

What is Webjectivity?

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Abstract: This note introduces the word of “webjectivity,” to describe a concept that is well-known, the character of being epistemically dependence upon a situation within a network; and suggests that this word and its corresponding concept could be useful for clarifying discussions of the epistemic condition of the information age.

1. Definition

In epistemology, subjectivity and objectivity refer to the character of being subjective or objective, which are respectively either being epistemically dependent on mental states or epistemically independent of mental states.[1] As I introduce it, webjectivity is the character of being webjective, which is being epistemically dependent upon a situation within a network. Like epistemic agents and judgements can be objective or subjective, they can also be webjective, if the network effects dominate the epistemic situation.[2]

2. Examples and Elaboration

In the information age, webjectivity is a well-known (if unnamed) epistemic condition, experienced much if not most of the time. The quintessential example of the webjective situation is the person occupying a node in a social network who is therefore only exposed to the social information that they receive through the connected nodes in that social network. A well-connected node will have a wider webjectivity perspective than a poorly-connected node which will have a narrower webjectivity.

Webjectivity can be overt or covert; in the former case, the situation of the node as a node is explicit, and in the latter case, the situation of the node as a node is hidden. An overt example is a social media website in which an individual user is exposed to the list of fellow users to whom they are connected, and therefore they can an awareness of their situation as one node within a network of nodes (Facebook, etc.). A covert example is a website in which the list of nodes to which the user is connected is hidden, therefore they have little to no awareness of their situation as one node within a network of nodes (TikTok, etc.).

However, sociology is not the only field to encumbered by webjectivity. The observations made by other disciplines can be webjective, even in the hard physical sciences. For example, astronomy is also webjective to the extent that astronomical observations are distorted by gravitational lensing effects that are dependent upon the situation of the observer within a network of gravitationally connected bodies.[3] The raw observation via telescope is webjective: a human here on Earth and their identical twin on a rocket orbiting Vega would have different

webjective observations of constellations due to their different situations within the network of stars. These network effects must be accounted for and subtracted to achieve a more objective assessment of the universe. Just as photons flowing through a gravitational lens are distorted by the shapes of the networks of massive bodies, so the data flowing through the world wide web are distorted by the shapes of the networks of web sites (and other kinds of network nodes).

3. Similar and Adjacent Concepts

Several other concepts are closely related to webjectivity, even being possible synonyms, such that webjectivity may sound like a new coinage for other well-worn words. However, webjectivity is sufficiently distinct from other concepts to warrant its own word. These nearby neighbor concepts include:

- “Network effect” describes a type of effect caused by networks, but it does not specify the epistemic character of participants or judgements from within the network.[4]
- “Algorithmic bias,” “media bias,” and “systemic bias” describe the types of epistemic distortions experienced within an algorithm, media, or system, but they do not describe the general epistemic character of participants or judgements from within the algorithms, media, or systems as networks.[5]
- “Filter bubbles,” “echo chambers,” and “information silos” describe specific, extreme situations of epistemic distortion experienced from within information networks, but they do not describe the less specific, less extreme case of the epistemic situation experienced from within networks more generally.[6]
- “Framing,” “choice architecture,” and “personalized marketing” describe the manner by which media is strategically manipulated to epistemically distort information networks, but they do not describe the epistemic character of the participants or judgements.[7]
- “Standpoint theory,” “positionality,” and “perspectivalism” describe the situatedness of the epistemic subject within a field of distortions, but they do not isolate the characteristics of the network from the characteristics of the subject.[8]

4. Contrasting with other Epistemic Categories

Webjectivity is different from other epistemic categories, including objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity, in important ways.

a. Objectivity:

Webjective effects are not the same as objective effects. Some epistemic influences arise specifically from the situation of the node in the network itself, universalizable characteristics. Given that the situation of every node in the network is part of the total situation, the objective view must include the view from every node in the network.

The situation of a subject inside a network the same as the situation of a subject outside a network. Nor is the situation of a subject as one of the nodes of a network is not the same as the situation a subject capable of accessing the network via any of its notes.

