



The Unequal Damages of Fake News: Amplifying Epistemic Inequality and Oppression

Laura Santi Amantini*

Abstract

This paper argues that the harm of fake news lies partly in its inequality-reinforcing effect. It shows how fake news interacts with two background inequalities, namely the unequal distribution of opportunities to become competent knowers and the unequal social status of oppressed minorities. First, I argue that fake news reinforces epistemic inequality among its recipients. The epistemic harm of believing fake news does not uniformly affect all members of society. Instead, epistemic inequality makes some citizens more vulnerable to believing fake news. In turn, believing fake news amplifies epistemic inequality by making those who fall for fake news increasingly less competent as knowers. Second, I argue that fake news amplifies status inequality within society by downgrading the status of minorities who are negatively represented in fake news stories. A significant subset of fake news targets minorities who are not recognized as equal within society, such as immigrants, Muslims and Roma minorities. The harm of being negatively portrayed in anti-minority fake news stories falls asymmetrically on members of the targeted minorities, reinforcing their oppression. Focusing on anti-immigrant fake news as the most widespread and paradigmatic example of anti-minority fake news, I show how it amplifies cultural imperialism, marginalization and systemic violence against members of immigrant minorities. Anti-minority fake news is also specifically harmful to members of targeted minorities as political agents because it contributes to denying their equal status as members of the democratic political community. This subset of fake news stories is therefore particularly corrosive to the democratic system and its core values.

Summary: Introduction. – I. Conceptualizing fake news and its harms for liberal democracies. – II. Citizens' unequal vulnerability to fake news and the amplification of epistemic inequality. – III. Oppressed minorities' unequal vulnerability to be targets of fake news. – IV. Amplifying oppression: the case of anti-immigrant fake news. – Conclusion. – Works Cited.

* ORCID: 0000-0001-5604-9389.

Introduction

Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump in the United States presidential elections. Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS. These are famous fake news dating back to 2016. The electoral campaign for the 2016 presidential elections in the United States (US) was characterized by an unprecedented proliferation of fake news on social media, which attracted public and scholarly attention. A growing literature has developed across political theory and social epistemology on the nature of fake news and its dangerous effects on democratic societies. It has been argued that the spread of fake news is harmful to citizens as knowers given that it can affect their beliefs and epistemic capacities, even inadvertently (see Levy 2017; Brown 2021). Furthermore, from a democratic angle, it has been argued that fake news is particularly harmful to both citizens and democratic institutions. Indeed, it affects the political agency of citizens. The perception of fake news being widespread lowers their trust in fellow citizens, in the value of democratic procedures and their outcomes, and undermines the constitutive values of democracy. Ultimately, widespread fake news could put at risk the stability of democratic institutions (see Rini 2021; Reglitz 2022). However, the philosophical literature on fake news has not engaged much with the interplay between fake news and background social injustices among citizens.

This paper defends the claim that part of the damage of fake news consists in its inequality-amplifying effect. Fake news amplifies epistemic inequality among its recipients. It also amplifies status inequality within society by downgrading the status of minorities who are negatively represented in fake news stories. Firstly, I argue that the harm of fake news on citizens as knowers falls primarily on those citizens who are already disadvantaged in terms of epistemic skills. Indeed, the epistemic harm of believing fake news does not uniformly affect all members of society. Instead, it is asymmetric since it is mediated by pre-existing epistemic inequality and contributes to deepening such inequality, further eroding the epistemic capacities of those who are more vulnerable to falling for fake news. Secondly, I argue that the content of fake news matters in determining its unequal damages. Several famous fake news stories target specific individuals belonging to the political elite (e.g., Hillary Clinton). Yet many others target members of minorities who are routinely discriminated against and marginalized in Western societies because of their ethnic background, immigrant origin, religious affiliation, and so forth. The harm of being negatively depicted in anti-minorities fake news asymmetrically falls on members of targeted minorities, strengthening their oppression. Anti-minority fake

news is also specifically harmful to members of targeted minorities as political agents because it contributes to denying their equal status as members of the democratic political community. Hence, this subset of fake news is particularly corrosive to the democratic system and to its basic values. Briefly, the diffusion of fake news, whatever its content, is distinctively harmful to epistemically disadvantaged recipients, while anti-minority fake news is specifically harmful to oppressed minorities. Such unequally distributed damages of fake news are normatively salient since they contribute to worsening social injustice and hindering political equality among citizens of democratic societies.

There are at least two important advantages in bringing into light the unequal impact of fake news on citizens of democratic societies caused by its interplay with pre-existing inequalities. Theoretically, it allows us to develop a more realistic and refined account of what is wrong with fake news. Normatively, it has important implications for how democratic institutions should respond to fake news. When theorizing what is wrong with the spread of fake news and how liberal democracies should address it, we should consider that oppressed minorities are distinctively targeted by this new form of misinformation and that anti-minority fake news specifically damages members of targeted minorities by reinforcing their oppression. When evaluating the role of citizens themselves in spreading misinformation, we should take into account the sources of unequal epistemic inequality that make some citizens more vulnerable than others to believing fake news. Moreover, we should consider that believing fake news amplifies such an epistemic inequality. Hence, addressing the unequal damages of fake news would require tackling structural causes of epistemic vulnerability. Taking background epistemic inequality into account also suggests not overstating the individual responsibility of citizens in spreading fake news and avoiding attributing equal blame on all those who spread it for their failure to behave as virtuous epistemic agents. Exploring policy implications falls outside the scope of this paper. The aim, instead, is to offer a more complete picture of the damages of fake news on democratic societies by highlighting how this new form of misinformation interacts with two background inequalities, namely the unequal distribution of opportunities to become competent knowers and the unequal social status of oppressed minorities.

