forms of society over the modernism of liberalism, Marxism and National Socialism.

In the contemporary literature, McManus has extended this line of thought, arguing that Donald Trump's presidency reflects a "postmodern conservatism."[30] For McManus, the failures of neoliberalism in the wake of the Great Recession, prompted mass disillusionment towards the workings of the state. However, rather than motivate efforts of reform, the failures of neoliberalism issued a "mass turn to the past as a nostalgic pastiche that could be mined to enable people to enter into an ever deeper illusion."[31] For McManus, this pastiche is embodied in Donald Trump whose slogans evoke the Reagan era and post-war economic prosperity at the same time, while ignoring the deep social issues that plagued these periods of history.

If we agree with McManus' account, Trumpism appears more as a kind of misrepresentation or simulation of conservatism rather than a true variant. Trump does not prefer traditionalism in order to avoid utopian theorizing, but rather constructs a false utopia in the past, one which has never in fact existed. He then uses this utopia as a façade to hide the general untenability of his social and economic positions.

For some, this type of Trumpian rhetoric is to be understood not necessarily as an extension of postmodernist critiques but rather through postmodern literature itself. For example, Illing argues that figures like Baudrillard are not skeptical figures as much as they capture our dependencies on false narratives and constructed representations.[32] Hanlon similarly argues that

[30] McManus, *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics*.
[31] McManus, 52.
[32] Sean Illing, "The Post-Truth Prophets," Vox, November 11, 2019, https://www.vox.com/features/2019/11/11/18273141/postmodernism-donald-trump-lyotard-baudrillard.

"the real enemy of truth is not postmodernism but propaganda" and that postmodernism provides

the perfect framework for understanding propaganda as an extension of power.[33]

Relativism in Scholarship

However, on the other hand, there has been a large cultural pushback against the style

and stances of postmodernism. For philosopher Lee McIntyre, postmodernism not only

exemplifies contemporary conservatism, but he argues that postmodern scholarship has played a

causal role in destabilizing the conditions of truth, that it is one of the important cultural

movements which predicated the creation of the so-called "post-truth" era.[34] McIntyre posits

explicit blame on the "Science Wars" of the early 1990s, where scholars in the humanities

engaged with those in the hard sciences over the reality and legitimacy of scientific knowledge.

He further argues that the positions of the scientific constructionists follow the same rhetorical

logic as corporate schemes to downplay the negative health effects of consumer products and

anthropogenic climate change.

Others have agreed that postmodern scholarship may have played a causal role in the

creation of post-truth. For example, one of the most famous US philosophers, Daniel Dennett,

takes a rather vicious line of critique, stating:

> Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. I think
> what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad
> that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts.[35]

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[33] Aaron Hanlon, "Perspective | Postmodernism Didn't Cause Trump. It Explains Him.," *Washington Post*, accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/postmodernism-didnt-cause-trump-it-explains-him/2018/08/30/0939f7c4-9b12-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c_story.html.

[34] Lee C. McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (MIT Press, 2018).

[35] Carole Cadwalladr, "Daniel Dennett: 'I Begrudge Every Hour I Have to Spend Worrying about Politics' | Daniel Dennett | The Guardian," The Guardian, accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-bach-back-dawkins-trump-interview.

Similarly, UK political philosopher Bob Brecher argues that the "truth-free" language of populism was preceded by the equal disdain for truth brought about from postmodern theorizing.[36] He explicitly cites Richard Rorty as one of the major figures who undermined the need for justification for one's beliefs, and thus, the very notion of justice or progress itself.

Even those associated with constructionism and critique in the humanities have acknowledged their potential incitement of post-truth and backed down from their more controversial claims. The political communication scholar Brian McNair explicitly blames himself and his colleagues for the chaos of "fake news," and he calls out his readers directly asking them to own up to their mistakes:

> We scholars and researchers, who have long critiqued the mainstream news media, now find ourselves confronted by a much more vicious assault on the media from current political elites in the United States and elsewhere (often using the language developed by critical media studies from the 1970s onwards).[37]

McNair even goes as far as calling the change in perspective within media scholarship in response to increasing misinformation "ironic,"[38] and he appears to defend the hostile attitudes that many professional journalists have held toward scholars as now justified given the outcomes of scholarly critiques.[39]

The major figures of Science and Technology Studies (STS), an interrelated field of scholarship, have also responded to charges leveled against them. The most important acknowledgement occurred over a decade ago, when Bruno Latour expressed worries that his critiques of scientific institutions and practices were providing rhetorical weaponry for deniers of

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[36] Bob Brecher, "Is the Left Responsible for Post-Truth Politics?," openDemocracy, September 8, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/left-responsible-post-truth-politics/.
[37] Brian McNair, *Fake News : Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism* (Routledge, 2017), 86, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315142036. Although McNair is implicating the political economic critiques more than the postmodern ones.
[38] McNair, 5.
[39] McNair, 86.

global warming.[40] Feminist philosopher Dona Haraway has also expressed concerns regarding

her work on the social construction of science and the larger controversies it created in the

1990s:

> We could have been more careful about listening and engaging more slowly. It was all
> too easy to read us in the way the science warriors did. Then the rightwing took the
> science wars and ran with it, which eventually helped nourish the whole fake-news
> discourse.[41]

However, Haraway not only implicates herself, here, but she makes a subtle point which other

positions miss. She questions to what extent post-truth is the fault of *critical scholarship* versus

the *scientists and right-wingers* who conflated critical scholarship with obscurantism and

nonsense. In essence, Haraway blames not only STS, but the *entire academy* for destabilizing the

legitimacy of scientific discourse.

A Moderate Position Towards Postmodern Scholarship

Haraway's response points to a much-needed moderate position in the cultural debate. In

relation to scientific legitimacy, the entire debacle of the Science Wars and its continuing

divisions in the academy are of no help given the rampant rise of anti-intellectualism in the

United States. In relation to media studies, in particular, while it is hard to establish a direct

causal linkage, McNair is correct that media studies made direct and sometimes hyperbolic

critiques about objectivity and the news media years prior to the rise of Donald Trump. Finally,

all the defensiveness in relation to postmodernism misses the point that these critiques were

meant to be delegitimizing – Baudrillard wasn't critiquing the rhetoric of individual right-wing

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[40] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (January 2004): 225–48, https://doi.org/10.1086/421123.

[41] Moira Weigel, "Feminist Cyborg Scholar Donna Haraway: 'The Disorder of Our Era Isn't Necessary,'" The Guardian, June 20, 2019, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/donna-haraway-interview-cyborg-manifesto-post-truth.

politicians in the early 1990s, he was critiquing the media apparatus of the United States as a whole.[42]

Additionally, many of these arguments (barring McManus) are limited insofar as they obscure the structural, economic, and material elements that have factored into the rise of right-wing populism. They instead tend to focus their analysis on certain pedantic metaphysical and normative arguments. But what about talk of economic decline, the polarization of partisan cable news,[43] the introduction and widespread use of personalized algorithmic filtering,[44] or the financial logic by which Web 2.0 platforms and the news media function?

The point here is that much of cultural debate about postmodernism, post-truth, and objectivity is debate about historical context and blameworthiness. But there is very little use in a cultural war which concerns how intellectual quibbles between professors managed to destroy democracy. Without discussing the material conditions outside of academia, these positions are likely to get us nowhere.

3. Outlining the Objectivity Crisis

However, when we combine the material and cultural interpretations of our contemporary situation, we find that there is something of substance which has been missed. The prior accounts that we have outlined have either argued that 1) the United States is facing a legitimation crisis or that 2) truth and justification have been dismissed from the public sphere. Separately, these points do not provide a full explanatory account of the contemporary political climate. But together these positions provide an adequate picture of the problem.

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[42] See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 2012).
[43] Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
[44] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

Lying at the intersection of a legitimation crisis and a post-truth world is what a call an *objectivity crisis*. In an objectivity crisis, the material conditions of a political regime bring about a legitimation crisis, but the cultural conditions of post-truth ensure that the corrective political measures remain elusive to the larger public. In this way, the contemporary political right exploits the conditions of post-truth because they need to ensure that public dissatisfaction with neoliberalism does not cause a shift towards Leftist ideologies. On the other hand, critical scholarship is implicated in the objectivity crisis, not because they have a causal stake in undoing truth, but because their dismissal of traditional epistemic notions plays into this right-wing political strategy.

As a result of the objectivity crisis, the real issue for media studies is not whether it is blameworthy, but how it should continue forward. Our concern should be the following: media studies and its related disciplines have engaged in a series of critical arguments against major institutions in hopes of holding these institutions normatively accountable for their errors; however, in the past decade, this critical opening has been exploited by the Right, who now cast similar critiques at the same institutions. The "irony" (as McNair called it) is that media studies is now performing a contradictory legitimizing task in addition to its critical analysis. But in terms of this newfound task, the discipline seems to be largely unsuccessful.

The Epistemological Problem

The problem is that the scholarship of Left cannot adequately respond to the objectivity crisis without putting its own past positions in jeopardy, and it is reluctant to do so. As a result, we are left with an odd, ineffective constructionist strategy for dealing with false claims, and we have not acknowledged the issues present within these strategies. A recent media studies textbook sells the point fairly well:

> …if a discourse analyst were looking at a news broadcast, she would not be interested in comparing the news representation with "reality" (indeed she would not believe that there exists some ultimate, unmediated, non-discursive reality), but might rather be concerned with exploring how the broadcast was organized to produce a sense of truth and coherence, to make its version of events persuasive, to generate a sense of "liveness" and authenticity, to accord authority to the host, and so on.[45]

Here, one is told that in order to properly perform a Foucauldian discourse analysis of the news, one should acknowledge that there is no reality beyond the media representation itself,[46] and that the notion of truth is constructed through how well the broadcast's various elements play off one another as well as how well the presenter is able to perform their authenticity.

But should a media scholar really be telling their students that the notion of reality is unimportant when watching a news broadcast? Should they be repeating claims that there is no verifiable thing beyond the television screen? Does such a theory really help expand the possibilities of progressive critique or is this theory an outdated historical product of a different time?

In the era of post-truth, one can easily imagine how such a theory backfires. If there is no reality beyond the broadcast, but rather the "truth" is merely a product of coherent, constructed representations, then what is keeping one from asserting that something different happened from what was shown by the broadcast? Here, there is no place for any constraining features of the world and no place for justification. It is a world of believe and let believe.

Clearly, this quoted passage is rather hyperbolic. There must be something more than just media representations here. In fact, the whole of critical discourse, itself, depends upon attending

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[45] Rosalind Gill, "Discourse," in *The Craft of Criticism: Critical Media Studies in Practice*, ed. Michael Kackman and Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2018), 25.

[46] See Chapter 2 for my argument against this kind of interpretation of poststructuralism (In essence, I argue that a media event is empirically verifiable by someone, while a transcendental signified isn't empirically verifiable by anyone. It is odd that many scholars conflate these two different conceptions, since one is dependent on believing in testimonial knowledge and the other is, if we agree with Derrida, cognitively impossible.)

to the needs of people, places, and events outside of the representations we are shown – that is, as critical scholars, we cannot reduce the injustices faced by others to a play of signs, pixels, and power. We respond to problems because we *believe with adequate justification* that data, evidence, and arguments are representative of a phenomena outside themselves.

But at the same time, there is a benefit to constructionist criticism. In fact, constructionism can sometimes explain conditions of journalistic and scientific practice better than realist interpretations. These views are especially important in downplaying *over-idealistic* accounts of knowledge (which in themselves, can promote a type skepticism through the discrepancy of theory and practice). As *The New York Times* states in its defense of scientific constructionism, figures like Bruno Latour demonstrated that "the traditional image of facts was never sustainable to begin with."[47] Indeed, if anything, the shifting views of scientific experts on social practices during the coronavirus pandemic, especially mask use,[48] demonstrates that some elements of constructionism are necessary components to provide accurate descriptions of how scientific facts change with respect to the collection, amalgamation, and interpretation of new data. Likewise, the news media are also only responsive to present data and evidence. They are not fortunetellers or mind readers. Their shifting presentation in relation to changes in scientific data or breaking news coverage may demonstrate their lack of objectivity, but it also demonstrates their commitment to certain practices of reasoning from known sources rather than engaging in speculation.

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[47] Ava Kofman, "Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science (Published 2018)," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2018, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html.
[48] Colin Dwyer, "CDC Now Recommends Americans Consider Wearing Cloth Face Coverings In Public," NPR, accessed November 9, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826219824/president-trump-says-cdc-now-recommends-americans-wear-cloth-masks-in-public.

Overall, the central problem for media studies in relation to the objectivity crisis is how it can adequately respond. Current scholarship seems theoretically unprepared to cast aside tired and rhetorically grand notions of constructionism, and also, a lapse towards realism may be detrimental both in explanatory and critical terms. Ultimately, any new theory needs to address concerns of objectivity without falling into the pitfalls of reactionary modernism or postmodernism. These routes, which we must explicitly avoid, are outlined below.

Modernist Reactionism

The reactionary modernist response to the objectivity crisis is that of Dennett, McIntyre, and Oakeshott's Rationalist. This type of response involves voiding the larger constructionist themes of media studies in favor of a more realist, logical, and empirically grounded approach. At the same time, such a response would be missing the critical element of media studies, and it would most likely be rejected from fellow scholars on the grounds that it attempts to undo over fifty years of scholarship.

The problem with modernist reactionism is that it does not take constructionism and postmodernism to have any serious or warranted epistemological results. This is an unfortunate result of the Science Wars and the kinds of stylistic ridicule that French theorists were subject to in the 1990s.[49] But ultimately, postmodern scholarship does pose an interesting challenge towards modernist and Enlightenment principles. As figures like Dewey and Rorty suggest,[50] Enlightenment philosophy was concerned with the same issues as premodern philosophy, it attempted to salvage notions of the absolute and immaterial and reflect them in the laws of Nature and Reason.

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[49] See Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador USA, 1998).

[50] The comparison between Platonism and Cartesian representationalism figures strongly in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

Postmodernism's greatest triumph was its focus on problematization over grand theorizing. It accepted uncertainty, rejected the absolute subject, and dismissed the goals of representationalism in favor of world-creation. Such ideas form the basis of contemporary scholarship on race, gender, and sexuality, and it would be naïve and possibly malicious to hastily reject these critical positions without any attempt to accommodate them.

Postmodernist Reactionism

On the other hand, the postmodern scholar has their own type of reactionist response to the objectivity crisis. This response amounts to doing nothing; it ignores the rhetorical turn of conservatism from modernist rationalism to postmodernist irrationalism and the scholarly role in dismissing truth and objectivity as tenable objects of study. It rejects the name-calling by scientists and journalists as anti-intellectual without engaging in self-critique as to how its own epistemological grounding may be self-defeating. It accepts critique for any object of study except itself and rejects grand narratives except for its own meta-narrative – the one which concerns how the grand narratives have unraveled into many.

Finally, and perhaps worst of all, is that Habermas' comparison of the antimodern to the premodern still looms large.[51] If the postmodern scholar rejects rationalist politics, then what really separates their position from conservatism? If we are to use the rejection of rationalism for our own self-creative ends, as post-humanist domains of scholarship suggest, then postmodern scholars must assert a creative and individualistic human nature rather than a selfish, conformist one. But they reject such universal theorizing. Essentially, they have undone the constraints of the world, opened the flood gates, without much direction, and the results were unexpected. If

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[51] Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity."

we dissolve the centrality of justified belief as it exists in rationalism in favor of faith, what will people put their faith in?

If anything, this is where the postmodern scholar fails. In a world without creative bounds, we have rejected the creation of the self and the plurality of identities, in favor of a new conservative creative project. In a world that has been reduced to signs, that itself has become an aesthetic project for our ontological creativity, we had forgotten Benjamin's warning against aestheticization of life as it is tied to fascism.[52]

4. Conclusion: The Path Forward

Ultimately, the discussions of this chapter demonstrate the untenability of current strands of media scholarship. Scholarship based in postmodern theory is unlikely to be able to respond to authoritarian movements nor does its overall epistemology lend itself to a discussion of misinformation. But at the same time we are unable to backtrack to an equally untenable modernism, which would thrust us back into a representational theory of the world and put our normative critiques in jeopardy.

In avoiding both modernist and postmodernist reactionism, I propose a new epistemological program for media studies which is both *critical and veridical*. In its critical dimension, it is able to keep the longstanding normative positions of media studies and the ontological constructionism on which these positions rely. Conversely, the veridical dimension provides a much-needed justificatory criteria for our beliefs, taking its points from epistemological critiques of postmodernism without rejecting the major ontological and historical shifts that postmodern scholarship has implemented.

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[52] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 1–26.

The result of this two-fold program is a more robust critical media studies, one that will be able to more adequately respond to the developing objectivity crisis which undermines both our institutions and the very ends of our scholarship. In developing this program, the brunt of this project will outline some suggestions as to how an epistemological intervention can be accommodated into existing scholarship. The next chapter will outline the major themes of postmodernism and how notions of truth, honesty, and rationality can be integrated into critical postmodern scholarship without much worry. Chapter 3 will then outline the veridical dimension of our program, using social epistemology as a guide for a new justificatory framework that does service to the aims and agendas of media studies. Finally, chapter 4 will provide some ideas as to how our new epistemology can be used to re-legitimize aspects of our social institutions and how it can downplay the overtly corruptive belief systems common to populist agitators.

Chapter 2

An Outline of Postmodern Epistemology

If we are to avoid the pitfalls of the various kinds of reactionism which emerge from the question of objectivity, our first goal must be to assess the merits of postmodernist epistemological enterprises, that is, we need to understand what types of social practices are valued and devalued in choosing one epistemological position over another. This task is quite difficult on account of the cultural baggage implicit in questions of objectivity and on account of that when referring to "postmodern," "constructionist," "constructivist," or "critical" epistemologies, we may be referring to any number of personal epistemological projects which have been developed within the humanities and the social sciences over the course of the past fifty years.

Nonetheless, there are some common themes running between the critical epistemological positions which have emerged since the Second World War. The goal of this chapter is therefore a reductive kind of intellectual history. I will first outline some of the central epistemological threads underlying common intellectual traditions in media studies. Our focus here will primarily be on those traditions which have received the greatest critical focus in the overarching culture wars surrounding objectivity – poststructuralism and science studies.[53]

After this outline, I will then discuss the various types of constraints that a critical epistemology, like those discussed, would need in order to necessitate commonsense norms

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[53] As a scholar with a significant background in the analytic tradition, I must note that my reasoning here is less to replicate the exact language and terms of these authors but to do justice to their epistemological positions in the best way I can. Such a style will ultimately lend itself to the literature and concepts which I am more familiar with rather than the original concepts of the authors. In this manner, I am more apt to use Donald Davidson's "scheme/content" over Derrida's "signifier/signified" or Kuhn's "paradigm" over Foucault's "episteme." But despite these linguistic differences and the theoretical nuances which may be lost in such a shift, I think the broader themes articulated still remain intact.

concerning practical reasoning. This line of argumentation is in response to claims that postmodern epistemologies are self-refuting or that they necessitate post-truth conditions.

I argue that these claims are largely overstated. While there are indeed some issues in how postmodern epistemologies handle the criterion for judging knowledge claims and how they have overdeveloped certain key points (which we have discussed in the prior chapter), there is nothing at a deep metaphysical, ontological, or epistemological level that necessitates the connection between a postmodern rejection of an ultimate or representational ontology and post-truth. Ultimately, if the arguments of this chapter are successful, we can state two important points. First, the theory underlying postmodern intellectual projects does not interfere with the contemporary goals of a 'legitimizing' media studies, that is, it is possible to discuss the role of government regulation or expert opinion in relation to questions concerning journalistic integrity, misinformation, and online harassment. Second, the degree to which postmodernism is actually critical of rationalist politics may be overstated, both by its adherents and its detractors. Through both of these points, I demonstrate that the critical and veridical dimensions of epistemology are not separable, but dependent upon one another.

1. Central Themes of Postmodern Epistemologies

There is a great difficulty in taking an already interdisciplinary field such as media studies and undoing its constituent theoretical parts. Nonetheless, different elements of a broader "postmodern" project emerge at different points in time and can roughly be charted against one another. I hold that there are roughly three main points that emerge in a historical analysis of postmodern post-war philosophy. The first, initiated by Thomas Kuhn in the United States and later, separately invoked by Foucault, concerns the dependence of knowledge claims on a

localized and historicized social foundation. The second, elaborated on by Donald Davidson, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Jean Baudrillard concerns the identification and dissolution of a conceptual scheme and an extra-conceptual objective reality which the scheme supposedly maps. Finally, the third theme, developed by various scholars in several traditions, concerns the reconsideration of linguistic statements as expressive rather than descriptive in capacity.

Knowledge Accumulation or Theory Choice?

Perhaps the first "grand narrative" to be philosophically unhinged in the latter decades of the 20th century, was the notion of linear scientific progress, or more broadly the notion of knowledge accumulation. To understand this idea, we can imagine a grand library of knowledge where every fact ever discovered is written down. First, these facts are written onto pages, line by line, within a bound book. Eventually, as the number of facts continues to grow, the single book becomes full. And in this case, it is placed onto a shelf, a new book is started, and the process repeats ad infinitum. In this way, the library of knowledge continues to grow progressively – new facts are added to the books and new books are added to the shelves.

But does knowledge really accumulate in such a manner? It seems like a new fact may contradict an old one in such a way that the processes underlying our library of knowledge cannot be as simple as just described. We are not merely adding new facts to books and new books to the shelves. But sometimes, new facts refute old facts in such a manner, that the old facts must be located and scratched out of existence. In other cases, whole books may even need to be thrown out.

But what if these processes are even more radical? What if there is a fact or a page that is so novel that whole shelves of the library must be tossed aside? And what if the shelves built up upon this new fact are not safe either? What if decades, centuries from now, these shelves too

will inevitably be replaced? Looking at this process unfold, we may even ask ourselves what we are really adding to the library. Are these statements written in the bound pages even facts after all?