For example, a social media user may have a different experience using their account than the social media admin capable of accessing every single persons account.

b. Subjectivity:

Webjective effects are not the same as subjective effects. Some epistemic influences arise specifically from the situation of the node in the network itself, not from the characteristics of the subject.

The same subject can be inserted into different nodes in a network and encounter different subjective situations in each. Or, different subjects can be inserted into the same node in a network and encounter different subjective situations each.

For example, a social media user may have a different experience using their account than using their friend's account. Furthermore, the user and friend may have different experiences using the same account.

c. Intersubjectivity:

Webjective effects are not the same as intersubjective effects. Although the term intersubjectivity may prima facie seem to indicate the same things as webjectivity, the character of being influenced by the relations between subjects, instead intersubjectivity merely indicates the character of being experienced or known by multiple subjects.[9]

5. Usefulness of the Concept

The concept of webjectivity is useful in several ways.

As indicated in Section 3, webjectivity is useful to the extent that it specifies something that similar and adjacent concepts do not, specifically the epistemic character of participants and judgements from within networks.

As indicated in Section 4, webjectivity is useful as distinct from objectivity and subjectivity because it acknowledges that the influences arise specifically from the situation of the node in the networks itself, not from the characteristics of the subject involved, nor from universal characteristics of the situation. In other words, like the external objective and internal subjective worlds may themselves be epistemic distinctions, the situation in a network is its own epistemic distinction, worthy of its own word. And, because of its homology with subjective and objective, webjective, unlike these other terms, acknowledges a third epistemological category. This is rhetorically important because one can simultaneously avoid attributing epistemic bias to the characteristics of the subjects themselves (by using the term "subjective"), and also avoid acting as though universal truth has been reached (by using the term "objective"). For example, telling someone, "that is your subjective opinion," may inappropriately assign bias to a characteristic of them personally, when in reality, anyone from their position in their network would have come to the same conclusion. Likewise, telling someone, "that is an objective observation," may inappropriately assign freedom from bias to a set of data, when in reality, that set of data only arose from the selection bias of the position occupied by the observer in their network.

Furthermore webjectivity is useful because of the preeminence of network effects in the modern information landscape. Biases do not necessarily emanate from either the external world of physical reality or the internal world of individual user preference, (being neither strictly objective nor strictly subjective) but emerge from the structure of the network itself and the pressures exerted by its algorithmic processes, and given that the majority of information is

obtained through networks in a modern, globalized world, the more important the network effects are to signal. Only declaring webjectivity as the explicit condition of epistemic participants and judgements adequately admits of the algorithmic pressures at play in the construction and dissemination of electronic knowledge, exposing the networks themselves as the constraints of knowledge, and knowledge of such constraints would surely expand the depth of human understanding in a manner that puts these effects in the foreground. Going forward, a more thorough characterization of webjectivity will be needed solve the unique problems of digital knowledge specifically and social knowledge generally.

Webjectivity is useful in several other ways as well. The term benefits the conversation through its intuitive familiarity, catchiness, and neutrality. We are familiar with attributing people and beliefs with objectivity and subjectivity, and attributing webjectivity follows suit. Likewise, because webjectivity has a homology with objectivity and subjectivity, it has the potential to be naturally catchy, and thus catch on in popular and academic discourse. Finally, because webjectivity as a neologism is not intrinsically connotatively preloaded, it has the potential to be a relatively neutral ascription, free from value judgement, merely describing the manifest condition of our epistemic embeddedness within the world wide web as modern social media users, a condition we already know well.

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[1] (Mulder, 2024)

[2] (Shapiro, 1999)

[3] (Dyson, 1920)

[4] (Shapiro, 1999)

[5] (Weizenbaum, 1976)

[6] (Ensor, 1988; Pariser, 2011; Nguyen, 2020)

[7] (Tversky et al., 1981; Peppers et al., 1999; Thaler et al., 2008)

[8] (Harding, 1986)

[9] (Spezzano, 2012)