The paper is structured in four sections. Before unfolding my argument, in Section 1, I define fake news, describe it as a new form of misinformation, and present some damages of fake news to citizens and democratic institutions which might seem to apply uniformly on society. In section 2, I argue that the epistemic harm of fake news to citizens as knowers affects citizens unequally. I draw on empirical literature to show that epistemic inequality makes some

citizens more vulnerable to believing fake news and argue that believing fake news amplifies such epistemic inequality, making those who fall for fake news increasingly less competent as knowers. Sections 3 and 4 argue that the content of fake news is relevant in determining what makes fake news specifically harmful to some groups of citizens. In section 3, I show that a significant subset of fake news, rather than targeting political elites, targets those minorities who are not recognized as equals within society, such as immigrants, Muslims and Roma minorities. In section 4, I focus on anti-immigrant fake news as the most widespread and paradigmatic example of anti-minority fake news. Drawing on the theory of oppression offered by I. M. Young's (1990), I argue that anti-immigrant fake news stories amplify cultural imperialism, marginalization and systemic violence against members of immigrant minorities. Therefore, these stories produce a distinctive status harm to members of the targeted minority and are particularly corrosive to the democratic value of equality.

I. Conceptualizing fake news and its harms for liberal democracies

Political philosophy has long dealt with phenomena of disinformation, such as propaganda. Disinformation, conceived as the deliberate spread of false, biased, or misleading information intended to deceive the receiver, can be distinguished from misinformation, which may not involve the deliberate intention to mislead or deceive (Brown 2021). Neither disinformation nor misinformation are new. However, over the last few years, fake news has emerged as a distinct phenomenon. Although the definition is disputed, it can be described as a story that “purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage” (Galeotti and Meini 2022). To be “fake”, news need not be literally false: it can be based on insufficient evidence or convey false information through conventional or conversational implicatures. For instance, fake news may refer to real events and yet pragmatically imply an unjustified causal relationship (Galeotti and Meini 2022; Jaster and Lanius 2018). Thus, it differs from genuine mistakes and oversimplifications made in good faith. Some scholars consider deliberate deception as a necessary condition for a piece of news to count as fake: according to Rini (2017, E45), fake news is “known by its creators to be significantly false and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely retransmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience”. Others have challenged this definition, pointing to the case of clickbait articles devised to attract views rather than to persuade readers to believe what they read. Fake

news creators may thus be simply epistemically indifferent and motivated by non-epistemic goals (Jaster and Lianus 2018; Croce and Piazza 2021). Briefly, fake news provides deceitful information, either intentionally or due to a lack of interest in its truth on the part of its creators and disseminators. Even when produced with a deliberate deceiving intention, fake news may well be further disseminated by receivers who genuinely believe it or do not deliberately intend to deceive. Hence, I consider here fake news as a form of misinformation.

Unlike previous forms of misinformation, fake news is created to be spread on the internet, particularly on social media. Social media are characterized by disintermediation (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 8). Indeed, every user can post news, share news, or increase news' popularity by reacting to a post. The lack of gatekeeping functions that journalists and editors play in traditional media facilitates the publication of false, biased, and misleading information. Moreover, social media allow an unprecedented spreadability of such information. Social media algorithms privilege the spread of content rapidly attracting reactions. Sensational, emotion-arousing fake news can thus be disseminated extremely quickly and widely. Thus, fake news on social media circulates even more quickly and widely than genuine news. Moreover, social media posts can also be easily shared as private messages through instant messaging systems, such as Whatsapp and Telegram, which amplify the diffusion of fake news. The use of these technologies and the active role of social media and instant messaging users as agents of peer-to-peer misinformation make fake news a specific form of misinformation.

Note that social media were not created as information services but as online networks enabling people to interact (Chambers 2021, 151). Social media are used mainly as a form of entertainment requiring limited cognitive effort. Checking sources and questioning the credibility of the information means going beyond the default predisposition to accept the information one receives (Lewandowski 2012). It requires an extra cognitive effort that social media as entertaining environments disincentivize.¹ Moreover, it also requires specific epistemic skills. Indeed, social media blur the boundary between information and entertainment, news and jokes. Navigating the contents of social media thus requires a kind of training which is not needed, for instance, when reading a newspaper. Consequently, as I argue in the next section, citizens who are less epistemically skilled and trained to discern the types of content they encounter on social media are more vulnerable to falling prey to fake news.

¹ As Humprecht (2019) reports, a 2014 study found that roughly 6 in 10 Americans do not even read the articles but only headlines when they come across news on social media.

Political philosophers have already highlighted that the spread of fake news has harmful effects on citizens and on the institutions of liberal democracies. Let us consider, first, the harmful effects of fake news on citizens as fake news consumers. Fake news undermines their personal autonomy by hindering their capacity to appreciate reasons in favor or against a certain position (Brown 2021). Citizens who believe fake news are harmed in their capacities as knowers and agents since they make their judgements based on bad beliefs and false information. What is more, fake news does not have pernicious effects only on those citizens who mistake it as genuine news and make their political judgements accordingly. Levy (2017) argued that even “sophisticated consumers”, who consume fake news for fun or to know what credulous fellow citizens believe, can be inadvertently influenced. As Levy puts it, even for those who confidently identify a claim as false, familiarity influences the processing of semantically related claims, contributing to implicit biases. From a democratic perspective, it is particularly relevant that fake news negatively affects citizens in their capacity as political agents, influencing their beliefs, political judgements and electoral choices. This can also have negative consequences in terms of the outcomes of democratic procedures. If one assumes that democracies require informed voters to function well as a collective choice mechanism, the fact that fake news can deceive citizens and even inadvertently influence those who recognize it as false means that fake news damages the outcomes of democratic decision-making.