In his 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn challenges scientific progress in a similar manner to the way we have just challenged the workings of our library of knowledge. In this account, Kuhn develops a new notion of science, one where the accumulation model of "normal science" is subject to and developed within the theoretical boundaries of a scientific paradigm.[54] For Kuhn the process of 'normal science' refers to "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice."[55] The achievements on which normal science is based are, according to Kuhn, sufficient enough to curb countering theoretical positions and they are vague enough to require further additions and puzzle-solving tasks to be worked out by others.[56] In Kuhn's terms, normal science rests within a period of time where research is secured by prior achievements, a period he refers to as a "paradigm."

But new achievements can threaten to displace the work secured by past achievements, they can threaten to create conditions of normal science centered within a new paradigm. Historically, we can point to the Copernican Revolution and its displacement of Ptolemian astronomy or Newtonian physics and its displacement of Aristotelianism as examples of

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[54] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[55] Kuhn, 10.
[56] Kuhn, 10.

paradigm shifts.[57] These examples seem obvious to the historian of science, but the idea of the paradigm shift itself threatens the expected or commonsense positions of scientific knowledge.

According to the Kuhnian model, scientific knowledge is dependent upon the overarching theories provided by novel scientific achievements – the facts that emerge from research can only be understood as such because they have been developed within a certain paradigm rather than another. This view has radical consequences since it rejects the notion of a theory-independent worldview. In essence, Kuhn's notion of the paradigm provided the foreground for future social constructionist views of science. As he explains, a nonsensical statement in one theoretical paradigm may be an obvious fact in another.

At one point, he even amusingly outlines this position using the example of opium.[58] According to the post-Newtonian corpuscular view of science, the world consisted of particles and natural laws, and could thus only be explained through size, shape, and motion. As such, the view of opium as having certain "soporific" qualities was derided as spooky, Aristotelian essence-talk. Until a more complex chemistry could emerge, the standard view of science spoke of opium's effects as being caused from its soothingly smooth-shaped particles.[59]

However, the notion of the paradigm could seemingly be extended to cases outside of the hard sciences. In his work, Michel Foucault captures a more radical constructionist spirit by outlining how certain theoretical or commonsense beliefs underlie knowledge and power production overall. Foucault calls the collection of these practices the episteme, which he defines formally as "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that

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[57] Kuhn, 10.
[58] Kuhn, 105.
[59] Kuhn, 105.

give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems."[60] We can see here that science, as a set of institutional practices, is not the general object of study for Foucault. Moreover, Foucault's object of study is the larger period of knowledge practices which underlie all formal systems.

For Foucault, the idea of the episteme allows one to situate ideas as historicized or constructed according to the underlying practices and beliefs of a given time and place. Here, Foucault's concerns are not with atoms or chemistry (at least not necessarily), but rather with the more controversial yet "taken for granted" aspects of humanity – mental illness, punishment, sickness, sexuality, etc.[61] In brief summary, Foucault's work largely reflects the notion that "commonsense" or "natural" categories of human experience are socially determined more than they are products of some necessary and universal ontology. The result is that there is no natural or biological order which is imposed upon us from the outside – social categories can be made and remade to our liking, as formal plays of power and discourse.

While there is much that one could say concerning the projects of these two thinkers, overall, Kuhn and Foucault share a similar epistemological theme, though Foucault is certainly the more politically and theoretically radical of the two. The goal of these scholars was to rework the idea of knowledge production in a manner that would shed light on historical and scientific progress. Ultimately, through their efforts, the accumulation model was eroded in favor of models which articulate how scientific and commonsense facts and ontologies are dependent upon underlying socio-cultural foundations. This social and historicist shift in epistemology forms the first theme in the development of postmodern ideas.

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[60] Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 191.
[61] See especially Michel Foucault, "Preface to the History of Sexuality Volume II," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. William Smock (New York: Vintage, 1984).

Rejecting the Scheme-Content Division

A second stage of postmodern epistemology can be viewed as extending from the first

theme by providing an underlying linguistic rationale for historicist models of knowledge

production. Thomas Kuhn's work in particular was heavily dependent upon descriptivist theories

of language which emerged with the beginnings of analytic philosophy with Frege and Russell.[62]

Under a descriptivist theory of names, a name is merely a placeholder to be exchanged for

relevant descriptions.[63] So 'Richard III' is a name corresponding to 'the last king from the

Plantagenet Dynasty' or 'the successor to Edward V'. But such a theory was becoming

increasingly problematized in the post-war era.

By the early 1950s, WVO Quine presented a position of meaning holism, which made the

meaning of any word dependent upon the meaning of others in the same language.[64] Taking

Russell's descriptivism as his starting point, Quine argued that if singular terms are really

placeholders for further descriptions, then the singular terms of the resulting descriptions would

have to be, themselves, be further defined. The result is that the whole language becomes

implicated within each case of definition. He states:

> Russell's concept of definition in use was, as remarked, an advance over the impossible
> term-by-term empiricism of Locke and Hume. The statement, rather than the term, came
> with Russell to be recognized as the unit accountable to an empiricist critique. But what I
> am now urging is that even in taking the statement as unit we have drawn our grid too
> finely. The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science.[65]

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[62] Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, "Kuhn on Essentialism and the Causal Theory of Reference," *Philosophy of Science* 77, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 544–64, https://doi.org/10.1086/656008.

[63] For the original statement of the view, see Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14, no. 56 (1905): 479–93.

[64] Henry Jackman, "Meaning Holism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/meaning-holism/; W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *The Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 20–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/2181906.

[65] W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *The Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 39, https://doi.org/10.2307/2181906.

Here, Quine notes that, while Russell is able to transform singular terms into corresponding statements and to define these statements according to the context of use – in essence, to engage in a shift from 'Richard III' to 'the last king from the Plantagenet Dynasty,'[66] he does not take into account the fullest picture of language. He is presupposing that we already have a complete understanding of the language here. But just as we can expand upon 'Richard III' to 'the last king from the Plantagenet Dynasty' it seems like we can also expand upon the latter description with even more descriptions. We can expand 'last' and 'king' and 'dynasty' into their respective definitions and so on until the entire language is understood as a matter of relations.

The issue here is that Quine, resultingly, becomes a so-called "reference skeptic."[67] It doesn't seem like reference to an extra-linguistic object plays a part in the meaning of singular terms at all. Rather, the meaning of a word is displaced onto other words within a language.

Donald Davidson furthered Quine's skepticism towards reference by questioning the longstanding belief in a scheme-content division in analytic philosophy.[68] While prior views had discussed how we use conceptual schemes to map onto or to organize extra-conceptual content, once reference is done away with, the distinction between scheme and content becomes difficult to maintain. While this initially seems like a form of skepticism, Davidson treats this dissolution as a way to refute skepticism; the objects of analysis in linguistic philosophy, our words, are now, themselves the focus of philosophy rather than some objects just out of our reach. He explains:

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[66] The use element comes into play because 'Richard III' could also be 'Brian's dog' if Brian had a dog with that name. Thus, there need to be a specification as to which description is correct for the corresponding name being used at a specific time.

[67] Eliot Michaelson and Marga Reimer, "Reference," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/reference/.

[68] Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973): 5–20, https://doi.org/10.2307/3129898.

In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth – quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.[69]

However, Davidson's optimistic view was not shared by others in philosophy. Another philosopher working outside the analytic tradition, Jacques Derrida, made similar points to great controversy. In fact, Derrida can be said to have formulated another presentation of the scheme-content dissolution in his book, *Of Grammatology*, a few years prior to Davidson's articulation. With his famous phrase "there is nothing outside of the text,"[70] Derrida inaugurated a series of new deconstructive readings concerning meaning and textual analysis. But when one reads the passages prior to this formulation, one finds that Derrida's main argument is not necessarily concerned with the mere analysis of textual artifacts; rather it is a metaphysical argument developed against the possibility of extra-linguistic referents. He states:

… reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general.[71]

Here, it is clear, that Derrida's notion of 'the text' refers to a type of linguistic scheme through which we experience reality, rather than an individual artifact of analysis. And by clarifying this position, we can see that he is providing a similar type of argument as Quine and Davidson.[72]

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[69] Davidson, 20.
[70] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
[71] Derrida, 158.
[72] A comparison is even made between the two philosophers and Derrida in Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh, *The Philosophy of Derrida*, Continental European Philosophy (Montreal, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015079328806.

For Derrida, however, the issue is not with a scheme-content division as formulated in scientific discussions, but with the duality of the sign as presented in the works of Saussure. He notes that Saussure speaks of reality as consisting of signs which themselves consist of a *signifier* – or word – and a *signified* – the object to which the word refers.[73] However, if Saussure's view is the case, then we cannot really speak of anything outside of language because we would then break the basic formulation of the sign itself – we would be giving a "transcendental signified" which exists without a corresponding signifier. In this manner, Derrida thinks that the division between signified and signifier is useless – we would never be able to understand a signified absent a signifier. He thus states:

> … from the moment that one questions the possibility of such a transcendental signified, and that one recognizes that every signified is also in the position of a signifier, the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematical at its root.[74]

As a result of this formulation, language becomes not just a tool for describing the world, but is essentially the world itself.

Here, Derrida articulates, on the European continent, the same types of arguments provided by his American contemporaries. However, while Derrida had a considerable influence on literary theory and surrounding traditions, his arguments are perhaps best expressed in media studies through the works of Jean Baudrillard, who extends aspects of the scheme/content division to various types of semiotic artifacts, including the American news media.

Baudrillard's major contribution to the field is his concept of hyperreality, a state in which the real world is "sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated

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[73] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass and Henri Ronse (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[74] Derrida, 20.

generation of differences."[75] In simplified terms, hyperreality is a kind of representation which does not refer back to anything in reality but rather defers to other representations for support and meaning; it is a pessimistic interpretation of reference skepticism that views poststructuralist theory as describing a "simulacrum" which can be constructed and maintained by systems of power, enabling these systems to distort and remove undesirable aspects of the world.

By the early 1990s, Baudrillard's pessimism and his more critical theoretical stance towards constructionism garnered support outside of literary contexts, especially in media theory. After the Persian Gulf War, North American media theorists found Baudrillard's theoretical work to be particularly constructive for their arguments against news media and corporatist media power.[76] This comes from the fact that the later Baudrillard increasingly targeted his theory to contemporary discussions of media power and political manipulation, even writing a series of essays on the Gulf War itself.[77] For Gamson et al., these discussions help to situate the Gulf War as a spectacle of the news media, where journalists would frame action shots of soldiers or snap footage of themselves in gas masks – for the postmodernist theorists, these coordinated events were used to frame the US as subject to gas attacks or direct combat in contrast to their role as aggressors.[78]

However, while theorists have found use for Baudrillard there are some issues in his apocalyptic style and more importantly, his overall extension of the scheme/content dissolution to media artifacts. For one, we should question whether Baudrillard's views are epistemological in intent or whether they are more akin to semiotic extensions of materialist economic concepts

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[75] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2-3.
[76] Gamson et al., "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality."
[77] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.
[78] Gamson et al., "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality," 386.

like alienation and commodity fetishism. For example, in his essay "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard describes Disneyland as the prime example of hyperreality. But this is hardly a case of misinformation or epistemological confusion.[79] It is more akin to a critique on the taken-for-granted presentation of the American Dream than it is a discussion of simulated reality in any epistemological sense.

Additionally, we should question whether metaphysical arguments against the scheme/content division can actually be extended to critiques of mediated knowledge. For example, according to postmodern epistemologies, I cannot go outside of my language or my experience as a subject to observe the world in an objective way. But this does not equate in the same manner for mediated or testimonial forms of knowledge. For example, it may be theoretically impossible to prove a metaphysical question – like whether numbers are abstract objects or not – from empirical observation alone. But it is perfectly reasonable to assume empirical observation in cases of media events – that is, it is theoretically possible to go to the site of a media event and experience it for oneself. And, moreover, the presence of the media event in the first place situates the event as one that can and has undergone empirical observation by other parties, also in contrast to metaphysical discussions where no party is presumed to have empirical awareness of the answers.[80]

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, if hyperreality is to be understood as a formally epistemological concept it would be entirely self-refuting. The very act of calling something hyperreal would indicate that it is indeed an illusory or simulated representation, and this would prove that it wasn't in fact hyperreal at all. For example, we cannot say that reality and simulation were indistinguishable in the case of the Gulf War, because when Baudrillard

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[79] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 12.
[80] This was also the issue with the hyperbolic passage from Chapter 1.

proclaimed that "the Gulf War did not take place," he acknowledged that there was an avenue for

separating the real from the fake.

The great issue with Baudrillard's theoretical contributions is therefore his lack of clarity

and the questionable extension of metaphysical arguments to media epistemology. While the

latter half of this chapter will defend elements of the scheme-content dissolution, I wish to

distance myself from this brand of media skepticism. The arguments I develop in the remainder

of this project will certainly be compatible with the deeper epistemological moves made by

Davidson and Derrida, but they will not be necessarily compatible with Baudrillard's critiques,

which I think are too underdeveloped and potentially detrimental to our overall goal in

developing an epistemology of media which is both critical and veridical.

Anti-Representationalism and Global Expressivism

Influenced by Kuhn, Quine, and Davidson in the United States and by Foucault and

Derrida in France, in 1979, Richard Rorty brought all of these theorists together to articulate

what may be the most complex formulation of postmodern philosophy in his book *The*

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.[81] For Rorty, the previously discussed philosophers usher in

arguments that allow for a new meta-philosophical perspective. This perspective is represented

by the major theorists in the three main traditions of 20th century philosophy: Wittgenstein,

Heidegger, and Dewey.[82] For Rorty these three theorists all rejected the central questions of

philosophy and questioned the role of philosophy itself:

> Each tried, in his early years, to find a new way of making philosophy "foundational" – a
> new way of formulating an ultimate context for thought. Wittgenstein tried to construct a
> new theory of representation which would have nothing to do with mentalism, Heidegger
> to construct a new set of philosophical categories which would have nothing to do with
> science, epistemology, or the Cartesian quest for certainty, and Dewey to construct a
> naturalized version of Hegel's vision of history. Each of the three came to see his earlier

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[81] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.
[82] Rorty, 5.

effort as self-deceptive, as an attempt to retain a certain conception of philosophy after the notions needed to flesh out that conception (the seventeenth-century notions of knowledge and mind) had been discarded. Each of the three, in his later work, broke free of the Kantian conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent his time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed. Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program.[83]

Rorty's own position, then is to present and defend his own anti-foundationalist, therapeutic vision of philosophy.

In doing this, Rorty praises Davidson for rejecting truth based on correspondence to an extra-linguistic reality and for providing "a semantics which does not depend upon mirror-imagery, but which, on the contrary, makes it as difficult as possible to raise philosophically interesting questions about meaning and reference."[84] Ultimately, Rorty extends this view and argues that Davidson provides an avenue to rescue philosophy from its representational underpinnings, to which no progress can be made. Instead, Rorty thinks that epistemology devolves into hermeneutics.[85] The true goal of philosophy is the goal of speaking, listening, and interpreting one another, not in deciphering the underpinnings of reality.

For Rorty, the ultimate meta-philosophical perspective is, what has come to be called, anti-representationalism, a view which rejects philosophy's orientation towards representational questions which ask what underlying reality is or isn't. Instead, philosophy should be engaged in conceptual clarification within and between disciplines – as a tool to further conversation, not as Rorty puts it, to encourage totalizing "commensuration."[86]

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[83] Rorty, 5-6.
[84] Rorty, 299.
[85] Rorty, 315.
[86] Rorty, 315.

The notion of anti-representationalism has been given much discussion in certain parts of anglophone philosophy in recent years. For some, such as the Cambridge philosopher of science, Huw Price, anti-representationalism entails a kind of global expressivism where sentences are understood solely through their expressivist features and where they lack any descriptive capacity.[87] Price explains that typically we revert to expressivism when we think of moral claims; to say 'such-and-such is bad' is not thought among some scholars to attribute the quality 'badness' to a thing – it is merely a personal expression or projection of sorts. Price then asks, given the arguments for an anti-foundationalist, anti-representationalist view of the world, what are we attributing or explaining at all in our statements other than our own projections of world?[88]

In essence, for communication scholars who are not predisposed to the current anglophone metaethical frameworks that Price is working from, Price may be thought to be problematizing a distinction in speech act theory concerning what J.L. Austin calls statements/constative utterances and performative utterances.[89] For Austin, statements are those which can be designated 'true/false' while performative utterances are generally designated 'happy/sad.'[90] However, Austin himself notes that he has considerable difficulty in forging a distinction between them.[91]

Take the phrase 'It is 30 degrees outside' and the phrase 'I am cold.' According to Austin, the first would be a statement and the latter a performative utterance. But how does this distinction hold? Can it not be true or false that I am cold when I say 'I am cold'? Can we not

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[87] Huw Price, *Naturalism Without Mirrors* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.
[88] Price, 11.
[89] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmon (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine, 2018).
[90] Austin, 54.
[91] Austin, 52.

imagine the first phrase as 'I will be cold outside according to this temperature!'? If so, would it still be a descriptive sentence or would it be performative in nature?

Previous figures associated with postmodernism, Judith Butler in particular, have broken down the barrier between statements and performative utterances. For Butler, the notion of gender is not explanatory or descriptive in nature as traditionally thought, but it is instead a matter of our expressions and overall embodiment.[92] In this case, utterances which traditionally would have been interpreted as statements should be interpreted as performative utterances.

Is Butler a global expressivist? It is hard to say given the newness of the term. Price, however, is a self-anointed global expressivist. He is not merely concerned with questions of gender. Rather, he wants to change the notion of philosophy entirely by redefining *all utterances* as performative, while also allowing these utterances to be described using the 'true/false' dichotomy.[93]

The overarching arguments Price presents are too much to discuss in a project of this size; however, Price's point of view provides what may be one of the most radical epistemological positions ever defended. The question now is whether Price's redetermination of philosophy along expressivist lines can hold, and if not, how far up our postmodern timeline can we go before we reach irredeemable issues?

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[92] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[93] Price, *Naturalism Without Mirrors,* 11.

2. Three Constraints on Postmodern Epistemologies

With a brief history of postmodern epistemology developed, it is important that we now consider the practical effects of these epistemologies in relation to real world scenarios. While these views seem acceptable in their own right at a theoretical level, decades of culture wars have questioned their applicability and long-term use value.

Ultimately, I think that postmodern ontology and the overall projects of anti-representationalism and global expressivism are defensible but that Rorty's reduction of epistemology to hermeneutics is not. In this section, I wish to rework the above theories in response to some objections and in the next section, I respond specifically to Rorty's views. For the remainder of this section, I propose a series of constraints or counters which postmodern epistemologies must meet in order to pass the tests proposed by opponents. These constraints are: 1) social constraint – the notion that actors must be able to hold each other accountable for correct and incorrect uses of language, 2) causal constraint – the notion that there exists a causal influence external to language use, and 3) rational constraint – the notion that there is some type of content or substance which exists besides just language.

In responding to these constraints, ultimately, it appears that postmodern epistemologies can easily respond to the first and second constraints, and can, with some difficulty, meet the requirements of the third.

Social Constraint

The first and most practical constraint we must place upon postmodern epistemologies is the notion of a constraint between social actors which prevents them from lying. In a classical, respresentational epistemology, such a constraint is generated by first looking at a state of affairs in the world and then determining whether statements conform or do not conform to this state of

affairs. But constructionist positions have some difficulty in articulating how this process can occur. When I say 'there is a chair here,' the object in question – 'chair' – may or may not actually exist as an extra-linguistic category. How then do we use the world as a comparative state of affairs with which to test our speech practices?

The solution lies in the various different language-games of the word 'truth' itself. Some contexts can be specifically read as testing speech acts against ontological or metaphysical states of affairs. Here, the word 'truth' is used to denote absolute or necessary conditions of the world. In this use of 'truth,' when one asks 'is there a chair here?' one is asking if there is indeed an extra-linguistic category that corresponds to the word 'chair.' The metaphysician may respond 'yes, there are objects called chairs.' or 'No, there are no chairs. There are only atoms and the natural laws which atoms follow' or various other potential positions.

But there is a second reading of 'truth,' one which looks at speech acts in accordance to the intent of the speaker in question. This is the sense in which we talk of people as being 'honest' or 'trustworthy.' Here, we rely on the notion that someone can be truthful, but also that in being truthful, they may not be giving us "the Truth" in a metaphysical sense.

In this second reading, when one asks 'is there a chair here?' one is doing something entirely different. Here, one is already assuming an ontology where chairs exist as a precondition to their question. The goal then, is not to ask of others the correctness of a certain ontology versus another, but to ask others, presumably those who already know of the meaning of 'chair,' whether any objects that conform to this meaning are present.

In this second-case, the issue comes down to the usage or pragmatics of language. One is asking a question with the presumption that others understand the correct meaning of the words and respond in the correct manner. Crucially, the pragmatic approach here is not dependent upon

an ontologically real structure in order to work, that is, one can separate or reject the metaphysical usage of truth entirely and still keep a socio-pragmatic notion of truth grounded in whether others follow correct or incorrect discursive practices.

The earliest and clearest account of this separation between the two usages of truth is in Friedrich Nietzsche's 1873 essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," which itself can be read as an early precursor to poststructuralism. In the essay, Nietzsche clearly and decisively rejects the notion of truth as a fixed, absolute, metaphysical category.[94] Stating that truth is:

> A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.[95]

However, while we could easily focus on the polemical bits of this passage, the idea that truth is nothing but "metaphors" (which unfortunately is the famous part of this quote), the real importance lies in the notion that these metaphors become binding from continued usage within a community.

Nietzsche describes the binding, normative elements of our discursive practices earlier in the essay, where he notes that the liar is to be understood as someone who intentionally misuses language. He states:

> The liar is a person who uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real. He says, for example, "I am rich," when the proper designation for his condition would be "poor." He misuses fixed conventions by means of arbitrary substitutions or even reversals of names. If he does this in a selfish and moreover harmful manner, society will cease to trust him and will thereby exclude him.[96]

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[94] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Duncan Large, Blackwell Readers (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 114–23.
[95] Nietzsche, 117.
[96] Nietzsche, 115.

The important part of this passage is the idea that lies amount to *misuses* of linguistic convention rather than *misrepresentations of reality*. For Nietzsche, as a nominalist, there is no real or ideal forms of 'rich' and 'poor' which exist in nature prior to our designations. Instead, the order of things is reversed. Rather than there being distinct categories which exist in nature and are *described* by pieces of language, these categories first arise from a kind of social contract among speakers. The act of lying, of misusing language, is therefore akin to breaking a linguistic contract between speakers.

Let's take an example of a word not in the ordinary English language to explain this phenomenon. Imagine I point to a chair and say with a loud voice "gavagai!"[97] Does this have any meaning to you? Am I lying here?

The fact of the matter is that there simply isn't anything in nature which is intrinsically gavagai. There first needs to be a binding practice of using the word before one can hold me responsible for correct or incorrect uses. But now, if I explain to you that gavagai is a word which means rabbit, then, because we have elaborated what the correct meaning is, you can now hold me responsible for my correct utterances. Now, if I point to a chair and call it gavagai, I am either confused or lying, depending upon the intention of my utterance.

What we should get out of this distinction is that the fundamental metaphysical projects of postmodernism are not in conflict which the practices of holding individuals responsible for their misuses of linguistic convention, that is, we can call people liars even under the assumption that the categories of language are fundamentally unreal or expressivist in nature. The first issue in conflating postmodernism and post-truth is, therefore, the conflation of these two readings of 'truth.' One may very well take the postmodern position of rejecting the metaphysical reading of

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[97] To reference an example from W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

truth while also keeping the second pragmatic notion of truth – such a view would not appear to have any practical consequences for the media scholar who calls themselves a postmodernist but is also committed against misinformation.

Causal Constraint

But if we are to expand the implications of this view, it does not seem to be enough that others know the meaning of our words and use them correctly. Once we establish among ourselves the meaning of the word gavagai, it is clear that there is something outside this linguistic contract which has a bearing on the correctness or incorrectness of our linguistic practices. A gavagai is not something that can just be imagined or spoken into existence. We could, in theory, revise the meaning of what the word means, but this is a different kind of discursive practice from a case of intentional misusage, and one that is unlikely to be confused for such.[98]

The second revision or constraint I propose for postmodern epistemologies is therefore the notion that there is a causal influence of the world from outside our conceptual scheme. In this manner, there is at least a threefold relation in our usage of gavagai, there are the (at least) two speakers who are committed to using language in accordance to certain conventional practices and there is the world, which – in being organized through the linguistic practices of the speakers – is used by the passive party in a speech act to determine whether the active party has used or misused conventional linguistic practices. In this manner, though the world does not

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[98] There are conservative responses to postmodern ontologies which attempt to appeal to the notion that a call for an ontological shift in conventional linguistic practice is equivalent to a lie. These types of responses are highly uncharitable and can largely be dismissed. I think, for the most part, it is easy to tell a lie from an ontological shift. For example, when Donald Trump called the election rigged, he wasn't attempting to reevaluate the normative implications of 'rigged' and suggest alternate ontological projects, he was just plainly lying.

play an active role in determining the ontological scheme itself, it does play a passive role as a mechanism that parties appeal to once an ontology is set and binding.

Philosopher John McDowell calls this type of constraint a "causal constraint" and notes that it is implicit in the views of Davidson (and can largely be understood in relation to all of the views mentioned in the first section of this chapter).[99] Causal constraint makes it such that there is a kind of negotiation between ourselves and the world, that once an ontological scheme is chosen, there is an extra-linguistic phenomena that is being recorded.

A good example of causal constraint is the measurements of a thermometer. Though one must choose between 'Fahrenheit' or 'Celsius' or 'Kelvin' before measurement takes place, once one holds this scale constant over a period of observation, an extra-linguistic phenomenon is indeed captured. It is clear from this case that there is not just language here, but a specific quality of the world, which is being expressed through the conceptual scheme (in this case the temperature scale) we have chosen. In this manner, the thermometer causally reacts to conditions in the world using an organizational scheme that we have agreed to as a matter of convention.

As with social constraint, causal constraint seems necessitated by all the major epistemologies we have discussed. All the positions must depend on some causal factor that is not linguistic in nature in order to explain how "material" conditions in the world play a role in our lives. In this manner, postmodern epistemologies do not posit unlimited agency to the subject – there is still a world which we are conditioned to and situated within, our agency merely concerns the ability to define the conceptual components of the world according to our liking. The scheme-content dissolution, therefore, only refers to the dissolution of concepts and objects,

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[99] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 25.

but while these are both combined and incorporated into language, the notion of *causality* is still

separate from our notion of concepts and is situated beyond the realm of language.

Rational Constraint

While causal constraint provides a necessary negotiation between our activities and the

conditions of the world, McDowell thinks that the results are unsatisfying.[100] In an explicit

response to Davidson and Rorty (although we can read it as a response to a larger Davidson-

Rorty-Derrida camp which explicitly rejects the scheme-content divide), he formulates what may

be the most complex philosophical challenge ever posed against postmodern epistemologies. For

McDowell, the issue is that our thoughts when discussed by the Davidson-Rorty-Derrida camp

are empty of content. He explains:

> Thoughts without content – which would not really be thoughts at all – would be a play
> of concepts without any connection with intuitions, that is, bits of experiential intake. It is
> their connection with experiential intake that supplies the content, the substance, that
> thoughts would otherwise lack.[101]

The issue here is that if a belief is justified only through another belief or a signifier is only to be

understood in relation to another, then there is no place where the content of the world comes

into play within our network of concepts. The world plays a causal role but not a justificatory

role in our affairs. But, if this is the case, how it is possible to generate a system of meaningful

concepts from a system that is merely causal?

The traditional responses involve some type of representationality in language, that the

world exists in some way, and that we somehow processes it into conceptualized content through

language. But the Davidson-Rorty-Derrida camp reject representationality. In essence, they say

that 1) meaning is generated from the relations between words, 2) the world causally impacts our

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[100] McDowell.
[101] McDowell, 4.

lives and 3) representationality is unintelligible. But it appears that these three views cannot co-exist. If we take the first two beliefs, we run into an issue that there are word-word relations in terms of meaning and word-world relations in terms of causality, but we have no way to reconcile the relationship *between* the systems of meaning and causality.

The problem is perhaps clearer if we extend the problem of "empty" thought to an example. Imagine that we are to trace the "play of concepts" all the way back to the very beginnings of human language. Here, the very first words are coming into being. Early humans are staring around at the world, pointing out, naming, and categorizing the things they see. Or are they?

According to the Davidson-Rorty-Derrida camp, it is unintelligible to discuss content outside of language. But if this camp is correct, how can it be that language even arises in the first place? If we are to only understand 'red' or 'rock' in the form of linguistic concepts, then how did early humans even categorize one color from the others or pick out objects from their experiences of the world? It seems that there has to be some intelligible way that content from the world is experientially understood, picked-out from the world, and then integrated into our system of linguistic concepts.

But this other route appeals to the representationalism that Rorty attempts to distance himself from, to a "transcendental signified" beyond our conceptually woven text. If we were to choose this route, we would have to therefore reject the "play of concepts" in favor of something more akin to traditional representational empiricism. Of the three themes of postmodernist epistemology, two would thus be rendered impossible – we could not intelligibly dissolve the scheme-content division nor could we speak of global expressivism without having to account for some implicit world-part that is being denoted by our speech acts.

By only asserting the first of the three themes, post-Kuhnian Science and Technology Studies appears to take this route. It keeps the scheme-content division and adopts a moderate form of representationalism. This stance is explicitly forwarded by Knorr Cetina, who characterizes constructionism in STS as necessarily rejecting the signifier-chain epistemology of Derrida without fully endorsing a traditionally empiricist scientific realism.[102] She states:

> The third characteristic of constructionism as it emerged from laboratory studies is the emphasis placed in the respective studies upon the phenomenon that knowledge is worked out, accomplished, and implemented through practical activities that transform material entities and potentially also features of the social world. This makes these studies continuous with the above conception of construction as the creation of the world through "labor" (Marx), and suggests a notion of practice *that includes, but is not coextensive with, representations*. One needs to emphasize that, in the face of recent, postmodernist epistemologies that see the world as constituted in terms of signifier chains and the deconstruction of science as part of a more general critique of representations.[103]

Here, however, Knorr Cetina is not clear as to how representationalism is meant to be included in the notion of practice, or how the material world is able to be accepted as a given extra-linguistic reality in light of the views she mentions. In light of these concerns, to the postmodern epistemologist, Knorr Cetina may be merely reciting some watered-down variation of modernist reactionism as described in Chapter 1.

Nonetheless, STS's epistemological constructionism, as Knorr Cetina describes it, does feature what McDowell calls "rational constraint"[104] – it is committed to some notion of content that would render our thoughts as proper mediators with the world. But though this view provides the necessary constraint, the solution here seems shallow. Surely, there are other ways

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[102] Karin Knorr Knorr Cetina, "Laboratory Studies: The Cultural Approach to the Study of Science," in *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995), 140–66, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412990127.d12.

[103] Knorr Cetina, 150. (emphasis added)

[104] McDowell, *Mind and World,* 14 .

we may be able to solve this issue without jettisoning two of the three postmodern themes we have discussed?

Instead of rejecting large swaths of theory, accepting STS's representational constructionism as the only possible position, and moving on to discuss new veridical epistemological components, I argue that there are still some potential options available to the Davidson-Rorty-Derrida camp and their expressivist associates. One potential avenue – and one that would prove useful for STS as well – is the deflationist ontological approach of philosopher Amie Thomasson.[105]

Thomasson's starting position is similar to ours outlined above: there are certain figures who desire to reexplain our vocabulary about ordinary objects in the world using expressivist approaches to language, but such views run into issues. When we speak of moral statements as expressions or opinions there are no easily identifiable ontological constraints that say otherwise, but when we say that our vocabulary about ordinary objects like chairs is the same type of vocabulary, there are seemingly objects which are denoted by our word 'chair' which have to be done away with or reduced to nothing but language.[106]

Thomasson, however, thinks that most responses misconstrue the points being made by skeptical approaches. The highlight of the anti-representationalist approach is a rejection of an "ontology-first" metaphysics which states that "we must first settle ontological questions about what exists before we can determine whether or not we are justified in introducing (or retaining)

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[105] Amie L. Thomasson, "What Can Global Pragmatists Say About Ordinary Objects?," in *The Nature of Ordinary Objects*, ed. Javier Cumpa and Bill Brewer, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 235–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316612897.012.
[106] Thomasson.

pieces of terminology."[107] So, according to Thomasson, figures like Rorty are not interested in the view that takes ontology to occur in the following order:

1) X is here
2) In English, we call X a 'chair'
Therefore,
3) There is a chair here

Rather, the anti-representationalist says 'there is a chair here' using linguistic convention without worrying about the underlying ontological justification – Thomasson calls this the "linguistic priority thesis."[108]

If we restate McDowell's worry along these lines, we would say that the issue of rational constraint is that one needs some sort of conceptually understood X prior to using the word 'chair' or else the word chair is an empty piece of language. Such a method would have to extend the notion of conceptuality beyond language in seeming contradiction of the scheme-content divide as commonly understood. But what if the anti-representationalist isn't denying a conceptually understood X at all here?

Thomasson uses two points to explain how the anti-representationalist position can hold despite the issues of content. She first appeals to the revisionist ontological views of figures like Peter van Inwagen and Trenton Merricks.[109] These philosophers attempt to reduce the world into simples like atoms. In such a manner, Merricks thinks that a chair is really a collection of atoms arranged chairwise.[110] Here, 'chair' points to an conceptually understood X in the world, but crucially, the space denoted by our conceptually understood X is not *really* a chair but rather, it causally reduces to a grouping of atoms arranged in the shape of our X.

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[107] Thomasson, 258.
[108] Thomasson, 256.
[109] Thomasson 244-245.
[110] Thomasson, 245; Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Here, the goal of Thomasson's reference to revisionist ontology is not to endorse these views but to point out that ontological issues are not merely empirical issues. It could be the case that we *see* a chair as a commonsense object X but that the level of interaction between ourselves and the world really exists at the level of atoms. In such a manner, our phenomenal experience of a chair as a distinct X is where rational constraint occurs and the causal constraint occurs at the atomic level.

The second move Thomasson makes is to appeal that the anti-representationalist can understand a point of phenomenal content mediation between ourselves and the world. She states that empirical research demonstrates that we experience concepts in phenomenal perception and that this is therefore why we like to talk of there being objects at a certain "commonsense" ontological level.[111] Crucially, though, if the revisionist ontologists are correct, then the commonsense ontology of empirical perception is not the "real" ontology of metaphysics.

Ultimately, Thomasson thinks that her two points demonstrate all that is necessary for anti-representationalist views to persist. When the anti-representationalist says 'there is a chair here,' they reference *phenomenally given concepts* and so there *is* some given part of the world in terms of rational constraint, but she notes that they don't take these phenomenal concepts to be a *real ontology* (even though they could be). The real ontology – as with the notion of a chair-shaped atomic grouping – may lie elsewhere.

To demonstrate this move, the most helpful example is the notion of racial categories. Here, one might say that differences among people seem quite obvious at a basic, visual level – it is fairly easy to distinguish people on the basis of skin color, eye color, height, body mass, or other associated features. Perhaps, even prior to language, humans possessed basic abilities to

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[111] Thomasson, 247-248.

make judgements and hold beliefs concerning in-group or out-group phenotypical features (these, of course would not map well to our contemporary understandings of race as defined and continuously redefined in Western thought). But this view does not mean that these categories of difference are *real* or that something akin to racial categories should be established along these lines. The postmodernist strand of thought, as exemplified by Stuart Hall, speaks of race as a "floating signifier" which does not map onto any signified.[112] Indeed, when we look into the question of racial difference using other categorical schemes – genetic, socio-historical, cultural, etc. – the "commonsense" ontology of human difference provided in vision does not hold. The way we should even understand race itself seems to fall apart, it becomes a matter of normative socio-political expression, not a description of natural kinds.

Here, we may be able to see some of Thomasson's points. Though there is a natural representational faculty or some other means which can provide us with concepts prior to language, it appears that these representational faculties are quite inefficient and normatively deficient. Natural perceptual faculties can therefore be challenged using more complex ontologies that do not arise directly in perception, but rather through a negotiation between perception and linguistic convention. Just as Merricks can deny the commonsense ontology of chairs in favor of some other ontological classification which goes unseen by human eyes, the anti-representationalist can deny the concepts given in perception in favor of alternate ontologies. The difference is that, for the anti-representationalist, the final ontology is a matter of normative and conventional choice rather than defined by some alternatively "real" reference-class, as with the case of Merricks.

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[112] Stuart Hall, "Race, the Floating Signifier: What More Is There to Say about 'Race'?," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 359–73.

Ultimately, the result of Thomasson's deflationist ontology seems to be that perceptual and linguistic elements both play a role in concept formation. But a result of this idea is that 1) once we are embedded into a language we cannot retrace the steps to determine what concepts were originally provided in perception and which were provided through language and therefore, 2) perceptually-given concepts can easily be replaced with linguistically-derived ones. The result is an anti-representationalism that can be committed to the normative, creative role of ontology production while also having a firm rational connection to the world at the same time.

If Thomasson's method does indeed work, then it appears as though the vast majority of postmodern epistemologies can survive the charges leveled against them. They can sort our truth from lies, take into account extra-human structural constraints, and have a basic point of conceptual contact with the world without relying on an ontological or an epistemological realism. However, there is one more constraint that postmodernist positions must address.

3. The Fourth Constraint: Rationality and Structural Underpinnings

The last issue surrounding postmodernist epistemologies is the notion that an expressivist or narrative approach to socio-political debates undoes the need for reasoning and evidence. This is a charge that has surrounded many fields of study in the humanities for at least three decades. Specifically, scientific authorities and conservative reactionaries have dismissed certain facets of the academy for appealing to collective intellectual norms and for engaging in rhetorical sophistry over reasoned argument. While some may defend critical epistemologies by biting the bullet and dismissing rationalist politics entirely, I think that such a position would throw us into postmodernist reactionism where we remain complacent with charges of irrationality because they somehow provide a "critical" edge. Such a position is dangerously congruent with

conservative and conspiratorial dismissals of evidence, and while it may successfully convince fellow members within the academy, it doesn't do justice to the force behind critical positions within wider public discussion.

It is on this point, that figures like Rorty are mistaken. Rorty appears to think that when one gives up on a representationalist account of philosophy, one is suddenly thrust into his vision of a post-philosophical society, one where we are not bound by any rules regarding the stake of our conversations. He states that under his view, epistemology treats discourse as commensurable, meaning it acts as though it can "be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict."[113] Rorty rejects this picture in favor of "continued conversation," stating that his picture of philosophy, like that of Oakeshott, rejects rationalist politics.[114] The question is, however, whether Rorty is correct here. Does rejecting the notion of representationality entail that there are no overarching rules to discourse and that rationalism must be rejected?

I argue that this is simply not the case, that the final constraint of postmodern epistemologies is that there is need for some way of necessitating reasons, a project which requires set rules underlying discourse, that is, there must be something more than just singular, unjustifiable opinions for meaningful conversation to take place at all. There must be something outside a speech act that provides a justificatory weight for believing in it, some connection to prior reasons which evidentially buttresses individual accounts. In essence, there has to be some rational structure underlying any epistemological project. The question is how such a view is possible, and if it is possible, what it means for the divisions of modernity and postmodernity.

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[113] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 316.
[114] Rorty, 318.

Here, a perfect solution would involve a philosophical position that can accommodate views as skeptical as global expressivism while also relying on fundamentally, universal structuralist underpinnings.

Brandom's Inferential Expressivism

The philosopher Robert Brandom, a student of Rorty, provides such a solution, arguing that anti-representationalism is indeed commensurable with rationalism. Brandom states that traditional expressivist views have understood themselves to be articulating how an inner state is expressed through gesture or action, but he finds that this simple form cannot accommodate expressions as the basis for all conceptual activity.[115] Instead, he thinks of expressivism as "making explicit what is implicit."[116] This involves a "relational expressivism" where we are to "understand linguistic performances and the intentional states they express each as essential elements in a whole that is intelligible only in terms of their relation."[117] Brandom ultimately thinks that this relational perspective takes the form of a linguistic theory known as *inferentialism*.

Here, Brandom means that the concepts we use are implicitly structured *inferentially* – in the form of the if/then conditional.[118] This creates a line of thinking that almost looks Derridean to the outsider, where the meaning of singular terms is understood through their relation to other terms, or in Brandom's vocabulary – concepts "must come in packages,"[119] Resultingly, to know a word/concept is to know how to use it in a network of inferences. Using the examples of a parrot and a thermostat, Brandom states that a parrot can be trained to exclaim 'that's red,' but

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[115] Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, An Introduction to Inferentialism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 8.
[116] Brandom, 8.
[117] Brandom, 9.
[118] For example, 'If <u>Socrates is a man</u>, then <u>Socrates is mortal</u>' is an inferential proposition.
[119] Brandom, *Articulating Reasons,* 16.

this is merely a causal reaction to a stimuli, not knowledge.[120] In Brandom's terms the parrot

does not know 'red' until it can use 'red' in relation to other concepts through inferences. For

example, to know red is to know its relationship to other concepts through propositions like 'if

something is red, then it is/has a color' , 'if something is red, then it is not blue' , etc. Likewise,

Brandom extends his metaphor to everyday objects like thermostats. He states that a thermostat

may be able to respond to the temperature of a room, but it does not *know* the temperature.

The interesting and differentiating factor of Brandom's theory from différance or

meaning holism is that the inferential model provides a stabilizing structure to linguistic use

which makes rational communication possible. Crucially, Brandom wants to imagine rational

actors as already imbedded within a system of language rather than imagining how they learn

such a language. In this way, when we imagine social actors, they have as much awareness of

their respective forms of language as we have of the English language.

For Brandom, this point makes it so that natural speakers understand concept relations

not only laterally but through *nested concepts*. For example, I can state 'if the object is a chair, it

is a material object' and 'if it is material object, then it is a thing' and so on. In this way, there

are logically ordered classes of concepts so that 'chairs' are in the class [material object] and

'material objects' are in the larger class [things]. In this way, two social actors can define a term

differently yet still have the ability to communicate with each other through navigating between

a lattice structure of concepts.

For example, imagine S_1 who defines a chair as 'an object we sit on' and S_2 who defines a

chair as 'a thing we sit on'. Though they give different definitions, to the two actors, the

definitions are mutually understandable and commensurable. This is because S_1 can immediately

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[120] Brandom, 48.

(and largely unconsciously) navigate through more *broader* concepts to believe that 'if

something is an object, then it is a thing' and likewise, S$_2$ can perform the same inference.

Without these types of inferences, it would seem difficult for any practical conversation to be

mutually understandable given the large variety of word choices we make when structuring our

sentences.

Relational Expressivism in Social Contexts

However, the more interesting implication of Brandom's linguistic theory is that certain

explicit expressions will nonetheless always have implicit endorsements given the unexpressed

inferences that speakers must make in social situations. For example, when I say 'this ball red

and only red,' so long as you and I are both native speakers of English, I also seem to necessarily

and implicitly endorse the expression 'this ball is not blue.' In a sense, I can be read as implicitly

endorsing this expression even when I do not explicitly say it.

Crucially, this can play a major role when certain expressions are understood to be the

grounding for further expressions. As an example, let's imagine three characters: Nick, Joe, and

Kevin and the following scenario:

> 1) Nick tells Joe the proposition p
> 2) Joe will believe p from Nick only if q – 'Nick is trustworthy' (if q, then p)
> 3) Joe believes q
> Therefore,
> 4) Joe believes p

Now, given a relational expressivism, it seems like when Joe explicitly expresses p to another

person, he must also be implicitly endorsing q – in this manner, his endorsement of p is logically

tied to the endorsements he took when he initially accepted p. Let's now look at the following

exchange:

> 1) Joe tells Kevin p
> 2) Kevin will believe p from Joe only if r – 'Joe is trustworthy' (if r, then p)

3) Kevin believes r
Therefore,
4) Kevin believes p

Again we have the same set of endorsements, but this time, though Joe has explicitly stated p, he has not explicitly stated q – the condition in which he believes p.