One may observe that the impact of fake news on citizens’ beliefs and its consequences on voting should not be exaggerated. Sharing fake news on social media, or even expressing endorsement for it, does not necessarily imply believing its content. The goal can be just to signal which side one assumes in a polarized political environment. According to Hannon (2021), citizens often declare to believe a given assertion out of “political cheerleading” but may not, in fact, believe it to be true. For instance, Republicans sharing fake news on Hillary Clinton could simply intend to symbolically show their political affiliation and support for Donald Trump rather than express genuine belief in a fact. If Hannon is right, it is not the case that all those who appear to endorse a piece of fake news believe it and behave according to that belief. The disruptive effect of fake news on electoral choices may not be as severe as initially thought. Nevertheless, fake news remains epistemically harmful for those who believe it, however numerous they are.

Furthermore, some have argued that the real threat of fake news does not reside in its persuasive effect on people’s beliefs, but in the erosion of epistemic trust among citizens, which in turn undermines the perceived legitimacy

of democratic institutions (Rini 2021; Reglitz 2022). Fake news can be deleterious for democratic institutions regardless of whether it is widely believed or widely influential: what counts is the perception of its being widespread. Citizens of liberal democracies are increasingly aware of the fact that the information they receive can be fake news and that other citizens may believe fake news and pass it on. The awareness of widespread fake news disrupts the usual norms of testimonial knowledge and undermines the epistemic trust among citizens. The perception of other citizens as untrustworthy epistemic vectors, as Rini (2021: 43) notes, induces the belief that those people are untrustworthy as parties with whom they can “negotiate mutual self-government in good faith”. Reglitz (2022) makes the implications for the legitimacy of democratic institutions even clearer. If a citizen believes their counterparts not to be competent enough to distinguish facts from lies, or reliable from untrustworthy information sources, this citizen is likely to be doubtful of the reasonableness of their counterparts’ political views. Hence, they may judge laws and policies produced by democratic institutions as no longer worthy of their respect, to the extent that they are based on false beliefs and bad choices taken by incompetent and manipulated citizens (see Reglitz 2022, 171, 174). Thus, the perception of widespread fake news, irrespective of whether it is in fact widely believed, undermines the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Since it does not sufficiently engage with background social injustices, this literature on the harmful effects of fake news might give us the impression that fake news disrupts otherwise functioning democracies. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Existing liberal democracies are not just societies that live up to their democratic values, where citizens have equal opportunities to become competent knowers and treat one another as moral equals. On the contrary, fake news spreads in deeply imperfect democracies and has an asymmetric harmful impact on citizens as receivers and as targets of misinformation, amplifying background social injustices. In the following section, I discuss how epistemic disadvantage makes some citizens more vulnerable to falling prey to online misinformation and how, in turn, believing fake news deepens such an epistemic disadvantage. Next, in sections 3 and 4, I consider how a particular subset of fake news - i.e., anti-minorities fake news - exploits and deepens the oppression of targeted minorities, focusing on anti-immigrant fake news stories as the most prominent and widespread examples of anti-minority fake news.

II. Citizens' unequal vulnerability to fake news and the amplification of epistemic inequality

Epistemic inequality mediates the damage of fake news on citizens as knowers. It makes some of them more vulnerable to believing fake news. Furthermore, it makes believing fake news more detrimental for those who are already epistemically disadvantaged. Someone may immediately observe that exposure to fake news can be harmful to anyone and that surely nobody is immune from falling for fake news. Indeed, humans are all susceptible to cognitive distortions and biases that may lead to attributing unwarranted credibility to a piece of information. Confirmation bias encourages us to take information as true when it confirms previous beliefs, including stereotypes and prejudices. Moreover, fake news on social media and instant messaging systems is typically received from friends and acquaintances, which may grant it unwarranted credibility. Indeed, fake news exploits the mechanism of testimonial knowledge, whereby a person believes a given proposition because the proposition was presented to them by another person. Rini (2017) notes that testimonial norms are ambiguous on social media: sharing a post on Facebook or retweeting on Twitter does not unequivocally mean endorsing it or being sufficiently competent on the matter. Yet, users tend to take information as true, or at least possibly true, when it is passed on from their social media contacts, even when the reported fact sounds weird. Roughly put, the fact that a person we trust endorses P (or might have endorsed P, given that they reported P) is taken as testimonial evidence that P is true (or, at least, might be true).

From the fact that nobody is immune from falling for fake news, however, it does not follow that citizens are equally susceptible to believing fake news. Indeed, citizens do not have equal opportunities to become competent knowers: epistemic goods such as education are unevenly distributed in society and citizens do not develop epistemic skills to the same degree. I argue that epistemic inequality makes some citizens more vulnerable to believing fake news or accepting it as plausible and passing it on, thereby misinforming others. By epistemic inequality, here, I mean the unequal possession of cognitive abilities, epistemic resources such as concepts, and skills such as analytic thinking to assess the credibility of a piece of information. Citizens are unequally skilled and unequally trained in judging whether the source reporting news should be trusted, whether it is possible to trace credible evidence behind the news and, when implications are drawn, whether such implications follow from the reported facts. Epistemically disadvantaged citizens, thus, are more vulnerable to failing to identify fake news, believing it or judging it as possi-

bly true, and passing it on without even trying to assess its credibility. Note that such an epistemic disadvantage is not purely innate: epistemic abilities are highly dependent on training. Education contributes to training appropriate epistemic skills. Moreover, exposure to good-quality media also contributes to making news consumers more competent as knowers, while poor-quality media reduces consumers' epistemic abilities.