This fact could come back to haunt Kevin. What if Nick commits such a vicious action that none of the parties now hold him trustworthy and they revoke their prior beliefs in his trustworthiness? In this case, Joe, who remembers his grounds for believing p, rejects p on the grounds of not q. Kevin, on the other hand, was never told that Joe believed p because of q. As a result, he still endorses p even though, when we backtrack through the chain of inferences underlying this scenario, he has no grounds to endorse p anymore.

Here, we can see a somewhat crude picture of a rationalist expressivism at play. Unbeknownst to Kevin, he was believing in p on some grounds that were not made explicit to him. As a result, depending upon p and what other grounds there may be for p, he may have been inadvertently misinformed by Joe since Joe did not spell out his full commitments when he expressed p.

The point of this scenario is therefore that something is missing in Rorty's picture of a post-metaphysical philosophy. It seems like we can develop a fruitful expressivist logic under anti-representationalist conditions (in the above case in particular, the actors can be assumed to have operated entirely under social and causal constraint). Furthermore, it seems that this logic may be important if not fundamental to addressing the truth or falsity of expressions in social situations and to addressing the motivations underlying a need to articulate our reasonings to others. The result of our inquiry is that Rorty must be incorrect in his view that epistemology devolves into hermeneutics. What Brandom provides is, according to Habermas philosophy as "a

mapping operation – rather than as a hermeneutic interpretation."[121] Although this is meant in a

negative manner,[122] I think there is room to explore the avenues that this type of mapping

operation may have in reinterpreting the way we speak about epistemology under social

conditions. The result is that formal epistemological discussions can make their way into

previously restricted areas of study.

4. Conclusion: Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism

When we take these points of this chapter to their logical end, we arrive at an interesting

position which combines postmodern and modernist assumptions. For the classic

representational rationalist, like Spinoza or Leibniz, the world itself could be seen as an

intuitively logically structured system. But the anti-representationalist, like Rorty, denies the

ability to talk of absolute systems, especially systems which extend beyond the usage of

concepts. According to such a view, we should be skeptical of appeals to both an absolute

structure of the world or to a stable human nature with innate ideas.

However, these two views are not mutually exclusive. Brandom's linguistic theory oddly

combines rationalism and anti-representationalism. Instead of there being an extra-linguistic

world which exists perfectly ordered in nature or a logical order given to us within our cognitive

faculties, we are left with a series of utterances or expressions which, themselves, are dependent

upon a proof-structured lattice-work of prior expressions. When we say p, we also endorse q and

r and s and so on.

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[121] Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, trans. Barbara Fultner, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 164.

[122] Although Habermas also adds that he personally finds Brandom to be giving one of the most important theoretical works developed in the United States.

In such a manner, our actions, our expressions, reconstitute in the social world the logical structure that early rationalists mistook for the order of nature. We can therefore achieve a kind of rationalist approach to philosophy using expressivism as a starting point. The result is that, though certain central tenets of modernism have been eroded by postmodernist stands of thinking, the actual process of reasoning remains untouched. From a practical standpoint, from an outsider looking in, Brandom's fully developed philosophy presumably imagines ideal subjects of a modernist form of life, they are perfect participants in an imaginary public sphere. It isn't until one peals back the layers and looks at the underlying first principles of this system, that one finds that these actors are wildly inconsistent with any prior form of theorizing – that they operate according to expressivist and anti-representationalist assumptions.

Such a view poses a radical challenge to both modernist and postmodernist projects. It seems that the modernist and postmodernist both agree on a single point which is itself incorrect – that one needs a metaphysically real system external to our concepts in order to necessitate rationality. When this line of thinking fails, so do modernist attempts to connect post-truth to postmodernity. At the same time, the radicality of the postmodern scholar may also be at stake. If an expressivist, anti-representationalist picture of the world is ultimately still subject to universalizable logical processes which underlie our expressive speech acts, then the critical aspect of their epistemology is now open to veridical revision.

With the major themes of postmodern epistemology laid out and discussed, it is in this new opening that Brandom has helped forged that I wish to assert my theoretical intervention. I argue that there is now room for analytic epistemology to make an entrance into communication and media theory, and that such an entrance is possible without rejecting the three overarching themes we have discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 3

Networking Knowledge: A Social Epistemology of Media

Before continuing with my argument, I would like to frame the contents of the following chapter in light of the larger picture of this work. In the first chapter, I articulated the central worry underlying this project – that the critical epistemological outlook of post-war theory could not be reasonably sustained in light of current authoritarian delegitimization strategies. Right-wing discourse profits off of the same line of critique that critical media studies and its neighboring disciplines have engaged in. With our social and political opponents taking advantage of this looming critical atmosphere in order to undermine the State, news media, and scientific institutions, we need a new theoretical outlook which can tackle the issue of legitimacy in the face of newfound populist rhetoric. For this reason, I argued for a new epistemological program in media/communication studies which is both *critical and veridical*.

In the prior chapter, I defended the first component from its detractors. Through a useful (though somewhat reductive) classification of various kinds of postmodern epistemology, we discussed how some forms of constructionism do not lead to relativism or a "post-truth" epistemology as suggested by critics. However, this critical outlook is merely the first of the two necessary components.

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the second, veridical component which has been missing from prior scholarship. Borrowing from recent epistemological literature on reliabilist theories of justification and social epistemology, I forward a positive account of epistemology that is adaptable to the larger aims and scope of contemporary communications studies. This new epistemology agrees with past, critical epistemologies in its rejection of the central tenets of traditional Cartesian representationalism. But it differs in that it does not jettison or obscure the

notion of truth or justification. Rather, it relocates the central locus of truth in the empirically

discoverable reliability of human and non-human actors, and provides a new transdisciplinary

perspective for analyzing truth claims in the new media environment.

1. The Raft and the Pyramid

Until the second half of the 20th century, European philosophy has appealed to two

competing epistemological notions: foundationalism and coherentism. Foundationalism, broadly

holds that "all knowledge or justified belief rest ultimately on a foundation of noninferential

knowledge or justified belief."[123] The most direct and intuitive example of foundationalism

comes from Descartes, who famously tried to deny everything including the external world, but

was unable to deny knowledge of the self; in asserting a foundation for knowledge, Descartes

declared "I think, therefore I am," and attempted to logically deduce the rest of the world from

that starting point.

However, while foundationalism played a major role in modern philosophy, it declined in

the post-war era. In analytic philosophy, figures like W.V.O. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Donald

Davidson, and Richard Rorty asserted various forms of anti-foundationalism, and on the

European continent Derrida and Lyotard attacked the notion of a stable metaphysical

underpinning to reality. Many of these figures would either explicitly or implicitly assert a form

of coherentism. Coherentism broadly states that "a belief or set of beliefs is justified, or

justifiably held, just in case the belief coheres with a set of beliefs."[124] This view denies the self-

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[123] Ali Hasan and Richard Fumerton, "Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/justep-foundational/.
[124] Erik Olsson, "Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/justep-coherence/.

justifying beliefs that the foundationalist relies upon, and asserts that beliefs multidirectionally impinge justification on each other through a type of interlocking "web of belief."[125]

For the epistemologist, Ernest Sosa, these two views can be described using the metaphors of a raft and a pyramid:

> For the foundationalist every piece of knowledge stands at the apex of a pyramid that rests on stable and secure foundations whose stability and security does not derive from the upper stories or sections. For the coherentist a body of knowledge is a free-floating raft every plank of which helps directly or indirectly to keep all the others in place, and no plank of which would retain its status with no help from the others.[126]

While the foundationalist, here, is presented in a secure fashion, the coherentist is unstable, their body of beliefs is constantly changing due to the addition of new beliefs which change the structure of the overall web. This instability could be seen as an issue so much as it denies some universal epistemic standard, but the anti-foundationalism of post-war theorists allowed for a unique degree of epistemic revision and progress.

For foundationalism, the central issue is how to locate foundational beliefs or whether foundational beliefs exist at all. Descartes started with a presumably self-justified belief and expanded it into a full philosophical system, but it seems like when we start at common sense beliefs and attempt to backtrack through our belief system there are no clearly delineated beliefs which are themselves self-justified. We either end in infinite regress – an endless chain of beliefs justifying other beliefs, circularity, or some vague assertion of what beliefs count as foundational.

On the other hand, coherentism also runs into issues. One major issue is the lack of any common standard for justification. For example, under coherentism, if two individuals with

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[125] W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 2nd edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 1978).
[126] Ernest Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1980): 23-24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1980.tb00394.x.

radically different belief sets are in conflict, it seems difficult for them to reach any adequate

resolution using a common ground to spring off of. In the worst case scenario, their beliefs may

even be unintelligible to one another.

One objection which hinges on this point is the *alternate systems objection* which states

that "for each coherent system of beliefs there exist, conceivably, other systems that are equally

coherent yet incompatible with the first system. If coherence is sufficient for justification, then

all these incompatible systems will be justified." This type of issue is exacerbated in the

structural environment of new media and under the conditions of our current objectivity crisis.

While radicalization and polarization can be usefully described under the conditions of

coherentism, the coherentist can have difficulty appealing to solutions out of these structural

conditions. The new media environment is littered with echo chambers, either in a classical

sense,[127] and under the new conditions of algorithmic filtering.[128] While in prior decades there

had been a centralized structural model of mass media where publics could form under the guise

of national or communal solidarity, the contemporary media environment creates personalized

epistemic structures – filter bubbles – which increasingly separate user interaction.[129]

Algorithmic filtering may also be conducive to forming new echo chambers where users with

similar media habits are unknowingly brought to the same content. This can create conditions in

which personal belief systems are valorized and outside sources are discredited.[130]

In light of these conditions, coherentism is an interesting descriptive phenomenon – it

describes how conditions of community and social bonding can generate coherent belief sets

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[127] I speak here of echo chambers as they relate to traditional mass media and news media according to the research of Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*.

[128] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (June 2020): 141–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32.

[129] Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*.

[130] Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles."

which radically differ from the belief systems of others. But it may not, at least in a simplistic sense, be an effective epistemic tool when navigating the new media environment. I argue that there needs to be a common condition of appeal to reason between various belief sets. But if there are no easily identifiable self-justified beliefs, what do we have to appeal to?

2. An Outline of Reliabilism

Al and the White Room: Externalist and Internalist Theories of Knowledge

To understand the issues with coherentism, let us imagine a man named Al who, as part of some twisted experiment, has been locked up within a blank white room for the past three years with only a single television monitor as a distraction. Just outside the room, a mad scientist relays information to this television monitor. He encodes a series of propositions about the developing state of the outside world, half of which are true and half of which are false. These propositions appear on the monitor, one-by-one every 10 seconds that Al is trapped in the room.

In response to the monitor, Al begins to form beliefs about the outside world from which he is separated. He holds that so long as a proposition does not contradict the beliefs he had upon entering the room, he will accept it to be fact. He also holds that, if two contradictory propositions are given, he will accept the most recent of the two. In this way, Al forms a coherent body of beliefs about the world beyond the white room. Furthermore, the procedure Al enacts is so simple that he is may even have a more coherent belief set than those who have openly lived in the outside world themselves. However, we must ask: is Al justified in any of these beliefs?

It seems like the procedure Al enacts *does* lead him to a coherent set of beliefs, but these beliefs are not in line with reality. The objection is therefore, that just because a set of beliefs is coherent does not make them true per se. But there is a different strategy one can appeal to here,

one that makes reference to the outside world rather than the beliefs internal to Al. A version of this position was most famously given by epistemologist, Alvin Goldman, who in the late 1960s argued for a causal theory of knowledge acquisition – that we have knowledge so long as there is a causal connection between our belief and a fact in the world.[131]

Under this view, we can imagine the case of a clock on the wall which either correctly or incorrectly gives the time.[132] According to *internalist* epistemological views, like coherentism, we are justified in our belief in the time just in case we can provide *internal reasons* or *evidence* for the clock's accuracy. But Goldman's causal theory is an *externalist* theory, where the conditions which determine knowledge are external to the knower at the time of their belief. Under Goldman's view, we have knowledge of the time when the clock is correct, and we lack knowledge when the clock is incorrect.

In our example of Al, the externalist view is a useful mechanism for denying Al extensive knowledge of the outside world, since half of the propositions given to him are not causally connected in any way to the world. The issue here is that Al himself is unaware whether his beliefs have causal connections, and for that matter, we ourselves, living outside of the white room do not have the ability to trace back the causal sequences of our beliefs to facts in the world. Under externalism, we would only have knowledge of the contents of a media just in case these were actually causally connected with its contexts, but how can we prove to ourselves that we have this knowledge? More importantly, how can we prove to others that we have knowledge capable of changing their minds or articulating reasons?

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[131] Alvin I. Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *The Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 12 (1967): 357–72, https://doi.org/10.2307/2024268.

[132] A clock is one of the examples used in Jonathan Vogel, "Reliabilism Leveled," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 11 (2000): 602–23, https://doi.org/10.2307/2678454.

For some, the initial causal view appeals too much to objective conditions beyond the subjectivity of the knower, and for Goldman himself there was a central problem with the causal view – it did not take into account conditions of probability. To demonstrate this point, Goldman devises a fictional location which we may call "fake barn county" – where local residents have the unusual hobby of building realistic cutouts of barn facades which, from the view of the neighboring highway, look like real barns.[133] Goldman imagines a case where an observer from the highway sees a real barn and comes to the belief that it is real, and thus, under the causal view he has knowledge of the barn.[134] But Goldman wonders what the probability of actually locating a real barn among the fake barns in the county could be. It seems like the casual view misses the point that the observer had a very low likelihood of seeing a real barn versus a false façade. In this way, the important feature in knowledge claims is not the existence of a causal connection but the *probability* of there being a causal connection.

Definition of Reliabilism

Revising his initial view, Goldman asserts a position known as *process reliabilism*, a theory of justification which states that an individual is justified in believing in a proposition *p* at time *t* just in case it was formed by "a reliable cognitive belief-forming process (or set of processes)."[135] This view allows for him to assert that, *generally,* our perceptual processes of seeing a barn façade reliably leads to the conclusion that a barn is present, but it also allows him to reconsider this reliability depending upon whether he is inside or outside of fake barn county.

[133] Alvin I. Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 20 (1976): 771–91, https://doi.org/10.2307/2025679.
[134] Goldman.
[135] Alvin I. Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?," in *What Is Justified Belief?* (Oxford University Press), 40, accessed April 14, 2020, http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812875.001.0001/acprof-9780199812875-chapter-2.

In this way, Goldman can account for certain contextual features that the causal view appears to ignore.

In subsequent discussions, Goldman's reliabilism has been extended to non-living entities and ordinary objects just like the causal view could be extended to clocks. For example, one might be justified in believing that their car is full of gasoline just in case they have 1) direct perception of their fuel gauge (with perception almost-universally understood to be a reliable process) and 2) their fuel gauge is a reliable indicator of the gasoline level.[136] Given this extension, reliabilism provides broad opportunities to appeal to the underlying processes of various actors and instruments in scenarios which are relevant to our epistemic crisis.

The Benefits and Limits of Reliabilism

In relating back to Sosa's distinction between internalist views of epistemology, reliabilist positions appear to lie at the intersection of foundationalism and coherentism.[137] Like foundationalism, they allow us to assert a grounding for knowledge and like coherentism, they allow for epistemic revision and context sensitivity. At the same time, reliabilism avoids the pitfalls of epistemic regress, unclear foundationalist premises, circularity, and useless abstraction. Reliabilism therefore, gives us the ability to map out the relevant epistemic conditions which underlie our engagement with media.

In returning to the example of a clock, while the causal theory of knowledge would say that the clock provides one knowledge of the time just in case the clock is accurate, reliabilism looks at the *type* of processes that the clock produces rather than each *token* instance.[138] In this

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[136] This example of the fuel gauge is presented in Vogel, "Reliabilism Leveled." Vogel, however, wants to shift the example into a counterexample against reliabilism concerning when objects should be assumed reliable which I will not discuss here.
[137] Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid," 23. Although Sosa's position is different than the one I articulate here. He looks at epistemic behaviors rather than Goldman's position which looks at epistemic processes.
[138] This distinction is clearly defined in E. Conee and R. Feldman, "The Generality Problem for Reliabilism," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89, no. 1 (1998): 2.

way, reliability describes "enduring mechanisms" and "repeatable type processes."[139] But under these conditions, in order for one to *assert* that something is reliable, one must have some set of prior beliefs about that thing.

For example (see figure 1 below), imagine at time t_4, you believe that that it is 3 o-clock because the clock, C, on your wall says so. The externalist insight here is that the standard of your belief is dependent upon conditions outside of yourself – namely the probabilistic potential of the clock to give the correct time. But reliabilism's focus on type processes is important here. Because you are looking at type a process, you can also use reliabilism in a manner that reflects internalist desires for internal reasons and motivations.

In order to appeal to internal reasons, you must have some prior beliefs about C (or about clocks in general) that allows you to assert its general accuracy. Let's imagine that, earlier in the day, at times t_1, t_2, and t_3, you looked at the clock as a reminder for important scheduled meetings and it was accurate at these times – that is, you made it to the scheduled meetings without delay. These prior beliefs formed a coherent set, and this coherent set demonstrated that C is an accurate indicator of the time. Now, at time t_4, you believe that C is reliable given these prior conditions, and the *reliability of C* serves as a form of justification for your current belief in the accuracy of C.

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[139] Conee and Feldman, 2.

1) Determining Reliability in Known Conditions   **2) Using Reliabilism in Unknown Conditions**
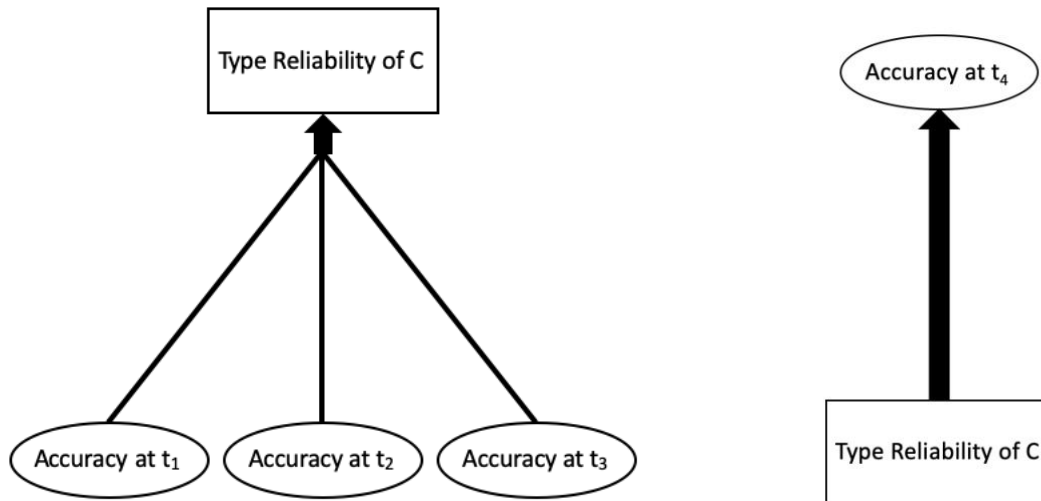

Figure 3.1: 1) Coherence of beliefs about the accuracy of C in known conditions can be used to uncover the reliability of C. 2) Reliability of C can be used as justification for the accuracy of C in unknown conditions.

In the above diagram, we can see that the reliability of the clock, from a subjective perspective, can be ascertained from a set of beliefs concerning past accuracy, which act as a grounding belief-cluster rather than a self-justifying foundationalist premise. But it is important to note that reliabilism is still typically identified as an externalist theory of justification. While we may be able to reconstrue objective probabilities into a manner that can be asserted in the form of reasons, the underlying grounding for our justification of the clock lies in the objective probability of the clock as an indicator (in addition to our cognitive processes such as memory and perception), not in the reasoning we can provide.

In this case, though we can demonstrate C's reliability though a set of beliefs, there is something external to us that we are uncovering here. It is an objective feature of the clock that it reliably tells the time and this is a feature which exists even before we have formed beliefs about the clock itself. In this manner, reliabilism allows us to assert justification in our beliefs formed by the clock even under conditions where we lack an explicit belief concerning its reliability, or,

using another common example, we can rely on our perceptual processes for knowledge about the world even without explicit beliefs concerning our perceptions.

Extending this idea to the gas gauge example, we may say that the reliability of the gauge is not dependent upon the driver's *beliefs* about the gauge's accuracy, but whether or not the gauge *is a generally accurate indicator* in its reading of the fuel level. Likewise, in Al's case, reliabilism suggests that Al is not justified in the beliefs given to him by the monitor because it does not give him reliable information about the world. Here, the reliabilist appeals to a different strategy. For reliabilism, the important criterion here is not beliefs/propositions and their epistemic statuses, but rather the underlying process through which any set of beliefs is formed. The reliabilist will say that because Al's beliefs are ultimately formed from a process with a success rate of 50%, as determined by the evil scientist, then Al lacks justification for any of the beliefs formed by this process on account of its unreliability. It argues that Al can't even claim justification no matter what reasons he may give, even though, he himself is unaware of the probability underlying his belief-forming mechanism.

For those predisposed to epistemic internalism, reliabilism may seem odd since it rejects our need to provide internal reasons for a belief. There are some pitfalls here, but also some major motivations for accepting reliabilism under some conditions. Robert Brandom, in particular, provides an interesting middle-ground position which has helped to develop the outline of this chapter. First, beginning with the motivations for accepting reliabilism, Brandom argues that Goldman has provided the "Founding Insight" of reliabilism in that it appears as though certain features of the world can be justified despite our internal reasons to the contrary.[140] He gives an example of an archeologist who can distinguish various types of

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[140] Robert B. Brandom, "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism," *The Monist* 81, no. 3 (1998): 371–92, https://doi.org/10.5840/monist199881317.

Indigenous American pottery shards without determinate chemical methods despite the fact that she believes she cannot.[141] In this manner, her evidence and reasoning are contrary to the objective probability that exists.[142]

Brandom thinks that such a case provides a degree of evidence to support reliabilism.[143] For example, let's imagine a case we may call "Brandom's Fork" (see Figure 3.2). The fork concerns whether we should base our own beliefs in a chain of proof-structured reasonings provided by another person (the evidentialist approach) or whether we should look at the conditions of their reliability (the reliabilist approach). Using the archeologist as our example, if the archeologist guesses that a shard is Toltec but also provides evidence that she isn't qualified to make such a guess without chemical testing, should an outside party believe the archeologist's reasoning or should they form their beliefs from the correct probability of her past guesses that they have seen? The evidentialist route involves integrating one's own chain of reasoning with the archeologist's reasonings; the reliabilist route involves invoking the archeologist's past successes to deny her reasons and reground one's belief on the reliability of her guesses. Brandom ultimately agrees with the latter route, and thus, he uses reliabilism to provide a means to ground beliefs in processes which are outside of the reasons social actors articulate.

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[141] Brandom, 372.
[142] Brandom, 372.
[143] Brandom, 377.

Brandom's Fork

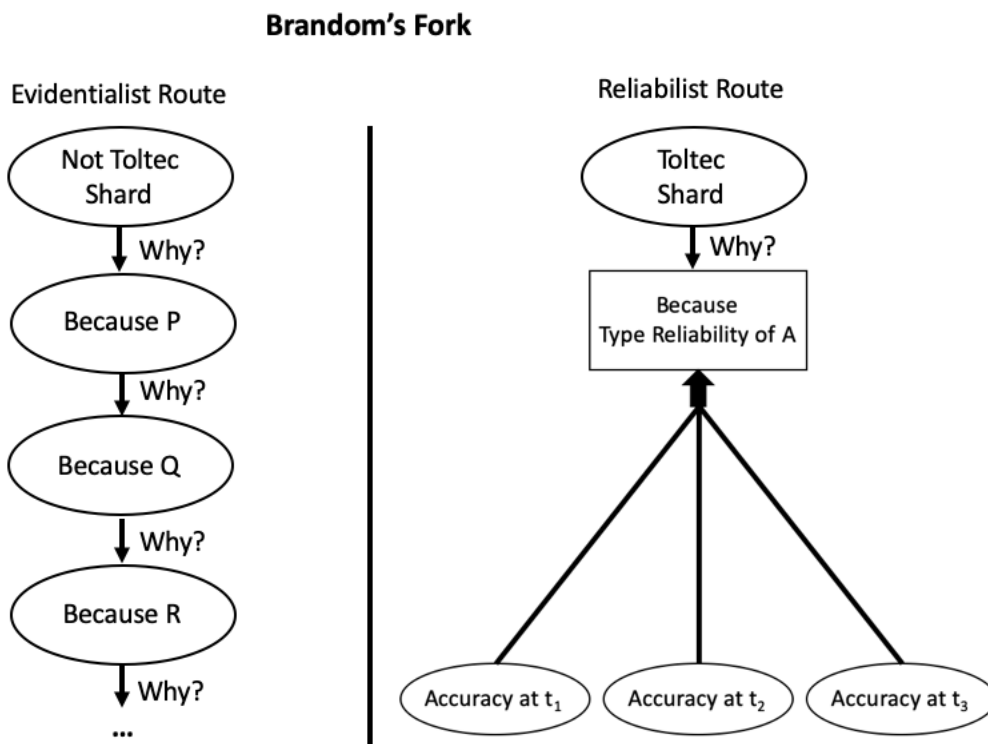Evidentialist Route | Reliabilist Route

Figure 3.2: Brandom's Fork – the evidentialist route of relying on the archeologist's chain of reasons contradicts the reliabilist route which is grounded on the reliability of the archeologist

At the same time, Brandom thinks that reliabilism can be largely integrated into a system based in evidentialism and that social actors can use reliabilism to ground their chains of reasoning without "recentering" their epistemology under externalist assumptions. All one would need to do is consciously come to the belief that something is reliable and then one can use such a belief as a grounding for a system or set of beliefs[144] (I sketch out a personal position of how this can be accomplished in the form of the belief-clusters in figures 3.1 and 3.2).[145] Therefore, Brandom appears to give the best of both worlds; he uses reliabilism as an insight for rejecting

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[144] Brandom 376-377.
[145] This view is personal in so far as Brandom seems to argue that the belief in a process's reliability is itself an epistemic stopping point. My point that this belief would need to be further grounded on a belief cluster of sorts and is therefore not foundational in itself.

the reasoning of social actors who are unreliable while also establishing how reliabilist insights

may be coherent with internalist/evidentialist desires for reasons.[146]

Three Classes of Reliabilism

Brandom provides another condition which proves helpful to our endeavor – he

distinguishes between the reliability of individual things and the reliability of overarching logical

relations. In the first case, he calls "reliability inferences" the types of commitments we take up

due to the reliability of an object or person.[147] For example, this would be using the belief 'S is

reliable' as a foundation for believing in the types of articulations S has made.

But Brandom also hints that these inferences themselves may or may not be correct. In

this type of instance, imagine the following case:

1) S says p
2) Bob believes that 'S is reliable'
3) Bob believes that 'If S is reliable, then p'
4) Bob believes p.

But what if p is wrong? What if a *reliability inference* like the above leads to a belief that is

ultimately incorrect? Furthermore, what if there is a type or set of inferential processes that are

unreliable? Given these questions, there is an interesting distinction: the reliability of individual

units within a system of inferences and the reliability of the system itself.

In this manner, I argue that we should divide reliabilism into three distinct classes. The

first class of reliabilism – *subject reliabilism* – concerns the reliability of internal, subjective

cognitive processes such as memory and perception (ex. the reliability of Bob's sight). The

second class – *object reliabilism* – concerns the reliability of persons or objects external to a

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[146] I do not want to debate in the end whether the internalist or externalist is correct here. I think Brandom's point is that a character like Al may believe himself to be justified on the basis of his own reasons but that anyone outside of the white room who knows the conditions of probability should reject his reasons. I'm not sure how such a view would be classified.
[147] Brandom, "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism," 389.

subjective individual (ex. the reliability of Bob's testimony). The third class – *procedural reliablism* – concerns the reliability of large-scale logical systems (ex. the reliability of a research article's methodology). We can see that subject reliabilism is needed to ground empirical states. These empirical states contain the objects and persons which reside in the second class. Finally, procedural reliabilism usually depends on a comparison of multiple individual actors and a manipulation of these actors in an intelligible manner. In the case of a research article, if it is a work of social science, it requires the reliability of several actors such as test subjects and sources. But it also depends on methods of organization above these individual units – such as the statistical methods employed.[148]

Procedural reliabilism may also be seen when we compare various procedures and the *degree* to which they can correctly determine certain circumstances. For example, let's imagine two drivers: 1) a driver who gets their fuel gauge tested every year and 2) a driver who has never had their fuel gauge tested. Under these conditions, we can check the reliability of two types of phenomena: the reliability of the gauge itself and *the reliability of the process we use to determine the reliability of the gauge*. Under these conditions, we may say that the first driver is *more likely* to have a reliable process when compared to the second driver on the grounds that he checks his gauge's accuracy more often. Here, the gauge in the first case is more reliable than the gauge in the second case and the process itself as an indicator or the gauge's reliability also appears more reliable.

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[148] Certainly the second and third classes are case sensitive. An object may be reliable in its process as object reliablism but if the object is made up of constituent parts which also must perform reliably, the object is also exercising procedural reliabilism as well.

This comparative approach evokes the process of *calibration* as discussed by van

Fraassen.[149] In van Fraassen's terms, calibration is the "measure of agreement between

judgments and actual frequencies."[150] Using the example of a weather forecaster, van Fraassen

states that the forecaster is "perfectly calibrated" over a period of time if their judgements

concerning the weather match the actual conditions which occur with perfect accuracy. But is

such a perfect degree of accuracy possible? Van Fraassen thinks that it is likely not possible to

reach such calibration in even our best and most reliable processes.[151] However, he also states

that "it would seem to be irrational to organize your degrees of belief in such a way as to ruin, a

priori, the possibility of perfect calibration."[152]

This notion of a theoretical, a priori perfect calibration is exactly what we appeal to in the

case of the two drivers. For example, it appears as though a perfect calibration between the fuel

gauge and the actual level of fuel is closest under the conditions in which a driver has the gauge

evaluated at a daily rate and that, furthermore, the reliability of the gauge decreases as it is

evaluated less and less frequently. Ultimately, I do not see reliabilism as necessarily providing

perfect calibration or perfect rates of justification in practice, but I do think that it allows us to

theorize the conditions of perfect calibration in order to assess to what degree certain belief-

forming processes meet this condition.

In returning to the case of Al one final time. Let's imagine a new character in this

example to compare Al against – Susan, who is an average journalist in a medium-sized US city.

While Susan would not necessarily provide apodictic or metaphysical truths about the world, and

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[149] C. van Fraassen, "Belief and the Will," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 5 (1984): 235–56,
https://doi.org/10.2307/2026388.
[150] van Fraassen, 245.
[151] van Fraassen, 245.
[152] van Fraassen, 245.

indeed, she may not have perfect knowledge or perfect belief-forming processes (in van Fraassen's terms, she lacks perfect calibration), she *would* be a *more reliable* indicator of current events than Al (as an *object*) because if we are to imagine a recent fact about the world, it would seem that Susan's *procedure* runs into less pitfalls in its ability to correctly determine this fact when compared to Al's. In this way, by imagining an objective scenario which determines the conditions of justification, we can compare the reliability of various belief-forming processes against one another.

3. Reliabilism in Social Conditions

It should now be clear, through our various examples, that reliabilism not only concerns certain cognitive processes and the calibration of instruments (like clocks and fuel gauges), but it can adequately be used to evaluate testimony, evidence, and expertise. In this section, I will outline how this approach can be extended beyond its individualistic roots. This extension takes the form of Alvin Goldman's role in the creation of the sub-field of social epistemology in analytic philosophy. I argue that analytic social epistemology provides a wealth of material which is much needed in media studies. It allows us to distinguish truths from lies, discuss media ontology in an empirical way, and extend notions of testimony into socially-relevant technical objects. These shifts are important, if not essential, for developing a critical media studies which can combat misinformation without itself endorsing speculative and relativist positions.

A Brief Sketch of Social Epistemology in Analytic Philosophy

For those working in the tradition of media studies, the term 'social epistemology' may be familiar as a subfield of constructionist epistemological points developed within the STS literature. However, as Finn Collin notes, there are two distinct and competing subfields with the

same name, one within STS and the other in analytic philosophy.[153] These two fields have

differences in that the latter takes a realist position on truth and science and separates conditions

of justification from socio-political critique, but at the end of the day, Collin thinks they can

easily be understood together.[154]

For philosopher Miriam Solomon, though the comparison has been made between the

two fields, the benefits of the latter field have gone unrecognized.[155] She claims that the

dominant strain of Anglo-American philosophy is cited, but remains largely unfamiliar to the

average practitioner in fields such as STS.[156] This is a downside to these fields, since Solomon

notes that there are several "normative recommendations" that analytic social epistemology can

make, including discussions about trust and honesty, epistemic authority, methods of productive

criticism, and issues of dissent versus consensus.[157]

Holman notes a similar issue, and like me, states that his worries concern the "crisis" of

science studies that has emerged as a result of post-truth politics.[158] While STS has concerned

itself with critique, he describes the conditions of the objectivity crisis perfectly, arguing that

STS may not have the resources necessary to distinguish honest claims from utter "bullshit"

without social epistemology as a guide.[159] On the other hand, Steve Fuller, the central figure in

STS's brand of social epistemology, cites his concerns that the analytic strand does not itself

engage with the larger socio-historical contexts from which it has isolated itself; he notes that

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[153] Finn Collin, "Two Kinds of Social Epistemology," *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2, no. 8 (2013): 79–104.
[154] Collin.
[155] Miriam Solomon, "STS and Social Epistemology of Science," in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 241–58, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/data-crone-wyatt-2007b.pdf#page=257.
[156] Solomon, 241.
[157] Solomon.
[158] Bennett Holman, "STS; Post-Truth, and the Rediscovery of Bullshit," *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 6 (n.d.): 370.
[159] Holman, 387.

analytic epistemology "has moved in a postmodern direction, though largely without acknowledging the corresponding world-historic trends."[160]

I contend that both of these critiques are generally valid. Solomon is correct that there is a wealth of untapped material that may prove effective for STS and for the subsequent fields which it informs (in our case, media studies). However, Fuller is also correct that analytic social epistemology is, in many respects, a post-modern aberration of the standard individualist model of analytic epistemology, and one which is entirely uninformed of figures like Lyotard and Derrida, who made similar moves decades prior. Nonetheless, I think that a crossover is still in order, precisely because of the issues of our legitimation crisis. Following the steps taken by Solomon, I argue that the most important aspect of analytic social epistemology is its material on epistemic evaluation, both of testimony in general and of domain-specific expertise.

This material begins with the "post-modern" shift given by figures such as John Hardwig, who in 1985 challenged the notion that appeals to epistemic authority were logical fallacies.[161] In Hardwig's view, when we deny others' epistemic authority, we are not making a neutral move of non-action, but rather we are implicitly asserting our own epistemic authority as more superiorto that of others; this position of "epistemic autonomy" can seemingly only result in "relatively uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore irrational beliefs" if asserted in all cases.[162] The resulting move is groundbreaking. Harding states that the position of individualistic rational autonomy collapses in favor of a socially-structured model of epistemic justification:

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[160] Steve Fuller, "Science and Technology Studies and Social Epistemology: The Struggle for Normativity in Social Theories of Knowledge," in *The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences*, by Ian Jarvie and Jesús Zamora-Bonilla (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 665–85, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473913868.n36.
[161] John Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 7 (1985): 335–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/2026523.
[162] Hardwig, 340.

> …the epistemic superiority of the expert to the layman implies rational authority over the layman, undermining the intellectual autonomy of the individual and forcing a reexamination of our notion of rationality.[163]

Hardwig ultimately appeals to the idea of citation and research practices for empirical support.[164] It seems here that good research is that which makes the correct moves between the most relevant sources, but this means that individual articulations of one's own expertise are epistemically dependent on appeals to the expertise of others, and so on. The result is that we must understand epistemic dependence and deference to the expertise of others as a central component in all knowledge accumulations.

This general notion of a socially-structured epistemic environment is extended further through the work of Alvin Goldman, the founder of reliabilism.[165] Goldman agrees with Hardwig that epistemology needs to have some type of social dimension and he develops a theory of "social epistemics" to account for what this social dimension could be. To elaborate this account, Goldman determines three possible objects of inquiry: 1) the beliefs of individuals in a group, 2) the social-belief profile of the group as a whole, and 3) the practices and procedures that a group follows.[166] He additionally situates these objects of evaluation in relation to four evaluative approaches: relativism, consensualism, expertism, and veritism.[167] The possible positions are outlined below:

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[163] Hardwig, 336.
[164] Hardwig, 348.
[165] Alvin I. Goldman, "Foundations of Social Epistemics," *Synthese* 73, no. 1 (1987): 109–44.
[166] Goldman, 114.
[167] Goldman, 114.

OBJECTS OF EVALUATION

	Beliefs of Individuals	Social Belief Profiles	Social Practices or Institutions
Methods Accepted by One's Group	Relativism	///////	///////
Group Consensus	Consensualism$_1$	Consensualism$_2$	Consensualism$_3$
Expert Opinion	Expertism$_1$	Expertism$_2$	Expertism$_3$
True Belief Production	///////	///////	Veritism

BASIS OF EVALUATION

Figure 3.3: Goldman's diagram of possible pathways in social epistemology[168]

For Goldman, relativism – the position adopted by Barnes and Bloor of the Strong

Programme and Richard Rorty – evaluates how an individual's belief is in accord with that of

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[168] Goldman, 115.

their larger community.[169] But this view does not appear to articulate a useful approach in

Goldman's view:

> What would the tasks of social epistemology consist in, on this approach? They would consist in (i) identifying a given community's methods, and (ii) determining whether any specified individual has complied with or violated those methods. This combination of tasks is suited, perhaps, to the historian, the sociologist, or the anthropologist. But it has little resemblance to any traditional philosophical mission of epistemology.[170]

Perhaps the evaluation should then consist in consensus? This could take the form of how well a belief accords with consensus (consensualism $_1$), how well a socially-accepted belief generates a consensus (consensualism $_2$), or how well a procedure generates consensus (consenusalism $_3$).[171] But this does not seem correct either. A consensus or consensus-generating belief is not necessarily a true belief. The same holds true for expertise – a belief isn't true just in case it conforms with what experts hold.

Goldman, ultimately, argues for the position of veritism where we "make evaluations by reference to the production of true belief."[172] Under this view, the object of study is the practices and procedures of a group, and the method of study concerns how likely these practices are likely to yield reliable outcomes over the course of evaluation. Essentially then, Goldman extends notions of reliabilism into the social realm in order to refute "anti-universalistic" positions.[173] The result is that Goldman thinks that the long-term procedures of certain groups are either likely to promote reliable, replicable positions, or they are will not. And for those groups that do not yield reliable, and replicable data, we cannot look towards conformity, consensus, or expertise within that group as a basis for our justifications.

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[169] Goldman, 116.
[170] Goldman, 117.
[171] Goldman, 118.
[172] Goldman, 115, 124.
[173] Goldman, 135.

Essentially, Goldman's position creates a new line of study with respect to social formations. He rejects descriptive sociological perspectives of analysis in favor of extending reliabilism to group formations in a manner that allows one to reject the positions argued by certain groups even if these groups have a high degree of conformity and consensus among themselves. Goldman therefore uses the shift from beliefs to belief-forming processes in order to engage in sociological phenomena using a veridical dimension.

Evaluation of Experts

Most critically, this veridical dimension is exercised in everyday aspects through our evaluations of and deference to other's expertise. For philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, the question of expertise runs into an interesting paradox; on one hand, the policies of a government must reflect empirical research conducted by relevant experts but on the other hand, they must be "democratically legitimate," as in the majority of the citizenry must accept such positions.[174] Anderson argues that the solution to such a problem lies in the essential function of citizens' second-order assessment of knowledge from their perspectives as laypersons.[175] If citizens have reliable criteria which they can use to assess expertise and they vote based off of these evaluations, then deference to expertise can be compatible with positions of deliberative democracy. However, for Anderson, the issue is that the US citizenry lacks a reliable criteria which allows them to make such assessments and the structural conditions created by partisan echo chambers, polarizing media, and cognitive biases exacerbate this phenomenon.[176]

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[174] Elizabeth Anderson, "Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony," *Episteme* 8, no. 2 (June 2011): 144–64, https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0013.
[175] Anderson, 145.
[176] Anderson, 145.

There are a host of philosophical criteria which could be discussed here. For one, is testimony justified primarily through an evidential/justificatory means or through reliabilism?[177] When we look at an example such as "Brandom's Fork" we can see that there are some cases where we can either believe others based on their reasoning or we can take the route of reliabilism and ground ourselves on a belief-cluster concerning their reliability. But this "fork" does not exist in all cases. When we ask a stranger for directions on the street or when we refer to a waiter for food recommendations we are not able to assess these individuals in terms of their reliability. This is an issue that Goldman also runs into within his position of social epistemics.[178] We are forced to wonder, without good reasons or the ability to assess reliability, is testimony justified prima facie as a form of knowledge?

This is not a debate I want to concern myself with here. I think Brandom's Fork allows us to depend on both reasoned inferences (justifications/evidence) and/or reliability when accessing expertise. And ultimately, Anderson does not concern herself with these issues either. Instead, she relies on assumptions from both the evidentialist and reliabilist paths in the fork and provides a well-ordered, extensively detailed list which attempts to solve the dilemma of expertise, one which would enable laypersons to reliably assess the claims made by experts in distant fields of knowledge.[179] The three-pronged criteria Anderson develops looks at "scientific expertise," "honesty," and "epistemic responsibility" as separate components which can be broken down by various degrees. The full breakdown of the criteria Anderson provides is given in the following figures.

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[177] This forms a major debate in Elizabeth Fricker and David E. Cooper, "The Epistemology of Testimony," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 61 (1987): 57–106.

[178] Alvin I. Goldman, "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63, no. 1 (July 1, 2001): 85–110, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2001.tb00093.x.

[179] Anderson, "Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony."

(a) Laypersons.
(b) People with a B.S. degree, a B.A. science major, or a professional degree in an applied science specialty far removed from the field of inquiry in question.
(c) Ph.D. scientists outside the field of inquiry.
(d) Ph.D. scientists outside the field, but with collateral expertise (for example, a statistician who is judging the use of statistics in the field).
(e) Ph.D. scientists trained in the field.
(f) Scientists who are research-active in the field (regularly publish in peer-reviewed scientific journals in the field).
(g) Scientists whose current research is widely recognized by other experts in the field, and whose findings they use as the basis for their own research. This can be determined by considering such factors as citation counts, the impact factors of the journals in which they publish, and record in winning major grants.
(h) Scientists who are *leaders* in the field – who have taken leading roles in advancing theories that have won scientific consensus or opened up major new lines of research, or in developing instruments and methods that have become standard practice. In addition to the factors cited in (g), leadership is indicated by election to leadership positions in the professional societies of the field, election to honorary scientific societies, such as the National Academy of Science, and receipt of major prizes in the field, such as the Nobel Prize.