Epistemic inequality alone does not predict who believes or shares fake news. Yet empirical studies on the predictors of belief in and spread of fake news suggest that epistemic inequality does contribute to making some citizens more vulnerable. According to recent reviews (Baptista and Gradim 2022, 2; see also Baptista and Gradim 2020), vulnerability to fake news correlates with lower education, reduced analytic thinking and old age, which, I argue, can be proxies of epistemic disadvantage in discerning fake news on social media. People with a lower level of education may be epistemically disadvantaged to the extent that they have been less trained to discern reliable sources of information, to identify logical fallacies and inconsistencies in reasoning and so forth. Indeed, empirical literature also documented an association between belief in fake news and reduced analytic thinking (Bronstein et al. 2019). Analytic thinking promotes the ability to distinguish meaningful statements from statements constructed without concern for truth, but it is more effortful than intuitive thinking. Indeed, default responses are suggested by intuitive cognitive processes emerging autonomously from simple stimulus-response pairings (Bronstein et al. 2019). Hence, although some individuals may be more inclined to analytic thinking as a cognitive style, analytic thinking as an epistemic skill needs to be trained. Thus, citizens with lower levels of education, who have been less trained in analytic thinking, appear epistemically disadvantaged in discerning fake news and thus are more vulnerable to believing and sharing it.

Moreover, people who received a low level of education typically have a low occupation level and live on low wages. This may be relevant when it comes to their access to online information. Indeed, empirical data suggest that people with a low occupation level mainly consume news distributed via social media and are less likely to actively search for news on newspaper websites (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018). Those who, instead of directly accessing newspaper websites, receive their information primarily through the mediation of social media and instant messaging apps receive less detailed and lower-quality information, even when such distributed information originally comes from mainstream media. Indeed, newspapers and magazines typically reserve longer and more sophisticated articles on complex topics for paying

subscribers, while shorter, simpler, more frivolous and sensationalist articles are accessible for free on social media. Non-subscribers are thus fed with worse quality content and get used to increasingly simplified reasoning and language rather than to complexity. Free news articles from mainstream media may not dramatically differ from articles taken from alternative information sources and do not appropriately train the epistemic skills required to discern fake news from reliable information. Compared to genuine news articles, fake news articles are typically shorter, include fewer technical words and quotes, employ smaller words, use less punctuation, and show more lexical redundancy. Hence, fake news needs lower levels of education to be interpreted (Baptista and Gradim 2020, 9). When even the genuine news articles a person is used to read are free news articles, which are often simplistic and feature clickbait headlines, that person is disadvantaged in detecting oversimplification in a fake news story, invalid inferences, or a lack of reference to recognizable and reliable sources.

Reduced epistemic skills and limited digital literacy might also explain why vulnerability to believing fake news and the likelihood of diffusing it correlates with older age. During the 2016 US election, older adults' Twitter feeds contained the most fake news (Brashier and Schacter 2020). An experimental study in the US found that respondents aged over 65 shared seven times as many articles from fake news domains on Facebook as respondents between 18 and 29 years of age (Guess et al. 2019). Another experimental study on US and UK Facebook users confirmed that fake news had a much higher reach among older users. Very few recipients opened the link, but many dropped emotional comments below the post, seeming to take the headline at face value (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). Research in psychology suggests that cognitive declines alone cannot explain older adults' engagement with fake news (Brashier and Schacter 2020). Given that older people typically show a more constant ideology and party identification than young people, partisan motivations may contribute to their higher rates of engagement and reposting of fake news. However, this may also depend on the fact that while older adults have gained increasing access to social media,² they may lack the level of digital media literacy necessary to reliably determine the trustworthiness of news encountered online (Guess et al. 2019; Brashier and Schacter 2020). As I noted in the introduction, social media have not been devised to inform but rather to entertain. Navigating and categorizing the contents one

² According to the Pew Research Center, in the US, 46% of people over the age of 60 used Facebook in 2018 (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020: 71).

comes across in social media requires specific epistemic skills, which older citizens may not have sufficiently been trained to develop.

Let me clarify that I am not suggesting that *all* those who are more susceptible to fake news do in fact believe them. I am simply highlighting that epistemic disadvantage makes some citizens more vulnerable than others to fall for fake news. Indeed, lower education, old age, and reduced analytic thinking (which can be taken as proxies of epistemic disadvantage) proved to correlate with higher rates of belief in fake news, though surely not all less educated citizens, older citizens, or citizens with a prevalent intuitive cognitive style believe fake news. Furthermore, I am not arguing that *only* less educated, older, or intuitive citizens believe fake news. The misplaced testimonial credibility given to news shared on social media, as highlighted by Rini (2017), proved stronger when fake news is passed on among people who share the same partisan affiliation. One is more likely to accept fake news if it is received from someone who shares similar worldviews, identifies with the same political party, or supports the same candidate. Furthermore, political partisanship proved to play a crucial role in strengthening biases and motivated reasoning (see Anderson 2021). Several studies suggest that motivating reasoning is particularly strong among right-wing voters and conservatives (Baptista and Gradim 2022). Yet empirical literature also reveals that right-wing and conservatives show lower levels of analytic or reflective thinking (Deppe et al. 2015) and a higher susceptibility to conspiracy theories (Douglas 2018). Thus, the evidence on partisanship as concurring to explain the unequal susceptibility to fake news among citizens does not exclude the role played by epistemic disadvantage. Epistemic disadvantage too might contribute to make part of the right-wing audience more inclined to accept to fake news as plausible.

Often, citizens who belong to socially disadvantaged social groups are also epistemically disadvantaged. Note, however, that individuals who count as privileged along ethnic or gender lines, such as white male Americans, may nonetheless be epistemically disadvantaged in knowledge acquisition and, specifically, in discerning fake news. Epistemic privilege itself is not unidimensional. Being given credibility as a source of testimonial knowledge is one of these dimensions, and members of socially dominant groups are typically privileged in this respect. For instance, white men in the US are typically epistemically privileged in their testimonial capacities compared to Black and female people, who are subjected to a systemic credibility deficit due to racist and sexist prejudice, suffering what Fricker (2007) famously defined as testimonial injustice. However, even white men can be epistemically disadvantaged in the distribution of epistemic goods, such as educational opportunities

in the development of their epistemic resources and in the acquisition of epistemic skills such as critical and analytic thinking.³ In their case, believing fake news may well partly depend on prejudice in accommodating false information that fits previous beliefs and on willful ignorance in dismissing unfitting information (see Pohlhaus 2012). Yet, it also partly depends on factors such as low levels of education or low online media literacy and reduced access to the wider scientific community.