Figure 3.4: Anderson's Criteria for Judging Scientific Expertise, ranked from least knowledgeable to most knowledgeable.[180]

(a) Conflicts of interest, such as receiving funds from agents who have stake in getting people to believe a particular claim.
(b) Evidence of previous scientific dishonesty, such as plagiarism, faking experiments or data, and repeatedly citing research that does not support one's claims.
(c) Evidence of misleading statements, such as cherry picking data or other misleading use of statistics, or taking quotations out of context.
(d) Persistently misrepresenting the arguments and claims of scientific opponents, or making false accusations of dishonesty against them.

Figure 3.5: Anderson's Criteria for Judging Honesty[181]

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[180] Anderson, 146.
[181] Anderson, 147.

> (a) Evasion of peer-review: refusing to share data for no good reason; refusing to reveal one's methods and procedures in enough detail to permit others' replication of one's experiments; failing to submit research to peer-reviewed journals; publicizing one's ideas in the press or in political circles before making one's case before experts.
> (b) Dialogic irrationality: continuing to repeat claims after they have been publicly refuted by others, without responding to the refutations.
> (c) Advancing crackpot theories in domains other than the one under investigation – for example, that HIV does not cause AIDS.
> (d) Voluntarily associating with crackpots – e.g., publishing their work, or placing one's own work for publication in their venues.

Figure 3.6: Anderson's Criteria for Judging Epistemic Responsibility[182]

As stated above, Anderson is dependent upon both evidential and reliabilist criteria, and from her three-pronged approach, this point is made clear. Her ordering of scientific expertise is ultimately based in evidentialism (the reliabilist would argue that an appeal to expertise is a form of evidence but it does not equate to having correct responses), but, on the other hand, her criteria for honesty and epistemic responsibility appear to map well to our distinctions of object and procedural reliability – for the criteria of honesty, an individual's predisposition to lie in the past makes them less reliable and for the criteria of epistemic responsibility, reliabilism is invoked in the assumption that certain practices such as peer-review lead to more rigorous and replicable results.

Through Anderson's criteria, social epistemology provides relevant reworkings of how we can evaluate the knowledge claims of experts without compromising our commitments to democracy. However, at the same time, her approach and that of Goldman and Hardwig may be limited. In extending social epistemology to media studies, I admit that social epistemology is

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[182] Anderson, 147-148.

limited in some respects by its analytic origins, which often displace structural and material phenomena in favor of the objects of reason or of phenomenal perception.

If social epistemology is to truly be extended into the domain of media studies, then it must make some accommodations. Nonetheless, I argue that the central background of Goldman's reliabilism and his general articulations of a social epistemics provide sufficient material for such accommodations. These adaptations ultimately focus on whether a socially-articulated version of reliabilism can only encompass human actors. To this question, I answer that this cannot be the case.

Representational Media or Reliable Media?

In the new media environment, a human actor's testimony of a distant event may just as well be replaced with a photograph, audio recording, or video of the event. Indeed, it seems like a large majority of our information is being mediated in some way or another through various different platforms and types of media artifacts. Especially, in scientific and political domains, we rely less on the direct testimony of human actors and more on testimonies provided through newspapers, television, and social media posts. In such situations, how are we to treat these media artifacts in relation to testimonial accounts, especially if human testimony is being depicted within the content of a media artifact?

First of all, this question is not necessarily a new one. Media studies as a discipline has a long history of approaching these issues through an ontological lens. Theorists like Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan focused on the centrality of the medium itself in organizing knowledge, rather than as serving merely as a transmission device.[183] For McLuhan, in particular, media

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[183] Harold Innis, "Media in Ancient Empires," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964).

were seen as extensions of human qualities – photography was an extension of sight, audio recordings were an extension of hearing, etc.[184] Philosophical approaches in aesthetics have made similar claims, with various figures approaching a medium like photography through its relationship to our perceptual phenomena.[185]

The issue here is that these media lack the embodiment and subjectivity of our perceptually acquired knowledge. Others can alter photographs and edit audio and video recordings, while no such *intentional* tampering can occur with our perceptual experiences.[186] It becomes difficult, then, to make comparisons between our sight and a video recording if a video can be tampered to reflect the intentionality and motivations of other social actors. So-called representational media, therefore, seem to fall somewhere between being an extension of our perceptual capacities and being more akin to the spoken testimony of others. However, reliabilism provides an interesting approach here; it can account for the internal cognitive capacities of perceptions, the honesty of human testimony, and the accuracy of non-human objects like thermometers, so why can't it be extended into our accounts of media ontology?

Under a reliabilist account of media, certain types of media may be more reliable in expressing their contents than others. For example, just as Susan is more reliable than Al, video and audio recordings, as types of media, may be more reliable than spoken or written testimonies. Here, we are not making claims regarding the casual chains established by each token video or audio recording, nor are we dependent upon a vague comparison to representationality or perception, but instead we can rely on empirically derived beliefs

[184] McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

[185] Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 3 (1981): 577–603; Kendall L. Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (1984): 246–77; Dan Cavedon-Taylor, "Photographically Based Knowledge," *Episteme* 10, no. 3 (September 2013): 283–97, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2013.21.

[186] Perhaps we could be drugged or brainwashed, but these examples seem different from having false ideas implanted into our heads or having our perceptual experiences edited down to create false beliefs.

concerning the past accuracy of these medium *types* versus others. Ultimately, just as we may say that the digital clock on your computer is more reliable than the analog clock on your wall, or that the fuel gauge in a constantly-inspected car is more reliable than the fuel gauge in a non-inspected car, we can make comparisons between the probability that certain media types provide us with correct and accurate knowledge.

This type of view would provide a basic account for why we hold certain forms of media to be more trustworthy than others without leading to some universalist position that a photograph, audio recording, or video cannot be disproved by spoken or written testimony. Ultimately, as media philosopher Mike Sandbothe notes, representational views of media must give way to the situated context of token media artifacts.[187] However, rather than throwing us into relativism, where all media types provide the same degree of justification, reliabilism seems primed to allow for such contextual features while also expressing the commonsense views we seem to hold towards media types and their associated epistemic features.

Ultimately, then, when it comes to fact-checking a medium such as a photograph using written evidence, reliabilism holds that photography as a type of medium may be more reliable than writing. But it would also take into account the reliability of the social actors involved in contradicting the photograph. If the contradictory account is given by someone who, using Anderson's criteria, has no direct expertise to the event in question, has lied in the past, and has been historically associated with conspiratorial positions, we are unlikely to believe such an account. But if the account comes from a direct and reliable actor, then we may yield our initial dispositions to believe in the photograph. It seems, here, that the context of the specific artifact is

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[187] Mike Sandbothe, *Pragmatic Media Philosophy: Foundations of a New Discipline in the Internet Age*, trans. Andrew Inkpin, 2005, http://www.sandbothe.net/381.html.

taken into question while, at the same time, reliabilism provides an avenue for assessing

important epistemic elements which may affect the overall probability of an account.

Justificatory Networks

When we review the final result of our theorizing, we end up in a position where, to

analyze the epistemic probability of any proposition, one is committed to analyzing, as best as

possible, the reliability of the various different human and non-human actors which surround and

situate this proposition. Overall, we are left with a network of competing justificatory positions

which must be sorted out. For example, let's imagine the scenario below:

> You watch a CSPAN video posted on Facebook by CNN which shows White House
> Press Secretary, Jen Psaki. She claims that US President Joe Biden told her that "Ted
> Cruz is more honest than Donald Trump."

Here, (assuming no prior knowledge of Ted Cruz and Donald Trump) in order to determine

whether we should believe that Ted Cruz is more honest than Donald Trump, or whether we

should reject this claim, we would need to depend on the reliability of 1) CSPAN (the video's

producer), 2) video as a type of medium, 3) CNN's Facebook account (the video's distributor),

4) Jen Psaki, 5) spoken testimony as a type of medium, and 6) Joe Biden, as well as 7) the

process/order through which we analyze these various prior actors.

This process is likely to occur instantly in the average person, who mixes reliabilist and

evidentialist assumptions as Anderson does. But in outlining the basic elements, we may be able

to more critically reflect on the various different processes and subprocesses that occur with

respect to the types of epistemic claims that are given to us in the new media environment.

Ultimately, it is not the purpose of this project to attempt to map out, in detail, the whole

epistemic process and the various manners through which the competing probabilities of each

actor in this network change the resulting belief in the proposition. Rather, the goal here is to

outline how these elements all play an important role in assessing epistemic justification, and how future projects must come to terms with the complexity of these various elements. It is here, that I take my most radical position – one that, to my knowledge, has not been outlined in any prior account – that an analysis of any epistemic phenomena is dependent upon a justificatory network of various human and non-human objects as well as the reliability of the subjective and procedural elements that any given actor uses to navigate through this network.

In many respects, the above network of competing actors seems reminiscent to certain perspectives common in Science and Technology Studies, especially the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour. For Latour, an actor-network is able to assess the dimensions of competing causal or material processes which develop between human and non-human actors in a given system.[188] The difference between our justificatory network and the networks of Latour is that we are not accessing causal dispositions or distributions of power in a material sense,[189] but rather the epistemic weight that various different processes have which can be reflected in both human and non-human actors and the inferential moves we – as situated, conceptually-capable subjects – make when accessing them in relation to each other.

Additionally, Latour misses the epistemic dimension that certain objects may have. For Latour, objects like doors may causally conditions human actors to respond in certain ways,[190] but they don't function in relation to any system of knowledge or knowledge production – a door does not "tell us" to believe in certain things in the way that a human actor can. On the other hand, when we extend reliabilism to objects, some objects seem to "speak" or produce

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[188] Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369–81.

[189] Latour, for example, thinks that at the simplest level, "ANT is a simple material resistance argument." This can be found in Latour, 370.

[190] To use an example from Bruno Latour, "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 225–58.

"testimony" in competition with human subjects. In many respects, technological objects such as DNA tests, lie detectors, pregnancy tests, facial recognition technologies, retinal scans, and CCTV recordings act as a kind of testimony which can be deployed against the epistemic accounts of human subjects. We may even imagine cases where mundane objects like clocks, fuel gauges, and thermometers provide "testimony" contra human actors. Furthermore, if reliability can encompass both human and non-human actors, then calling a measuring device unreliable can be akin to downplaying or reducing the honesty of the kinds of epistemic accounts a non-human object is giving.

Ultimately, we have outlined a yet unrealized project in media studies and in philosophy, which we will later further develop in practical scenarios. To summarize my theoretical intervention, reliabilism is an epistemological theory which can be used to ground subjective processes like perception, processes which are necessary for encountering objects in the world. It can additionally be extended into human and non-human actors to account for the probability that the epistemic reports of these actors are correct. Finally, it can be used to assess the types of procedures we use when navigating through networks of various reliable actors. The result is a unique contribution to the field of media studies – we can now engage in a kind of epistemic mapping operation which, if reliabilism is correct, should ultimately avoid circularity or infinite regress. The next chapter will outline how this theory can be applied to current discussion of verification in the new media environment. However, for the remainder of this chapter, we should briefly touch upon some of the possible objections that may result in response to this intervention, and ways that reliabilism can be defended from these objections.

4. Defending the Theory in Light of Critical Epistemologies

To conclude this theoretical intervention, let us consider two objections to the above stated view. The first objection is that the above theory may not be compatible with social constructionism as an epistemological and ontological enterprise. The second concerns how media studies can include the veridical elements I have outlined while also keeping a normative critical stance which privileges the positions of underrepresented voices. In this final section, I will sketch out some brief responses to both of these potential objections.

Social Epistemology and Constructionism

The issues of social epistemology's compatibility with constructionism is one that extends to both sides of the debate. Constructionists may worry that I am developing a reactionary approach which dismisses the critical theory they have built up. On the other hand, Godler – one of few scholars to write directly on a media studies/social epistemology crossover – notes his disdain for constructionist approaches, going as far to assert that they are actively denying reality.[191] The implicit assumption of his research appears to be that analytic social epistemology is too realist in nature to be compatible with constructionism.

Neither view is correct here. Surely Goldman's reliabilism was born out of a desire for objectivity and greater naturalism in epistemology, but in the manner I have described, reliabilism can largely be understood in a pragmatic and anti-representational sense.[192] Our theory allows us to determine a process' reliability as a probabilistic relation between two particular reference classes, but it cannot be used to determine whether these reference classes exist as ontologically real entities. For example, Goldman talks of "true belief production" but

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[191] Godler, "Why Anti-Realist Views Persist in Communication Research."
[192] Although, to be clear, I think pragmatism and anti-representationalism are compatible with a certain variety of naturalism. See Price, *Naturalism Without Mirrors*.

what does he mean here? The representationalist may talk of 'true' here as a disposition to give the facts, but the anti-representationalist may talk of 'true' as a disposition to use language in accordance with convention.

For Goldman, the anti-representationalist program may appear to fall into the relativist category, but I disagree.[193] They aren't necessarily looking at how *individual beliefs* accord with convention, as he stereotypes Rorty and the Strong Programme, but they may just as well look at the dispositions of belief-forming processes. For example, imagine Group X performs a procedure that says 'tomorrow X will happen' and Group Y's procedure leads them to a different conclusion – 'tomorrow Y will happen.' Here, we can still analyze the disposition to give reliable accounts. If X indeed happens, we can say that Group X's procedure was correct. But this doesn't necessarily lead to the view that X is a real ontological class of things.

Similarly, we may view an individual's abilities to perform math operations in two ways: a representational manner and an anti-representational manner. In the representational framework – the individual is demonstrating their knowledge of factual mathematical truths – and in the anti-representational framework – they are demonstrating their ability to use words and symbols in accordance with convention. In the second case, the anti-representationalist is solely concerned with behavioral procedures and practices as expressive phenomena and takes no concern with their descriptive capacity. Mathematics, here is understood in the sense of doing or performing a phenomena in calibration with a community of other doers, not as a description or manipulation of logical facts in the world. In other words, if we are to say the statement, 'she is reliable at factoring equations,' we our not committing ourselves to an ontology where

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[193] In fact, Goldman may be categorizing the positions in such a way that the framework I present – one which does not even need to depend upon scientific or metaphysically realist assumptions – is omitted from discussion.

'equations' are ontologically real, abstract objects – the relation is understood only at the level of pragmatic linguistic usage, not in the language-game of metaphysics.

My response to the first objection is therefore, that reliabilism works under both representational and anti-representational assumptions – an individual could be viewed as reliably knowing mathematical truths or as reliably calibrating their symbolic communication practices to the conventions of their overall community. The metaphysical position we take in this debate is largely inconsequential. Ultimately then, there should be no concern as to whether reliabilism is commensurable with social constructionist approaches to knowledge.

Social Epistemology and Strong Objectivity

The second concern is that social epistemology may bring back a standard of objectivity which is detrimental to the epistemic positionality of oppressed groups. One of the most developed and popular ideas of a standpoint epistemology comes from Sanrda Harding, who argues for a position of *strong objectivity* where "all knowledge attempts are socially situated, and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects."[194] The central idea here is that objectivity cannot come from a top down perspective but must be looked at from the positionality of those and their social relations to the object of study – it is, in contrast, a bottom up process of knowledge construction. For Harding, this idea is an extension of the Hegelian approach to the master/slave relationship – the slave, or the social actor at the lower end of a relative hierarchy, achieves a type of embodied knowledge and a perspective of the upper hierarchies that members of the upper hierarchies cannot themselves come to understand.[195] This type of view challenges some of the assumptions of

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[194] Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?,'" *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 444.
[195] Harding, 442.

expert evaluation. How can we hold onto these types of critical epistemological perspectives when expertise is inherently tied to elitist and hierarchical notions of knowledge production?

The answer is that Harding's approach here is fundamentally tied to reliabilist sentiments in the first place. For example, imagine Eric, who in the past day, has told the truth at a rate of 85%. It would seem from this fact that Eric is pretty reliable in his testimony. But the strong objectivist would entirely object to this hasty assumption.

The reason is that Eric's reliability may be dependent upon the positionality of the social actors with whom he is engaged. For example, what if we further elaborated to say that Eric is a misogynist – in the day measured, his group of social relations was already skewed such that he had 80 encounters with men and 20 encounters with women, and he told the truth at a rate of 100% to the first group and rate of 25% to the second. Here, it appears that the "objective" probability of Eric's reliability is skewed, for if one is a man, one should actually treat Eric to be perfectly reliable, and if one is a woman, then one should treat him as a liar.[196]

This approach is essential to critical studies of technology. A facial recognition program may have an accuracy of 98%, but what if, due to the data sets in which the program was trained and assessed, it is only 50% reliable with women of color? In this example, standpoint epistemology both depends upon a position similar to reliabilism and also provides an interesting critique of how the epistemology has been developed, a critique which has been noted by figures such as Brandom[197] – how context-specific should a probability be before we can act with normative certainty upon the information?

If we take note of the critiques given by Harding, it appears that our common notion of 'expertise' is too literally tied to some kind of formal structure of knowledge production rather

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[196] And he's also certainly a misogynist pig.
[197] See Brandom, "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism." 386.

than as a stand-in for an embodied epistemic perspective. While it is true that those with formal

education in certain technical fields will be experts as a result of their embodied perspectives,

others have embodied perspectives from non-technical life experiences that must be noted.

Michaelian sees this position as a way to blend reliabilism with feminist positions in

epistemology which reject the idea of a universal subject S:

> …there is space for a position that both endorses standard feminist arguments against "S knows that P" epistemologies and maintains that the central aim of "S knows that P" epistemology is worthy of pursuit, a position according to which differences of embodiment matter methodologically, but not metaphysically.[198]

In this passage, Michaelian points to the idea that a rejection of a universal subject as potentially

skewed against minority epistemic positions is a methodological critique of knowledge, but it

does not depart from the metaphysical view that there exists some type of knowledge. Instead, it

merely changes the methodology of how this knowledge is to be accurately assessed.[199]

Ultimately, the ideas expressed in this chapter do not seem to conflict with the critical

perspectives argued elsewhere. As Harding would note, critical epistemologies cannot argue

against basic claims of justification without undoing their own prospects – the position of

relativism appears to endorse the same criteria of equality among epistemic standpoints as does

objectivist science.[200] The solution is therefore to engage with how certain epistemic starting

points are able to point out the "invisible" features of bias and prejudice in our epistemic

formations. Social epistemology, as developed in analytic philosophy, can help here, and there

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[198] Kourken Michaelian, "Privileged Standpoints/Reliable Processes," *Hypatia* 23, no. 1 (2008): 69, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2008.tb01166.x.

[199] Michaelian may be arguing for a position which is closer to what Harding calls "strong methodology," in which the method of achieving objectivity is changed but not the definition of objectivity itself. See Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 462.

[200] Harding, 450.

some figures whose research into the epistemic positions of minorities and oppressed groups may prove invaluable to these efforts.[201]

5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided the basic outline for an intervention between media studies and analytic social epistemology. While I have not provided an exhaustive account of how these fields are interrelated, I have demonstrated that there is a transdisciplinary level of analysis which neither field can quite capture in their present states. This analysis concerns the extensive justificatory network that results when a variation of reliabilism is endorsed and extended to encompass human actors and technical objects with repeatable indicatory processes. Ultimately, such an account is useful for mapping out the relevant epistemic phenomena that we encounter in the new media environment, and it forms the most ambitious attempt to reincorporate veridical epistemological perspectives from analytic philosophy into the broad theoretical domain of contemporary media studies.

With our theory laid out, the next chapter will attempt to incorporate it into practical analyses of media. We will specifically look at newsroom practices, fact-checking, media literacy, and conspiracy theorizing to see how these phenomena can be discussed in relation to our theoretical approach. The results of this expansion should further situate this theoretical approach in relation to relevant scholarly literature in communication field and demonstrate its applicability in real world evaluation practices.

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[201] See especially, Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State Univ of New York Pr, 2007), 11–38; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Chapter 4

Media Literacy, Source Evaluation, and Verification

With a full account of reliabilism laid out, we can now apply some of the main points of this theory to established literatures in communication to probe some potential solutions to the objectivity crisis. This ultimately constitutes the first crossover between analytic epistemology and media studies in North American scholarship. Prior crossovers have been theorized elsewhere through published articles from within the past year[202] and indirectly in the past two decades,[203] but many accounts which utilize analytic theory to guide analyses of the new media environment do so within a specific philosophical tradition; they speak to other philosophers. Unlike these approaches, this chapter is meant as practical guide for non-philosophers – how can a theory, with little prior involvement in media studies, be applied to solve the pressing issues of the contemporary objectivity crisis both as it exists in the US and as it has manifested abroad.

To attend to the theoretical components of contemporary communication studies, the prior chapter serves to connect reliabilist epistemology in a way that may be relevant to contemporary theoretical analyses, especially those coming from STS concerning strong objectivity, object-oriented ontologies, and actor-networks. In this chapter, we will now apply reliabilism to perform a dual project of legitimizing certain facets of our journalistic institutions and delegitimizing sources misinformation. The legitimation process concerns how journalists and fact-checkers can be defended on the grounds that they are involved in social and

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[202] The only source I have found to use analytic epistemology in a comparative manner is Yigal Godler, Zvi Reich, and Boaz Miller, "Social Epistemology as a New Paradigm for Journalism and Media Studies:," *New Media & Society*, January 20, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819856922.

[203] I especially see such work being done in German pragmatist-influenced philosophy of Jurgen Habermas (especially his later work) and Mike Sandbothe. See Habermas, *Truth and Justification*; Sandbothe, *Pragmatic Media Philosophy: Foundations of a New Discipline in the Internet Age*.

professional conventions which are more reliable than those exercised by the typical institutional outsider. This process crucially bypasses the question of direct institutional legitimacy by stating that it is not that media institutions are reliable *as institutions*, but rather they are reliable, given their promotion of certain forms of procedural reliabilism. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that we may equally use our theory to delegitimize the practices of conspiratorial actors. By revising our commonsense definition of conspiracy theorizing to encompass the evaluation processes underlying belief-formation rather than the beliefs themselves, we can label actors "conspiratorial" without compromising healthy epistemic dissent in the public sphere.

Ultimately, these engagements demonstrate that there are interesting ways that reliabilism may be used in scholarly circles. It can help us to critique media institutions without validating their biases, to develop media literacy strategies which take into account multi-source evaluation, and to evoke some barriers as to what constitutes healthy political and scientific dissent in the greater public sphere.

1. Legitimizing News Media

The idea of legitimizing news media would probably appear foreign and reactionary to a scholar twenty years ago, but the circumstances have yielded a need for more complex forms of engagement. In returning to Nietzsche's discussion on truth from the first chapter, we may understand truth in two ways: it can be a metaphysical, representational notion or an anti-representational notion – the kind articulated in our idea of social constraint. Here, it is important to see that critiques of news media generally focus on the former – they ask questions concerning the presentation and choices of media in relation to a non-represented absolute standard.

On the other hand, anti-representational notions ask whether the news media *gives accurate reports* – whether they have a disposition to accuracy *in the reports they do give*. In

making this distinction, a process of legitimation is more concerned with making comparisons between sources using the latter standard of truth.[204] Outlining this distinction is important, as we discuss the notion of social construction as specifically outlined in the American sociological tradition, a tradition which relies on questions of positionality in their critique of journalistic practices.

The Social Construction of News Content

Prior accounts of journalistic procedures have largely been critical of newsroom practices and the unstated influences upon mass media. Gaye Tuchman, for example, argues that positions of objectivity were a part of ritualization to the norms and practices of the newsroom.[205] She notes that certain practicies, such as the deliberate presentation competing views to look non-biased, don't represent reality as much as they assume a certain a political standard.[206] Schudson agrees with Tuchman that news is constructed, but he is careful with his critiques stating, "we didn't say journalists *fake* the news, we said journalists *make* the news."[207] He cites several instances of knowledge production strategies including gatekeeping and routine beats.[208] And while journalists are not *lying* in these instances, they are still participating in a construction of knowledge through the content they ultimately select and the institutional sources they choose to parrot. The practices ultimately create a "steady source of news,"[209] but this news content is not

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[204] Though, I think, in terms of embracing positionality, reliabilism could be construed as defending metaphyiscial critiques concerning the racial, class, or gendered bias of media representations in comparison to an outside standard.

[205] Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 660–79.

[206] Tuchman.

[207] Michael Schudson, "The Sociology of News Production," *Media, Culture & Society* 11, no. 3 (July 1989): 263, https://doi.org/10.1177/016344389011003002.

[208] Schudson.

[209] Schudson, 271.

necessarily untainted from institutional influence and social norms (if such a thing is even possible).

While Tuchman and Schudson focus on ethnographic material gathered in newsrooms, other critics have focused on the political economic factors in news production. Chomsky and Hermann, for example, famously refer to the economic underpinnings of liberal news media organizations as a "propaganda model."[210] Bagdikian similarly argues that US news media has become increasingly consolidated into large-scale media conglomerates which put news media more and more under the control corporate elites.[211] This centralization threatens to decrease a pluralism and diversity of opinions in favor of commercial interests.

The general view of sources is a skepticism towards the objectivity of journalistic actors. However, my question is whether these institutional practices are tainted to the point of illegitimacy. Here, it seems we often unfairly assume legitimacy to be a binary (either/or) condition rather than continuous and relative to other comparable models.[212] While journalistic actors construct knowledge, it seems like *any* social structure which collects and distributes information, including scientific and academic knowledge, is influenced by social norms and procedures. The question of asserting legitimacy is not an appeal to the abstract objectivity but to the epistemic reliability of these institutions in comparison to current and theorized alternatives.

In relation to *current* alternatives, the specific occupational norms of journalistic institutions may create reliability-promoting social constraints which non-institutionalized forms of information dissemination lack. For example, though Tuchman is critical of journalistic claims to objectivity, she notes that the ritual of objectivity is a strategy to prevent libel suits:

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[210] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2011).
[211] Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, Revised Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

> The newsmen may be held accountable for the accuracy of any and all of these "facts." The "facts" are read by both the general news consumer and the "concerned" news consumer (the person whom the story quotes, describes, and/or reports). If the concerned news consumer feels he can prove damage to his business, reputation, etc., he may sue for libel. While libel suits are relatively rare, when they do occur, they place news organizations in financial jeopardy. Endangering a newspaper's reputation, a libel suit may also affect the general news consumer's proclivity to buy the newspaper.[213]

This is a constraint that does not play a large role in the layperson's creation of knowledge online. While laypersons can be subject to libel suits, there is a matter of reach and incentive. Low-profile users are less likely to be noticed by the offended party and may have the benefits of anonymity when compared to journalists and news media companies who not only speak to larger audiences but also have larger financial assets that are more worth the time and effort of a suit.[214]

There are, of course, limitations in this latter comparative strategy between news production and the content production of laypersons online. While there may be a difference in the scope and reliability of information-gathering practices, there is also a discrepancy in the roles and motivations that these actors follow. It is therefore difficult to determine to what extent journalists have more reliable epistemic processes and to what extent this is a result of social pressure rather than some standardized occupational practice. An interesting point of comparison between journalistic practices and that of the layperson would therefore need to concern practices whose general scope and motivations align both within and outside of institutional settings in order to reduce the confounding effects of social pressure and role .

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[213] Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual," 663.
[214] This is, of course, does not apply to laypersons who are celebrities or microcelebrities in online spaces.

Media Literacy and Fact-Checking

A better starting point for comparison between the practices of institutional and non-institutional actors may therefore lie, not at the level of content production, but at the level of content verification. Here, the motivations of both the journalist and the layperson are the same – to determine the reliability given media texts.

Historically, in journalism, the practice of verification would have concerned what is today called *internal fact-checking*, where the factual accuracy of news material is verified prior to publication.[215] Graves and Amazeen note that this practice has been around since at least the 1920s, when *Time* and *The New Yorker* established fact-checking departments.[216] In smaller newsrooms, where resources were lighter and roles multi-faceted, verification would be performed by copy editors rather than departments, but the overall role and process would be the same.[217]

In the 21st century, however, the term fact-check has come to refer to practices which verify material published *outside* of the newsroom for the purposes of correction and analysis – in Graves and Amazeen's terminology, this type of fact-checking is called *external fact checking*.[218] This shift in focus from internal fact-checking to external fact-checking was caused both from the implosion of information online and from the tighter schedules of newsrooms which restricted the extent to which dedicated verification roles could be delegated.[219] In 2003, FactCheck.org became the first organization specifically dedicated to external fact-checking, and in 2007, PolitiFact and the Washington Post's Fact Checker were established, reaching larger

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[215] Lucas Graves and Michelle A. Amazeen, "Fact-Checking as Idea and Practice in Journalism," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication, February 25, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.808.
[216] Graves and Amazeen.
[217] Graves and Amazeen.
[218] Graves and Amazeen.
[219] Graves and Amazeen.

audiences.[220] Graves notes that the US model spread internationally by the 2010s, and by 2018, over 100 such organizations were in existence.[221]

In contrast to fact-checking, the movement for media literacy in education did not fully emerge until the post-war era and it did not necessarily involve epistemic verification. The broader goals of the media literacy movement were first articulated in a 1993 report concerning the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy.[222] In the conference, the participants reached the following definition of media literacy: "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes."[223] In a later article, Renée Hobbs restates the definition with an additional goal; in her terms media literacy concerned access, analysis, *evaluation*, and communication.[224] She also questions the meaning of these terms, to what extent media literacy should cover subjects like production, and what existing curriculum (if any) media literacy should be taught within.[225]

Hobbs' outline of the field demonstrates the vast expanse of intellectual territory that the notion of media literacy covers, but for our purposes, we should explicitly focus on her inclusion of 'evaluation' as an additional goal of media literacy education. 'Evaluation' seems to explicitly differ from 'analysis' in that concerns the proper *selection* of media texts. So, to outline the implicit strategies developed from each of goals, *access* concerns one's relation to the texts in question, *analysis* concerns one's ability to read and understand said texts, *evaluation* concerns

[220] Lucas Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 5 (April 4, 2018): 615, https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1196602.
[221] Graves, 617.
[222] Patricia Aufderheide, *Media Literacy. A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy* (Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program, 1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N, 1993), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED365294.
[223] Aufderheide, 6.
[224] Renee Hobbs, "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement," *Journal of Communication* 48, no. 1 (1998): 16.
[225] Hobbs.

one's ability to select relevant texts and exclude irrelevant texts, and *communication* concerns

one's ability to make purposive use of the selected material.

For our purposes, then, it seems like verification practices occur at the level of source

evaluation. But what exactly occurs at the level of evaluation? In fact, what even occurs during

the institutional practices of fact-checking?

2. Critiques of Verification Practices

These questions actually pose some threats to the very idea of verification practices. A

number of problems have been leveled against the methodologies of fact-checking institutions.

An ambitious attempt to undermine the practice was put forward by Uscinski and Butler.[226] They

argued that bias occurs due to the non-randomized selection of statements, that there is a lack of

standardization concerning the treatment of multi-fact statements, and that there inability to use a

bivalent (true/false) logic on certain types of claims.[227] They disturbingly found that in a sample

of 1,057 fact checks, roughly 40% of checks combined facts under the guise of a single

statement.[228] This practice introduces an implicit element of bias. For example, if a politician

were to give a sentence with two factual statements inside, a fact-checker could analyze both as a

single sentence or each separately. If one of the factual statements is false, this could be the

difference between the politician having a truthfulness of 50% versus a truthfulness of 0%. The

additional confounding effects of this practice across all fact checks puts the supposedly un-

biased verification procedure in question.

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[226] Joseph E. Uscinski and Ryden W. Butler, "The Epistemology of Fact Checking," *Critical Review* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 162–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2013.843872.
[227] Uscinski and Butler.
[228] Uscinski and Butler, 167.

There is also an additional issue concerning the basic application or non-application of verification. Merpet et al. state that is general knowledge among fact-checkers that the only claims which are checkable are those which contain facts and that opinions or normative claims are not checkable.[229] They also state that there are four different types of facts: 1) those which concern historical events, 2) those which make comparisons between things, 3) those which concern the legality or illegality of an activity, and 4) those which cite statistical data.[230] However, these classifications fall apart upon analysis of real-world claims. For example, it is clear that the sentence 'a Wall Street broker gave $200,000 to politician P's campaign' is a factual claim (and, to use the deeper classifications, a historical claim). It is also clear that the sentence 'politician P is bad' is not a factual claim. But what about the sentence 'politician P is a Wall Street sellout'? What type of factual data warrants the use of the term 'sellout' here?

The ambiguity and diversity of media literacy campaigns makes it even more difficult to determine their verification ability. Social media researcher, danah boyd notes that "understanding what sources to trust is a basic tenet of media literacy education," but she also voices her skepticism that past media literacy campaigns may be contributing to current social issues rather than solving them: "media literacy asks people to raise questions and be wary of information that they're receiving … unfortunately, that's exactly why we're talking past one another."[231] For her, the problems cannot be fixed using a cultural notion of literacy, and the issue cannot be thrust upon the citizenry as if it is their job to clean up the mess of misinformation – the issues are deep, structural, and immensely complex.[232]

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[229] Ariel Merpert et al., "Is That Even Checkable? An Experimental Study in Identifying Checkable Statements in Political Discourse," *Communication Research Reports* 35, no. 1 (2018): 48–57.
[230] Merpert et al, 49.
[231] danah boyd, "Did Media Literacy Backfire?," Medium, March 16, 2018, https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d.
[232] boyd.

Sociologist and communication scholar, Franchesca Tripodi agrees that the effectivness of media literacy may be overstated She argues that media literacy proponents often obscure the literacy practices of conservatives.[233] In typifying researchers views towards conservatives she states:

> *Why don't they do their research?* some bemoan. *Don't they check the facts?* The assumption: If only *they* could learn to think critically, accessing, analyzing, and evaluating a variety of sources, then *they* would be informed voters. The thing is — they do, and they are.[234]

Tripodi's ethnographic research demonstrates that conservatives *do* actively engage with media texts, often performing similar rituals of interpretation as they would with the Bible – a practice she refers to as *scriptural inference*.[235] She further argues that scriptural inference is a form of media literacy, and that therefore, the notions that conservatives must be taught "correct" strategies of interpretation are incorrect and potentially infantilizing.[236]

According to these views, the idea of verification seems unnecessarily littered with incorrect assumptions, definitional ambiguities, and methodological errors. However, there is still room to defend the verification practices of both fact checkers and of media literacy. Furthermore, the prior literature I have summarized may play an interesting role in reinterpreting these critical studies.

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[233] Francesca Tripodi, "Alternative Facts, Alternative Truths," Medium, February 23, 2018, https://points.datasociety.net/alternative-facts-alternative-truths-ab9d446b06c.
[234] Tripodi.
[235] Francesca Tripodi, "Searching for Alternative Facts," Data & Society (Data & Society Research Institute, May 16, 2018), https://datasociety.net/library/searching-for-alternative-facts/, 6.
[236] Tripodi.

3. Defense of Media Literacy / Fact Checking

In the prior chapter, we defined the basic tenets of reliabilism – an epistemological approach which analyses the reliability of epistemic processes during belief formation. This epistemological discussion plays an interesting role in relation to the above literature on verification because, while there are methodological errors present in the way that verification has been traditionally interpreted, reliabilism is concerned with the actual comparative effectiveness of these verification strategies in real-world use. Despite the challenges, we still need to consider how effective the defined verification practices are in correctly achieving their ends. The question for this section is therefore: in light of prior concerns, can we still consider the above verification practices reliable?

Responses to Skepticism

First, in response to Uscinski and Butler's skeptical position on fact-checking, Amazeen provides a rebuttal to these claims with her own set of data.[237] Amazeen's response concerns the calibration between rival fact-checking organizations, that is, if several organizations, using different ranking systems and methodologies, could come to the same conclusion regarding a statement, then the basic principles of the fact-checkers could be upheld.[238] Amazeen demonstrates that despite all the methodological worries, the fact checkers agreed with each other at astonishingly high rates.[239] In fact, over the course of the 2008 and 2012 elections, there were only three instances of disagreement, and these cases were largely due to interpretive issues with classifying a statement.[240] In all, Amazeen's rebuttal demonstrates that, while there may be

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[237] Michelle A. Amazeen, "Revisiting the Epistemology of Fact-Checking," *Critical Review* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2014.993890.
[238] Amazeen.
[239] Amazeen.
[240] Amazeen, 17.

methodological bias in the practices of fact-checkers, their conclusions are reliably calibrated to each other in such a way as to provide justification for their basis.

Second, in response to boyd's views of media literacy, I wholeheartedly agree with her critiques. The issues of misinformation and disinformation require multiple perspectives of analysis and multiple solutions; media literacy and fact-checking cannot solve the issue themselves and there is indeed a risk of averting attention away from the structural issues which contribute to disinformation when we appeal to these solutions. As to whether media literacy "backfired" (to use the term in boyd's title),[241] I also agree. But, at the same time, 'media literacy' as defined and implemented since the 1990s is not the type of literacy project we need. This kind of media literacy was a critical project that lacked *veridical* concerns of evaluation. The problem isn't media literacy itself but the way that media literacy had been conducted as to obscure necessary veridical features of truth and justification.

These are features we need to respond correctly to Tripodi. In reinterpreting the notion of media literacy to include the reliability of evaluation strategies in determining correct epistemic outcomes, we should reject that her study demonstrates a conservative form of media literacy. It is true, and demonstrated through her work, that the notion of scriptural inference does challenge the assumed passivity of the conservative citizen, in contradiction to the assumed "passive receiver" role that liberal scholars have assumed them to have.[242] However, according to a reliabilist criterion of effectiveness, we should question whether scriptural inference actually produces reliably true epistemic outcomes.

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[241] boyd, "Did Media Literacy Backfire?"
[242] Tripodi, "Searching for Alternative Facts," 18.

To this question, Tripodi's own research demonstrates that the practice of scriptural inference is unreliable.[243] She notes that conservative participants engaged in verification practices in a manner similar to the "do-it-yourself" reading practices of Biblical interpretation, but this process largely relied on an unsophisticated use of Google search:

> Since Google is seen as a neutral purveyor of information, it becomes a conduit for "unbiased" news. Given their low trust in mainstream media, members of the conservative groups I observed "fact check" the news by typing "exact phrases" into Google. Following the principles of scriptural inference, they feel the need to "do their own research" in order access information they can trust. While scriptural inference might be a sophisticated mechanism for media critique, the technological underpinnings that influence their query results receive little scrutiny. Not only can the slightest shift in language dramatically skew the ideological position of the returned texts, this report also demonstrates that Google and YouTube can unintentionally expose individuals who consider themselves "mainline conservatives" to "far-right" and "alt-right" content.[244]

The problem with Tripodi's position is how the process of scriptural inference can compare to the components of media literacy, as defined by Aufderheide and Hobbs. It seems like the criteria of *source evaluation* is completely neglected for the participants in Tripodi's study or rather that active evaluation alone was viewed as the important criterion. Additionally, a literacy practice which stems from the interpretation of a single, uncontestable source does not adequately provide a position for source evaluation. Though exegetical and hermeneutic traditions still provide ample room for analysis *within content*, we should question their role in being adequate for multi-source comparative evaluations.

Comparison of Verification Practices

Wineberg and McGrew have found even more devastating results: not only evangelical conservatives, but laypersons and even some professionals in general seem to lack essential

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[243] Tripodi.
[244] Tripodi, 6.

media literacy skills in their ability to identify the honesty of different sources.[245] To test media literacy, Wineberg and McGrew analyzed 10 historians with PhDs, 10 fact-checkers, and 25 Stanford undergraduates, watching and documenting their approaches to source evaluation. In one specific study, participants were tasked with comparing the reliability of the American Academy of Pediatrics (a professional organization of medical doctors) and the American College of Pediatrics (an anti-LGBT hate group) after reading an article on their respective web pages. With five minutes and unlimited web resources to use, the results were the following:
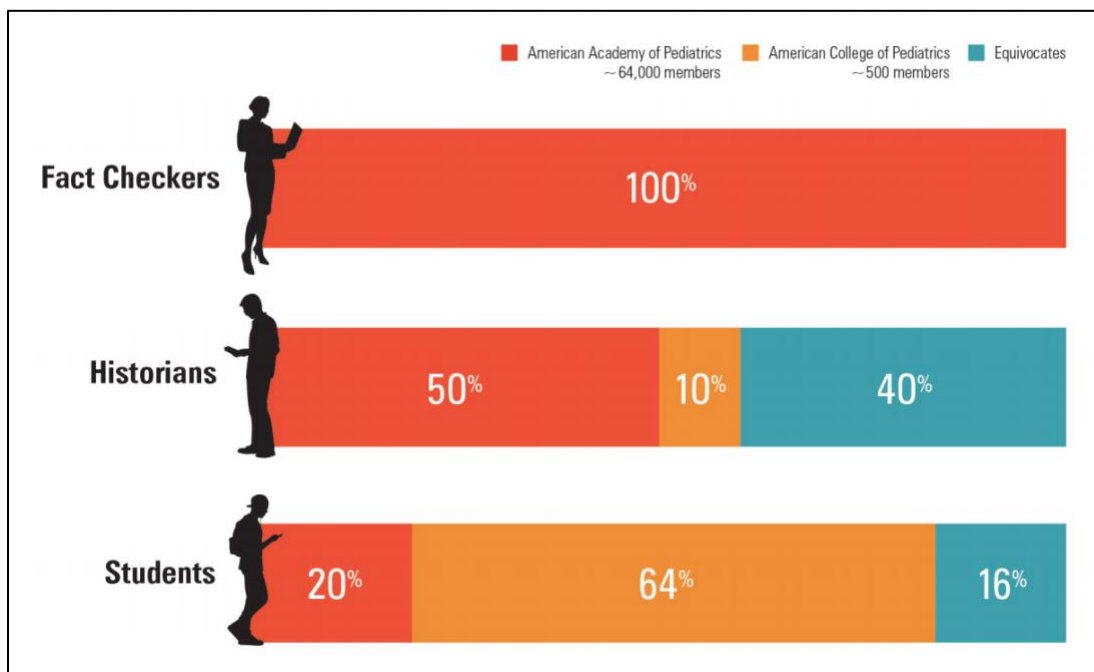

Figure 4.1: Results of source evaluation by group.[246]

Fact checkers unanimously determined that the American Academy of Pediatrics was more reliable, while the historians and students struggled with the question. Wineberg and McGrew reason that it was because, in watching the participants, historians and students were

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[245] Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, "Lateral Reading and the Nature of Expertise: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information," *Teachers College Record* 121, no. 11 (November 1, 2019): 1–40.
[246] Wineburg and McGrew.

less likely to perform "lateral reading" practices – or reading in-between texts – when they were in engaging with sources that included known biases and errors.[247]

Here, we may see the type of issues that the conservative participants in Tropodi's study suffered – there are seemingly more reliable and less reliable ways to read between the texts. Just because a person actively engages with the material does not mean that they have performed anything close to a correct evaluation. In response to literacy's critics, people may read into texts, but were never trained how to read in-between texts in accordance with the flood of information that we receive in the contemporary media environment.

We can now make the central claim of this chapter – reliabilism gives us a theoretical framework through which we can analyze and compare the source evaluation strategies of different actors in ways that have not been fully studied. For example, prior studies on fact-checking used empirical data to explain two phenomena: 1) Amazeen assessed the coherence of individual fact-checker's practices in relation to others with the same occupation[248] and 2) Wineberg and McGrew demonstrated that fact-checkers correctly evaluated sources at a higher rate than laypersons.[249] The latter study particularly demonstrates the central benefit of reliabilism; by starting with *known data* which was initially outside of the test subject's subjective field knowledge, the researchers were able to devise an empirical method to determine which fact-checking procedures were more successful under experimental conditions and what methods were exemplified within these procedures. This methodology is precisely the line of research that could be done at an empirical level using the naturalist and empiricist lines of thought running through reliabilist literature, and its results demonstrate an important counter to

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[247] Sarah McGrew et al., "The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News," American Federation of Teachers, September 18, 2017, https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg.
[248] Amazeen, 18.
[249] McGrew et al., "The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News."

right-wing appropriations of critical discourse. If we extrapolate from data on effective and ineffective evaluation strategies, we can use the theoretical insights of reliabilism to learn and develop practices of media engagement that are more reliable in real-world conditions.