If some citizens are more susceptible to believing fake news and unwittingly misinform others due to their epistemic disadvantage, this means that epistemic inequality mediates the epistemic harm of fake news, making citizens unequally vulnerable to being harmed by fake news in their capacity as knowers. What I intend to highlight now, is the fact that the epistemic harm of believing fake news is particularly detrimental for those who were already epistemically disadvantaged, because it deepens their epistemic disadvantage. Consider the effect of fake news on someone who genuinely believes it to correspond to something that happened. This false information becomes part of their body of knowledge about the world. Thus, the fake news recipient comes to know less about the world. Often, a person accepts fake news as true or plausible because it confirms their worldviews, their stereotypes and prejudice. Thus, exposure to fake news makes them less informed about reality and even more biased towards future evidence because the incorporated false information now constitutes evidence to judge future information.

Furthermore, accepting an untrustworthy source of information as trustworthy undermines the ability to judge the credibility of future information. Suppose someone received a website link shared by a Facebook friend they trust, and the recipient believed that news to be true. Why would they be suspicious about an analogous article from a similar website, especially when shared by the same Facebook friend? Fake news recipients, then, become less competent in resisting fake news the more they attribute trust to unreliable sources of information. As we have seen, those who believe and pass on fake news may have already been disadvantaged in accessing trustworthy sources of information. They may have been prevalently fed with mediated information, rather than directly searching for news, and with free, low-quality news articles. Low-quality information may have eroded trust in mainstream media and made them more open to alternative sources of information, including those

³ For a conception of epistemic injustice understood as an injustice in the distribution of epistemic goods such as information and education, see Coady 2010. On the concept of “formative epistemic injustice”, see Nikolaidis 2021.

who nurture conspirative thinking. Falling for a piece of fake news feeds this unwarranted trust in alternative sources of information. Hence, fake news recipients are made more vulnerable to the next piece of misinformation they will be exposed to. They will not only know less about the world and have their stereotypes and prejudices rooted more deeply. They will also be less capable to discern false information and to discriminate among information sources. Shortly, they will be even more epistemically disadvantaged than before being exposed to fake news.

In sum, epistemic inequality mediates the impact of fake news on society. The epistemic harm it imposes on citizens as knowers has an asymmetric effect. Those who are disadvantaged as knowers before being exposed to fake news are more vulnerable to accepting it as true or plausibly true and to passing it on. Moreover, incorporating false information, invalid arguments, and unreliable sources in their body of knowledge makes them increasingly less epistemically competent as knowers, deepening their previous epistemic disadvantage. Theoretically speaking, taking pre-existing epistemic inequality into account allows us to have a better understanding of the epistemic harm to citizens as knowers. Normatively speaking, it is relevant for the debate on the responsibility of citizens who pass on fake news, misinforming their fellow citizens. Rather than too quickly placing blame on all of them for their complicity in spreading fake news, political philosophy should consider the multi-dimensional sources of epistemic inequality among citizens in accessing and processing information. This does not mean that citizens should not be held responsible for their behavior as misinformation consumers and misinformation spreaders. However, it entails paying attention to their asymmetric vulnerability to fake news and to the asymmetric detrimental impact that believing fake news has on those who already had fewer opportunities to develop the appropriate epistemic skills to discern this form of misinformation. Hence, when discussing how democracies should counter the spread of fake news, structural background inequalities in the development of appropriate epistemic skills should be taken into account, alongside individual responsibilities in consuming online content.

III. Oppressed minorities' unequal vulnerability to be targets of fake news

The previous section argued that the epistemic harm of fake news to citizens as knowers has an asymmetric impact on society because citizens are un-

equally exposed to this harm due to epistemic inequality. This section aims to show that some citizens, namely members of oppressed minorities, are also unequally exposed to being the object of fake news stories that reinforce their inferior status in society. When discussing the damages of fake news, we tend to focus on false stories about political candidates and other public figures. However, a large subset of fake news stories online revolves around members of minorities, such as immigrants, Muslims, Roma, and Jewish people. Such minorities are disproportionately vulnerable to being negatively represented in false stories spread on social media. A quantitative study on above 600 false stories circulated in the US, the UK, Germany, and Austria revealed that in Germany and Austria, fake news stories on immigrants even outnumbered those targeting political actors (Humprecht 2019). Moreover, immigration was a salient issue both during the 2016 US presidential elections campaign and during the UK Brexit referendum campaign. Indeed, anti-minority fake news is widely used in politics. Even fake news stories that directly target rival political candidates may in fact reinforce anti-minority sentiments as well. For instance, a fake news story reported by Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, featured Democratic senators wanting to impose Sharia law in Florida (Borella and Rossinelli 2017). This was not only a piece of anti-Democrats fake news but also a contribution to Islamophobic sentiments.