The results, in terms of legitimation, are twofold. For journalism, reliabilism demonstrates that, though journalistic practices are socially constructed, the organizational practices of those in journalistic occupations are more reliable than the information gathering practices of the layperson. And for media literacy, reliabilism can be used as the theoretical underpinnings for new approaches to evaluation which have been yet to be developed.

Finally, these are strategies which cannot be easily reached through other positions of epistemic justification nor through prior methods of sociological analysis. Evidentialist routes of legitimation may force us into infinite regresses or circularity. Essentially, we can't claim that journalists are correct because other journalists say they are correct or because of some institutional criterion. This seems like a disaster when we imagine institutional distrust and claims of elitism, and it may also null important critiques leveled against these very institutions. More importantly, as one conservative opinion column pointed out, we don't have anyone to fact-check the fact-checkers, and if we did have them, who would then fact-check those fact-checkers?[250]

Likewise, while sociological categories like race, gender, class, education, professionalization, religiosity, and political affiliation may explain certain facets of an individual's reliability in evaluation or their susceptibility to certain types of rhetoric, there appears to be an underlying *process* which is not necessarily reducible to these categories alone. In essence, we have presumed that high education and professionalization map onto media

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[250] Jon Coupal, "Who Checks the Fact-Checkers?," *Daily Breeze* (blog), December 20, 2020, https://www.dailybreeze.com/2020/12/20/who-checks-the-fact-checkers.

literacy, but Wineberg and McGrew show that even those with terminal degrees do not fare as well against those who have been professionalized according to a specific role in real-time verification. In essence, their study challenges the notion that active reading strategies are enough to account for good media literacy. The notion that evangelicals are as active as liberal professionals have assumed themselves to be in their evaluations does not prove that *either* have particularly well-developed, reliable strategies. Education, class and religiosity therefore may correlate with certain types of evaluation processes but they cannot account for what the correct evaluation strategies are or why they work – only an analysis of the strategies themselves can make these types of claims.

As a result of these issues, rather than engaging in legitimation by claiming, as scholars, that "we, the media experts, say that these other experts are experts," we need to ground approaches to justification in *our practices* and *the practices of journalists* – we need to appeal to a standard of justification that 1) does not assert intellectual superiority, elitism, or institutional involvement as a central factor underlying our claims to justification and 2) does not reject a standard for which justification can be based upon. Reliabilism gives us both of these criteria. It allows us to address the first problem by basing criteria of justification on the underlying practices which are promoted by professional practices of news organizations, but crucially, this does not mean that organizations are reliable *as organizations*, nor does it mean that individuals outside of these institutions (scholars, activists, lay people) cannot critique such institutions, just that they must do so demonstrating their own reliability or the failed reliability of institutions in the context in question.

This theory, therefore, provide us with material to mount a defensive strategy against journalism while maintaining the critical projects of past literature. We can promote some

standard of objectivity without endorsing biased institutions. We can critique post-truth without being forced to refute our own notions of critique. And we can use these lessons to assert that media education projects are not somehow completely done away with by contemporary authoritarianism – there are still unexplored avenues.

4. Flat Earthers, Conspiratorialism, and Naïve Empiricism

We can now turn to reliabilism as a strategy for assessing the *unreliability* of actors whose positions have been deemed "conspiratorial." This is the second subject of analysis for this chapter: how do we develop a delegitimizing strategy against bad-faith actors, in particular those who have been radicalized into conspiratorial view of the world? Prior discussions regarding conspiratorial claims have often looked at the basic beliefs of radicalized agents, but more important prospects for research lies at the underlying belief-forming processes through which these beliefs have been manifested. Therefore, the second half of this chapter is a response to the issue of fact-checking conspiratorial claims, using reliabilism as a theoretical guide. Ultimately, I argue that when the source evaluation strategies of conspiratorial actors are assessed, they largely fall into incoherence, and that these strategies can form barriers against fact-checks. Therefore, fact-checking alone is not the answer to questions of misinformation; we may also need to respond to underlying issues in the source evaluation strategies of actors as they exist prior to attempts of fact-checking.

Epistemological Considerations of Conspiracies

The philosophical literature on conspiracy theories is divided into two interrelated camps: the first attempts to define what exactly is meant by the term 'conspiracy theory' and the second

attempts to consider whether actors who believe in such theories are justified for doing so.[251] In consideration of the first criteria, Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen state that 'conspiracy theory' can be considered according to both its meaning and its use. While, descriptively, the term refers to theories which are illogical or poor indicators of reality, it is often *used* as part of a "rhetoric of exclusion" which prevents certain opinions from being discussed in the public sphere.[252] Their findings suggest that governmental activities to subvert conspiratorial ideation among the populace may exacerbate such thinking, since they perpetuate the feelings of exclusion that conspiratorial thinking, itself, already fosters.[253]

Several philosophers agree with these worries. In a summarization of the literature, Peters explores the idea that, though some conspiracies are irrational, "such scepticism can be healthy especially in relation to corrupt political institutions and authoritarian governments."[254] He also argues that, for a healthy democracy, we need to educate students to consider dissent and teach them how to verify these types of claims.[255] Dentith agrees with these positions, stating that the very idea of "debunking" a conspiratorial claim already carries the connotation of its falsity.[256] As a response to more critical positions, he derives the *Debunker's Fallacy* where "rather than admitting that sometimes conspiracies occur, everything (including, it seems, obvious cases of collusion, deception, and conspiracy) ought to be considered through the lens of coincidence instead."[257] Since it is clear that the Debunker's Fallacy is an untenable position, Dentith thinks

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[251] Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen, "Conspiracy Theory: Truth Claim or Language Game?," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 140, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416657880.
[252] Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 142.
[253] Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 142.
[254] Michael A. Peters, "On the Epistemology of Conspiracy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, March 22, 2020, 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1741331.
[255] Peters, 2.
[256] M R. X. Dentith, "Debunking Conspiracy Theories," *Synthese*, May 14, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02694-0.
[257] Dentith, 2.

that our approach towards conspiracies must be contextual and that we must "investigate them like we would any other kind of theory."[258]

These positions are especially charitable towards conspiracy theories, and from the other side of the debate, Harris calls them out for their "premature" findings.[259] He notes that Dentith's definition does not hold upon scrutiny – there is indeed a distinction between a theory that relies on conspiracy for explanation and a 'conspiracy theory.'[260] Despite this challenge to the prior authors, Harris does not think that there can be an easy "blanket argument" through which all conspiratorial thinking can be typified.[261] Nonetheless, he does consider the notion that conspiracy theorizing may involve "errors of reasoning."[262]

Harris outlines and rejects several programs through which he can explain this faulty reasoning. He considers that conspiratorial beliefs may be a result of poor epistemic character traits – but this is difficult to prove considering the extent to which people will go to defend their conspiratorial beliefs (they often even know more about their topics than the average person does).[263] He also compares conspiracy theories with "degenerative research programmes" which have lost their explanatory character – but it seems like conspiracy theorizing has the ability to discover novel facts about a case (such as discrepancies in evidence) while degenerative programs cannot contribute such facts.[264]

Ultimately, Harris settles on two criteria which map well to conspiratorial theorizing – 1) the overreliance of errant data, and 2) the confusion of logical inference rules. In terms of the

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[258] Dentith, 10.
[259] Keith Harris, "What's Epistemically Wrong with Conspiracy Theorising?," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 84 (November 2018): 235–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000619.
[260] Harris, 237.
[261] Harris, 239.
[262] Harris, 239.
[263] Harris, 242.
[264] Harris, 246.

first criteria, Harris defines errant data as either information that is unaccounted for in official channels or information which is contradictory.[265] The problem with errant data is that "conspiracy theorising is strongly correlated with illusory pattern perception."[266] It attempts to use errant data to map out a more totalizing theory, when in reality, such data is actually faulty in the first place – it is expected that some witness accounts may be contradictory or that some information will be deemed unimportant in an official account of an event. Therefore, the conspiracy theorist will attempt to account for this data rather than exclude it as false or superfluous.

The second criteria involves the confusion of inferential warrant when it comes to modus ponens and modus tollens.[267] Harris explains that:

> Suppose that if p is true, it is enormously improbable that q. Now suppose that one observes that q. Does it follow that p is improbable? No. A simple example brings out the point. If any given lottery with many participants is fair, it is improbable that any particular entrant will win. However, it would be absurd to conclude, once a winner is named, that the lottery was probably unfair.[268]

From this point, Harris is able to explain how a lack of logical analysis can also explain conspiratorial theorizing.

I think Harris' account provides a better practical framework for discussion when compared to Peters and Dentith. This is because Harris analyzes not just the belief sets of conspiratorial actors, but the underlying processes of belief formation. What his research shows is that conspiratorial actors are conspiratorial not because of *what they believe*, but because of *how they believe* – to use reliabilist terminology, their belief-forming processes are unreliable.

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[265] Harris, 248.
[266] Harris, 248.
[267] Harris, 250.
[268] Harris, 250.

The reliabilist insight here is that certain epistemic processes lead to incorrect beliefs at a higher rate than normal, and that conspiracy theorists are more likely to follow such epistemic processes. Crucially, this insight challenges Dentith's view that conspiratorial theories must be investigated like any other theory. But we do not (and should not) use the term 'conspiracy' to denigrate a dissenting view through ad hominem means, rather we apply it to theories and theorists who 1) promote a conspiracy and 2) have demonstrably utilized unreliable belief-forming processes in the past or have grounded their current claims on processes that can be evaluated as demonstrably unreliable.

When Source Evaluation Goes Wrong: Zeteticism and Naïve Empiricism

But how would such a strategy play out in assessing the claims of conspiratorial actors? Perhaps the best and easiest example is the most extreme case – the Flat Earther who holds that all contemporary astronomy is false and that the Earth is actually a flat disk. For the Flat Earther, this position seems logical, and indeed, there is an underlying logical to this belief that is very interesting philosophically-speaking. The traditional Flat Earth sources even present their epistemological position as a counter to science and a new form of objectivity. They call it zeteticism.

The notion of zeteticism has been considered the "cornerstone" of the Modern Flat Earth Theory since its initial conception by Samuel Rowbotham.[269] Zeteticism, from the Greek word ζητέω (examine), is defined by the Flat Earth Society as follows:

> Zeteticism differs from the usual scientific method in that using zeteticism one bases his conclusions on experimentation and observation rather than on an initial theory that is to be proved or disproved. A zetetic forms the question then immediately sets to work making observations and performing experiments to answer that question, rather than speculating on what the answer might be then testing that out.[270]

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[269] "Zeteticism," The Flat Earth Wiki, accessed March 9, 2021, https://wiki.tfes.org/Zeteticism.
[270] "Zeteticism."

They continue with an example of how this methodology works:

> For example, in questioning the shape of the Earth the zetetic does not make a hypothesis suggesting that the Earth is round or flat and then proceed testing that hypothesis; he skips that step and devises an experiment that will determine the shape of the Earth, and bases his conclusion on the result of that experiment. Many feel this is a more reasonable method than the normal scientific method because it removes any preconceived notions and biases the formation of a hypothesis might cause, and leaves the conclusion up entirely to what is observed.[271]

On the surface, such a method appeals to empirical standards of objectivity and bears some resemblance to the views of classical empiricists like David Hume. However, the theory evokes an unusual degree of epistemic self-autonomy. For one, it rejects all past socio-cultural epistemic projects in favor of building up one's own self-sufficient belief set through direct perception. Additionally, this method either excludes the need for a source evaluation strategy or it relies on what I call *naïve empiricism*.

Naïve empiricism is the belief that direct perceptual experiences are the only reliable form of justification. As a consequence, all forms of testimonial evidence, and potentially even photographic and videographic evidence, are tossed aside as unreliable. For the Flat Earther, such a source evaluation strategy jettisons the need to engage in scientific debate or to defer to other sources of inquiry. Any photograph or video can be altered, any testimony can be a lie, and therefore, the only reliable source of information is oneself.

This type of strategy fits well within the individualistic conservative literacy tradition defined by Tripodi, but, as with this tradition, zeteticism is not a reliable belief-forming processes. Zeteticism's issue is that the skeptical scope of its epistemology is too restrictive to permit commonsense beliefs of any kind.

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[271] "Zeteticism."

Refuting Zeteticism and Naïve Empiricism

While the Flat Earther, in principle, has a coherent set of beliefs and uses clever tactics to counter contrary evidence, their epistemic strategy fails for three reasons: 1) they run into issues in being able to define and use every day concepts, 2) they are logically self-refuting, and 3) they do not actually subscribe to the definition of zeteticism as written.

1) Concept Use

Imagine that you – a member of the Flat Earth Society – see, walking down the street, two dogs – a Dalmatian and a Chihuahua. Clearly, these two dogs, by being dogs, are part of the same species. They are merely different breeds of dog. But then again… their size is so different. And come to think of it, you've never seen a Dalmatian and a Chihuahua mate, nor have you ever seen a crossbreed between the two. You've been told about how dogs are the product of domesticated wolves, but you cannot see this lineage in the abstract nor were you present thousands of years ago to directly perceive this domestication. You were also taught, as a child, that the word 'dog' describes both of these animals, but what if this isn't true? You were also taught that the Earth is a sphere, which totally isn't true. Can you really assume that the Dalmatian and the Chihuahua are both dogs?

According to zeteticism, you cannot take a hypothetical stance here without an experiment to back it up. You should neither assume that these animals are the same species nor that they are different species, but rather you must forgo this process and engage directly in experiment.

Of course, once you ensure that the Chihuahua and Dalmatian are both indeed the same species, you are not done yet. This experiment would have only demonstrated that the Chihuahua and the Dalmatian are the same species, but what about every other breed of dog? Are the

Chihuahua and the Dalmatian the same species as the Pug? Is the Pug the same species as the Rottweiler? According to zeteticism, you would need to conduct an experiment to test every single combination of dog breed to ensure that you aren't being fooled when you talk about dogs...

We can see that the issue here is how far to take the zetetic's reliance on direct perception. According to some philosophical views, concepts like 'dog' are already given in perception, but according to others, we only know 'dog' insofar as it is a word that has been passed down through language. Such a word carries with it a particular classification (and a particular reliance on the past empirical observation of others) that we could not readily come to without being first embedded in our language. It seems like the zetetic either has to amend their views to accommodate some basic assumption concerning the givenness of concepts or else they would be faced with an impossible task of having to empirically verify all sets of particular things to ensure that they fit within the commonsense classification that our language provides. If they take the first step, they are breaking their rule concerning preconceptions and potentially their implicit rule about testimonial knowledge (if we assume that being taught a language is a form of testimony). If they take the latter step, then the roundness of the Earth should be the last of their epistemic worries.

2) Self-Refutation

This is not the only issue for the Flat Earther. They also seem to fall into a devastating self-refutation. A similar problem has been posed for other forms of skeptical empiricism, particularly the metaphysical skepticism of David Hume and later, the logical empiricists of the Vienna Circle. These figures defined their overarching philosophical project according to a single principle. In relation to Hume, the principle is called Hume's Fork, and in relation to the

logical empiricists it is called the verification principle. The principle was originally devised as follows:

> If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[272]

According to the principle, a statement has meaning only if it can be derived logically or if it is a product of empirical enquiry. The problem with this statement, however, is that the conditions of skeptical empiricism are too strict. Since the principle, itself, is neither the product of a logical deduction, nor the product of empirical observation, by the criterion that the statement assumes, the statement is itself nonsensical.

As a variation of this line of skeptical empiricism, the zetetic also faces a similar self-refutation. If they are to believe in only the products of direct experience, then they must be able to prove this criterion, itself, to be a reliable method through direct empirical means. If they have not done this, then they are merely assuming a position without conducting experimentation and are breaking their own criterion. Additionally, if we are to assume that the zetetic is also a naïve empiricist, they are engaging in a performative self-contradiction. If testimony is an unreliable source of knowledge, then it appears as though the very act of explaining the position of zeteticism to others requires these others to break the criterion of zeteticism in order to first endorse it.

As with Hume and the logical empiricists, it appears that the underlying mechanisms through which Flat Earthers distinguish between meaningful and non-meaningful beliefs is subject to self-refutation. The principle of zeteticism fails because it claims to remove

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[272] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165.

preconceived notions and biases in observing experimental phenomena, but it treats this very methodological assumption as somehow exempt from its own consideration. In other words, the statement "I have no preconceived theoretical beliefs" is self-refuting. By stating this proposition, one is already endorsing a preconceived theoretical belief.

3) Inconsistent Subscriptions

The final (and least philosophical) issue of the Flat Earther is that the methodology of zeteticism is more or less a fabricated position of assumed pseudo-objectivity. While the Flat Earth Society has presented this position as a methodological critique of the hypothetico-deductive method of science – which in itself would be an interesting discussion – their position is more of a rhetorical distraction than it is a serious bout of inquiry. In an analysis of the Flat Earth Society at the turn of the 21st century (before their contemporary revival), anthropologist Eugenie Scott noted that the flat earther was the most conservative of all Young Earth Creationist views.[273] She defined it as an example of "extreme Biblical-literalist theology: The earth is flat because the Bible says it is flat, regardless of what science tells us."[274] This Biblical literalism is downplayed in the Flat Earth Society's own definition of the methodology, and it becomes another contradiction that the zetetic seemingly embraces.

The point of this example is to express a skepticism for the positions laid out by Dentith and others. We should agree with their points that conspiratorialism cannot be defined strictly according to a certain set of beliefs or belief systems, but on the contrary, we *can* endorse a definition of conspiratorialism which analyzes the underlying belief-formation processes of conspiratorial thinking. According to the latter definition, the Flat Earth Society is not providing

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[273] Eugenie C. Scott, "Antievolution and Creationism in the United States," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 263–89.
[274] Scott, 268.

theories which require open debate and a neutral position of fair assessment and inquiry, they are providing a cleverly devised belief-formation process which allows them to disregard all non-essential sources. Upon inspection, this source evaluation strategy runs into an endless series of contradictions.

5. Conclusion

There are three points to be made from this chapter, one intellectual and two practical. At the intellectual level, this chapter provides some manner of clarification regarding the aims and scope of scholarly critiques against news media in the American sociological tradition and demonstrates to political moderates, scientists, and right-wing figures, that these critiques do not necessarily devolve into relativism, nor do they contradict affirming studies of news media, like those of Amazeen. In this manner, we can use these discussions to push back against groups which try to connect media scholarship as causally responsible for post-truth, and to hopefully reduce the effects that these debates have had and will have on rising anti-intellectualism.[275] It is clear that studies have explicitly defined standards of social construction as different from that of lies, and therefore, these studies have no place in affirming post-truth ideology or for being implicated as such.

But at the practical standpoint, this chapter first demonstrates that pessimistic approaches towards media education miss the point. Media education has been considered by critics solely in terms of its critique and not in terms of its potential to promote proper methods of evaluation. Media studies therefore rests at a unique position going forward; it seems primed to be the point of contact between the research and development of new procedures for source evaluation and

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[275] This is a cultural debate where I see little work being done to combat the wider cultural movements expressed by right-wing and libertarian spaces, which take the form of rejecting all non-STEM scholarship.

the implementation of these procedures to 1) journalists and fact-checkers who lack clear methodological standards of verification (despite themselves being comparatively reliable), 2) to students in in media, journalism, and design university programs, and 3) to younger adolescents through grade school curricula on media literacy.

Secondly, this chapter describes a new approach towards study of conspiracy theories, one that evokes complex processes underlying our acceptance or rejection of sources. This demonstrates that certain methods of fact-checking may not undo more radical beliefs, which are developed from source evaluation strategies meant to buffer opposing views. But in pointing out such strategies, there may be future attempts at targeting or reversing these strategies directly. Will the flat-earther answer to logic? Probably not. But in identifying the possible prevalence of naïve empiricism in Flat Earther views and this evaluative strategy's relation to other forms of skepticism, both radical and not-so-radical, we may be able to better discuss some of the features that underlie radicalization.

Conclusion: A New Model of Critique

The objectivity crisis still rages on in the United States. And in hindsight, we should have seen such a crisis coming. While scholars have spent decades waging war against the establishment in hope of instigating a corrective turn, they were too narrow in their approach. We have seemingly reached the conditions of a legitimation crisis in the West, but no true upheaval of the neoliberal status quo has taken shape. I argue that this is because we have thrown all our energy into a critical analysis of institutional power without realizing that critique is dependent upon the veridical domain as well.

What scholars missed was that effective critique does not merely emerge from willpower and rhetorical flair; it has to be maintained in relation to effective strategies of accession, organization, and deployment of information. Critique is dependent upon an informed public, a citizenry which has the capacity to evaluate claims and distinguish truth from lie. Unfortunately, the contemporary United States lacks such a citizenry. Our populace only knows how to criticize but not how to effectively organize. And, as a result, our legitimation crisis has transformed into an objectivity crisis where large sections of the populace are unable to distinguish true corrective measures from the false promises of demagogues.

The solution to this crisis involves a revision of our methods of praxis and a redefinition of critique to accommodate the epistemic dimensions which have previously been dismissed. In such a manner, while the postmodern scholar has imagined the world around us to be a play of power, I further that it must also have an epistemic nature – it is more akin to a play of competing justificatory processes which emerge from our tools, instruments, media, and from each other. In essence, our very navigation through the world must involve a dependence on and a trust in certain processes over others.

However, this epistemological revision of our methods cannot promise immediate success, and it certainly cannot replace the more immediate regulatory responses to misinformation. But, at the same time, when such responses are deployed alone, the various crises of our time are merely evaded and redirected. A long-term solution to the objectivity crisis requires a true corrective turn which will end the underlying legitimation crisis.

Such a corrective needs a well-developed site of critique, it needs a media studies which is committed to addressing issues of truth and honesty with full force, which takes seriously the epistemic dimensions of the social world, and which understands the dual importance of both the critical and the veridical. This is the site of critique which I have outlined in these pages.

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