Islamophobic and xenophobic sentiments appear strictly intertwined in online misinformation. Several pro-leave tweets pointed to a global conspiracy in which US President Obama and the German Chancellor Merkel were supporting a Muslim invasion of the West. Single fake news entries, such as those concerning Turkey joining the European Union (EU) and its free-movement area, fit in this larger conspirative frame. In the EU vs Disinfo database of anti-minority fake news, Muslims are the second main target after migrants (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 12). According to an analysis of this database, fake news tends to present migrants and Muslims primarily as a threat to the European culture. This is illustrated in false stories about European cities abandoning Christmas traditions or children forced to prey to Allah in schools (Szakács and Bognár 2021: 13). Secondly, fake news often portrays both migrants and Muslims as criminals, particularly as rapists (Szakács and Bognár 2021,13). This is illustrated in widely circulated fake news on the increase in crime in Germany, as well as on the increase of rapes in Sweden.⁴

⁴ The latter is an example of false context misinformation rather than a case of a completely fabricated story: Swedish statistics do show an increase in reported rapes, but the uncontextualized sensationalist data reported in fake news omit that it depends on changes in rape definition

The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have lowered the overall salience of migration in the public debate in Europe, at least temporarily. Nevertheless, it boosted fake news that builds on the atavistic fear of strangers as disease carriers. Fake news about newly arrived immigrants escaping quarantine, violating lockdown restrictions, or even deliberately infecting police officers were reported in several countries, including Italy, Spain, Germany, and Belgium. Fake news about immigrants making the majority of intensive care patients circulated in Germany, too (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 16-17). Among citizens distrusting mainstream media and political elites, the sharp decline in media coverage about migration after the outbreak of the pandemic also elicited conspirative thinking. False stories on migrants entering the country under the cover of lockdown spread both in Germany and the Czech Republic (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 16). The pandemic also reinvigorated deeply rooted antisemitism and anti-Roma sentiments. Along with fake news on alleged Zionist plans for ethnic substitution and suppression of nation states, fake news spread on Jews being implicated in the creation and diffusion of the new virus. In several countries, Roma minorities were scapegoated on social media for the spread of Covid-19. In countries such as Slovakia and Bulgaria, where Roma minorities were subjected to additional movement restrictions, fake news resulted in direct harmful policy outcomes (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 15).

Fake news stories about immigrants, Muslims, Jews and Roma minorities are particularly relevant when assessing the damages of fake news on democratic societies. The content of anti-minority fake news has a specific harmful impact on the members of targeted minorities. Indeed, such instances of fake news reinforce the subordinate status of members of the targeted minorities, who are not treated as equals in society. Thus, they are distinctively wrongful to minority members. In the next section, I illustrate this claim by focusing on how anti-immigrant fake news contributes to the oppression of immigrant minorities. Furthermore, fake news reinforcing a pre-existing form of subordination is particularly damaging for the institutions of a society that aims to live up to its democratic values, given that moral equality among citizens is a fundamental democratic value and the abolition of status hierarchies is a key goal of democratic institutions.

and count in Sweden, and do not support a causal connection with the admission of immigrants and refugees (Juhász and Szicherle 2017).

IV. Amplifying oppression: the case of anti-immigrant fake news

As shown in the EU vs Disinfo database (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 12), anti-immigrant fake news accounts for most instances of anti-minority fake news in Europe. Anti-immigrant fake news is distinctively harmful and wrongful because it worsens the disadvantaged position of immigrant minorities in Western liberal democracies. When talking of immigrant minorities, here, I do not only refer to foreign residents. I also refer to naturalized citizens and citizens whose parents or grandparents immigrated who continue to be identified as “immigrants” and to occupy a subordinate position in society because of their negatively stereotyped ethnic origins or religious belonging. Even when it targets potential immigrants, anti-immigrant fake news is harmful to members of immigrant minorities who are already members of society.

The social disadvantage affecting immigrant minorities is not reducible to inequalities in income and wealth, although members of immigrant minorities are often more exposed to material deprivation. The social inequality at stake is broader: it is a status inequality, a disadvantage in their standing as members of society. Status inequality does not merely reflect the distribution of material goods. It depends on how the minority group is commonly perceived and publicly represented, on how its members are treated by institutions in laws and policies, but also by their fellow citizens in everyday practices. For newly arrived immigrants and asylum seekers, social inequalities may depend on their legal status: indeed, undocumented migrants and legal residents with temporary visas may not be granted the same rights as citizens. Yet, for foreign-born citizens and for second-generation or third-generation immigrants, social inequality may persist despite access to equal rights.

To see the forms of inequality that members of immigrant minorities experience and why they amount to social injustice, considering the distribution of resources and opportunities is not sufficient. It is necessary to take institutionalized norms and social relations into account. Among the accounts of non-distributive forms of social injustice, Iris Marion Young’s (1990) theory of oppression as a multifaced phenomenon is a prominent example. Moreover, it offers a sophisticated frame to make sense of how anti-immigrant fake news reinforces the disadvantaged position of immigrant minorities. Drawing on Young’s account, I argue that members of immigrant minorities in Western liberal democracies often experience marginalization, cultural imperialism and violence, which are forms of oppression. This allows us to capture the impact of anti-immigrant fake news on targeted immigrant minorities. Indeed, anti-

immigrant fake news contributes to their oppression, further eroding their already unequal standing in society.

A striking way in which anti-immigrant fake news denies equal status to members of targeted minorities consists of an expressive wrong. Think of fake news stories that depict people with an immigrant background as criminals or Muslims as unable to respect basic liberal democratic principles. Examples of anti-immigrant fake news of this kind contribute to amplifying the negative stereotyping and essentialization that members of immigrant minorities already suffer. Members of denigrated immigrant minorities are misrecognized as individuals, reduced to an undifferentiated collective entity showing invariable negative traits. Fake news that associates immigrants with threatening behaviors and dangerous beliefs makes them even more visible in the media and among the public as members of a negatively stereotyped minority. Paradoxically, even debunking fake news may reiterate their negative stereotypical representation. At the same time, members of immigrant minorities, as individuals with their own views and experiences, are silenced.

This can be described, in I. M. Young's terms, as "cultural imperialism". According to Young (1990, 59), those living under cultural imperialism "undergo a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible". Anti-immigrant fake news amplifies this "face of oppression" when it reinforces negative stereotypes of immigrants as inferior and deviant and foster prejudice towards them. Moreover, those who undergo cultural imperialism cannot but perceive themselves from the perspective of those who negatively stereotype and demean them. They "find themselves defined from the outside [...]. Consequently, the dominant culture's stereotyped and inferiorized images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the extent that they are forced to react to behavior of others influenced by those images" (Young 1990, 59-60). Due to the anonymity and pervasiveness of anti-immigrant fake news, resisting internalization and rebutting demeaning stereotypes has become increasingly difficult for the members of targeted immigrant minorities.

Empirical research has shown that negative stereotypes and prejudice towards immigrants, particularly those belonging to certain ethnic and religious minorities, have an impact on behavior. Fake news that nurtures negative stereotypes and prejudice towards immigrants is wrongful in itself, but it also contributes to fueling other forms of oppression, namely marginalization and violence. At the beginning of the 1990s, Young identified a "growing underclass of people permanently confined to lives of social marginality, most of whom are racially marked", including "Blacks, East Indians, Eastern Europe-

ans, or North Africans in Europe”. Marginalization remains a useful concept to describe the interplay between forms of social inequality, such as employment discrimination, and de-facto social and spatial segregation, that many immigrants face today. According to Young (1990, 53), marginalization can be the most dangerous form of oppression, whereby “a category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation”. Not all individuals, even among the most despised ethnic and religious minorities, suffer marginalization to the same extent. Yet, it can still be argued that, as a social group, they are systematically “exposed to deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction” (Young 1990, 55).

Several studies have shown that immigrants face discrimination in employment and housing. This emerges consistently from field experiments based on correspondence audits, in which researchers send written applications for employment or housing in response to real job or housing advertisements, manipulating information about the correspondents. Research both in Europe and North America demonstrated evidence of employment discrimination toward immigrants applying for jobs. Holding human capital constant, stronger discrimination emerges against African, North African, Middle Eastern and Muslim applicants (Esses 2021, 512-514). Correspondence audits have also been used to study housing discrimination, focusing on responses to rental advertising. This literature, albeit less extensive than the literature on employment discrimination, shows that there is prevalent discrimination against Middle Eastern, North African, and Arab Muslims in Europe, as well as against Hispanics in the US (Esses 2021, 514-515). As a result of discrimination in employment, immigrants belonging to these ethnic and religious minorities find themselves systematically more unemployed or underemployed than the rest of the population (Esses 2021, 519). Moreover, housing discrimination contributes to the creation of neighborhoods with a high concentration of immigrants, which are often those with fewer services and resources. Hence, immigrants have poorer access to good jobs and high-quality schools, they need to commute longer to work and have more difficult access to medical care (Esses 2021, 520).

The widespread circulation of fake news portraying members of minorities as deviant and inferior normalizes and provides justification for discriminatory behavior and social exclusion. If so many pieces of news associate members of targeted minorities with certain threats, even those citizens who were not strongly prejudiced against the targeted minority may suspect that there might

be something true and behave accordingly. Despite establishing causation between anti-immigrant fake news and discriminatory behavior can be difficult, a recent study by the Spanish Ministry of Equality linked the spread of fake news and online hate speech to a rise in anti-immigrant discrimination in housing and education (Szakács and Bognár 2021, 23). Unemployment and underemployment due to discrimination in job seeking and spatial confinement in underserved neighborhoods due to housing discrimination, in turn, contribute to material deprivation and limited social relationships with the rest of society.

Fake news, thus, contributes to undermining the status of members of negatively connotated immigrant minorities within society by amplifying their marginalization. What is more, anti-immigrant fake news fosters another serious form of oppression, which is systemic violence. According to Young (1990, 62), what makes violence “a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice. Violence is systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group.” Members of negatively marked groups, Young notes, have a “daily knowledge” they are “liable to violation, solely on account of their group identity.” The risk of being physically or verbally attacked may well be independent of their behavior, given that this systemic violence is motivated by fear and hatred towards the group they belong to. Young argues that the wrong of violence does not only apply in the moment one is individually attacked: the mere fact of “living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity” (Young 1990, 62). Fake news fuels both online and offline hate crimes. Not only it incites online hate speech, but also verbal and physical violence in in-person interactions. Although a direct causal connection between the circulation of a piece of fake news and offline hate crimes may be hard to establish, recent empirical studies support the claim that an increase in online hate speech on social media is associated with an increase in violence towards the targeted minority. In their study on hate crimes in London, Williams et al. (2020) established a “temporal and spatial association between online hate speech targeting race and religion and offline racially and religiously aggravated crimes”. In the German context, Müller and Schwarz (2021) found a link between antirefugee sentiment on Facebook and hate crimes against refugees.

In sum, anti-immigrant fake news exacerbates marginalization, cultural imperialism and violence and thus contributes to reinforcing the overall oppression of the members of targeted immigrant minorities. Thus, anti-

immigrant fake news has an asymmetric impact on citizens: it is distinctively harmful to those citizens who belong to targeted immigrant minorities. Furthermore, the fact that anti-immigrant fake news worsens the inferior social status of members of immigrant minorities is particularly worrisome based on a democratic conception of political justice. Indeed, fake news stories that reinforce the oppression of members of immigrant minorities contribute to hindering their capacity to stand as equals and participate in the democratic political process, strengthen unjust social hierarchies among citizens and further erode the democratic value of status equality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that part of what makes fake news problematic for liberal democratic societies is the role fake news plays in amplifying pre-existing social inequalities and injustices. It has already been shown that fake news is harmful to recipients in their capacity as knowers. I argued that this epistemic harm does not have a uniform impact on democratic societies, given the epistemic inequality among citizens. Those who are epistemically disadvantaged are more susceptible to believing fake news. Believing fake news, in turn, deepens this epistemic disadvantage. Secondly, I argued that citizens are unequally targeted by fake news and that targeted groups are distinctively harmed. Indeed, a significant subset of fake news consists of misinformation about minorities, such as immigrants, Muslims, Jews, and Roma minorities. Such anti-minority fake news is distinctively harmful to members of targeted minorities. I focused on the case of anti-immigrant fake news to show how anti-minority fake news amplifies the status inequality of the targeted minority within society. Drawing on I. M. Young's account of oppression, I claimed that anti-immigrant fake news exacerbates multiple dimensions of oppression, namely marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence against members of targeted immigrant minorities. Finally, I noted that anti-minority fake news is not only notable for its unequal damaging impact, falling disproportionately on members of targeted minorities, but also for its particularly corrosive effect on democratic values. Indeed, the spread of fake news that reinforces the pre-existing oppression of a minority further erodes the democratic value of citizens' status equality.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2021. "Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics." In *Political Epistemology*, edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baptista, João Pedro and Gradim, Anabela. 2020. "Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review." *Social Sciences* 9 (10):185.
- Baptista, João Pedro and Gradim, Anabela. 2022. "Who Believes in Fake News? Identification of Political (A)Symmetries." *Social Sciences* 11 (10): 460.
- Borella, Carlo Alessandro. 2017. "Fake News, Immigration, and Opinion Polarization." *SocioEconomic Challenges* 1 (4): 59-72.
- Brashier, Nadia M and Schacter, Daniel L. 2020. "Aging in an Era of Fake News." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 29 (3): 316-323.
- Coady, David. 2010. "Two concepts of epistemic injustice." *Episteme* 7 (2): 101-113.
- Bronstein, Michael V., Pennycook, Gordon, Bear, Adam, Rand, David G. and Cannon, Tyrone D. 2019. "Belief in Fake News is Associated with Delusionality, Dogmatism, Religious Fundamentalism, and Reduced Analytic Thinking." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 8 (1): 108-117.
- Brown, Étienne. 2021. "Regulating the Spread of Online Misinformation." In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*, edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chambers, Simone. 2021. "Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?" *Political Studies* 69 (1): 147-163.
- Croce, Michel and Piazza, Tommaso. 2021. "Misinformation and Intentional Deception." In *Virtues, Democracy and Online Media: Ethics and Epistemic Issues*, edited by Nancy E. Snow and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza. London: Routledge.
- Deppe, Kristen D., Gonzalez, Frank J., Neiman, Jayme L., Jacobs, Carly, Pahlke, Jackson, Smith, Kevin B. and Hibbing, John R. 2015. "Reflective liberals and intuitive conservatives: A look at the Cognitive Reflection Test and ideology." *Judgment and Decision Making* 10: 314-31.
- Douglas, Christopher. 2018. "Religion and Fake News: Faith-Based Alternative Information Ecosystems in the US and Europe." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 16 (1): 61-73.
- Esses, Victoria. M. 2021. "Prejudice and Discrimination Toward Immigrants." *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (1): 503-531.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Galeotti, Anna Elisabetta and Meini, Cristina. 2022. "Scientific Misinformation and Fake News: A Blurred Boundary." *Social Epistemology* 36 (6): 703-718.
- Guess, Andrew, Nagler, Jonathan and Tucker, Joshua. 2019. "Less than you think:

- Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook.” *Science Advances* 5: eaau4586.
- Hannon, Michael. 2021. “Disagreement or Badmouthing? The Role of Expressive Discourse in Politics.” In *Political Epistemology*, edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Humprecht, Edda. 2019. “Where ‘fake news’ flourishes: a comparison across four Western democracies, Information.” *Communication & Society* 22 (13): 1973-1988.
- Jaster, Romy and Lanius, David. 2018. “What is Fake News?” *Versus* 127: 207-227.
- Juhász, Attila and Szicherle, Patrick. 2017. “The Political Effects of Migration-Related Fake News, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Europe.” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; Political Capital.
- Kalogeropoulos, Antoni and Nielsen, Rasmus. K. 2018. “Social Inequalities in News Consumption.” Factsheet report. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>.
- Levy, Niel. 2017. “The Bad News About Fake News.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6: 20-36.
- Lewandowsky, Stephan, Ecker, Ullrich K.H., Seifert, Colleen M., Schwarz, Norbert and Cook, John. 2012. “Misinformation and its Correction: Continued Influence and successful Debiasing.” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13: 106-131.
- Loos, Eugene and Nijenhuis, Jordy. 2020. “Consuming Fake News: A Matter of Age? The perception of political fake news stories in Facebook ads.” In *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population*, edited by Quin Gao and Jia Zhou. Cham: Springer.
- Müller, Karsten and Schwarz, Carlo. 2021. “Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime.” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19 (4): 2131-2167.
- Nikolaidis, Alexandros C. 2021. “A Third Conception of Epistemic Injustice.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40: 381-398.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile Jr. 2012. “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance.” *Hypatia* 27 (4): 715-735.
- Regliz, Merten. 2022. “Fake News and Democracy.” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 22 (2): 162-187.
- Rini, Regina. 2017. “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology.” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27 (2): E-43-E-64.
- Rini, Regina. 2021. “Weaponized Skepticism: An Analysis of Social Media Deception as Applied Political Epistemology.” In *Political Epistemology*, edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Szakács, Judith and Bognár, Éva. 2021. *The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>.

- Williams, Matthew L., Burnap, Pete, Javed, Amir, Liu, Han and Ozalp, Sefa. 2020. "Hate in the Machine: Anti-Black and Anti-Muslim Social Media Posts as Predictors of Offline Racially and Religiously Aggravated Crime." *The British Journal of Criminology* 60 (1): 93-117.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

