(**1) Should measures be taken to address the spreading of false information on social media platforms? If so, should these measures be designed to make users more accountable for what they post, share, like, or re-tweet?**

The spreading of false information on social media platforms is becoming increasingly common and thus, is creating an epistemic environment where people don’t know what to believe. Within this essay, I will argue that measures should be taken to address and reduce the spreading of false information on social media platforms, furthermore, accountability mechanisms should be implicated in order to do so.

In order to convey why measures should be taken to address the spreading of false information online, I will firstly give a detailed analysis of social networking systems (SNS), how such communications differ from real life and why gamification online incentivises the abandonment of truth. I will then subsequently discuss Rini’s (2017) solutions to the issue of false information and proposals for the relevant accountability. Finally, I will challenge Rini’s solutions with Arnold’s (2014) disapproval of mechanisms of accountability and form a logical conclusion from the discussion in order to contend that measures should be taken and accountability mechanisms ought to be implicated.

Communication on SNS have several attractive features which entice users to engage that differ from real life communication. Messages can be permanent or semi-permanent, editable, searchable, shareable and scalable. They can be easily sent/published at a little cost and reach a vast amount of people with the most minimal effort. Posts can be anonymous and there is usually no intermediary or responsible authority that is held accountable for online speech *(Arnold, K. 2014. p. 64).* Nguyen argues that gamification is one of these attractive features, as SNS like twitter uses gamification to increase motivation in an activity by narrowing and simplifying the target of that activity. This is carried out by offering ‘immediate, vivid and quantified evaluations of one’s conversational success’, in the forms of functions such as likes, retweets and followers *(Nguyen, c. 2020. p.1-7).* SNS can grant users ‘the emotional security and existential relief of value clarity’, however in exchange, users must adopt narrowed targets *(Nguyen, c. 2020. p.10)*. By changing the goals of the activity, it changes the activity itself. Normally, communication is carried out in order to develop understanding, pursue truth and develop empathy for one another, however, when scoring mechanisms are brought into this it invites us to replace these values with more simplistic goals, that being, maximising likes and followers. This leads to what Nguyen calls ‘value capture’, which is where users go onto SNS such as twitter in order to communicate and connect but end up becoming obsessed with maximising likes, retweets and followers *(Nguyen, c. 2020. p.11-21).* Gamification tempts us to change our endeavor for truth to a goal of a maximum score, in reward for pleasure, similarly to an echo chamber. The same can be said for the use of ‘moral outrage porn’ on SNS. When we use moral outrage porn, we use our own moral outrage for pleasure, so we are ‘incentivised to change our moral belief system to ignore the truth and adopt the beliefs that will give us the most pleasure’ (*Nguyen, c. 2020. p.30-34).* This is where the problem of spreading false information arises. If someone is posting on twitter as if it was a game, this then ‘runs the risk of undermining the epistemic goods available to other users’ (*Nguyen, c. 2020. p.11-20)*. Essentially, if someone is treating this form of communication as a game to get the most likes/retweets, then as a result, they will say whatever it takes to achieve these goals. This will lead to other users, who are oblivious to the fact that someone is playing a game, become profoundly misinformed and take the information as a serious testimony (*Nguyen, c. 2020. p.20).* It could be argued that in order to address the spreading of false information on social media, is to remove the gamification of it, however, this is not feasible as the seductiveness and addictiveness of gamification is exactly how SNS make profit. The user and their time is the product, and users invest their time in order to achieve higher scores. Rather, I would hold that accountability mechanisms should be implicated in order to address the spreading of false information, as eradicating gamification is not attainable.

During the 2016 presidential election, there was a significant rise in ‘fake news’ on SNS, which certainly affected the choices of many individual voters, implying outcomes were achieved partly based on inaccurate information. Rini defines fake news as a story that poses to describe real life events, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false and is created in order to be widely re-transmitted and deceiving to its audience *(Rini, R. 2017. p.45)*. The intentions behind fake news tend to be more complicated than simple cases of lying, often the motive is financial, rather than epistemic. Rini claims that people believe fake news as it is acquired through social media which has sharing features that reduces audience willingness to fact check and is amplified when users share a partisan orientation as greater credibility is granted *(Rini, R. 2017. p.44).* If we share a political outlook with some people and we share their values, then we are likely to give them more credibility, which is not only a recipe for polarization, but also for producing an epistemic problem, however Rini argues that this is rational. Rini also claims that the transmission of information via social media is a bent form of testimony, some people share posts because they are amusing, or seem true at first glance, however they do not take accountability when they turn out to be inaccurate *(Rini, R. 2017. p.47,48).* The epistemic relationship between testifier and testimony is ambiguous, as people who retweet false posts cannot be pinpointed to necessarily asserting the content of those posts. One could argue that in order to solve this problem, we should be more careful to check testifiers sources and fact check the information stated, however, humans are cognitive misers, and do not have the time to investigate every single claim for themselves. Measures should be taken in order to address this spreading of fake news and Rini states that we need to look beyond individual epistemic practices and instead, look at institutions *(Rini, R. 2017. p.53,54).* The solution Rini suggests to address the spreading of false information on SNS is that we should ‘firmly establish the norm that social media sharers are understood as conveying testimonial endorsement’ *(Rini, R. 2017. p.54)*, then people would be more hesitant sharing unverified stories in order to avoid being held accountable for errors. Alternatively, we could establish that social media sharing does not communicate testimonial endorsement whatsoever, however this is very unlikely, as social media is intended to be used to communicate truths. Therefore measures should be designed to deny the norm ‘a retweet is not an endorsement’, and instead hold people accountable if their claims are later proven to be false, such as a loss of testimonial reputation *(Rini, R. 2017. p.54,55).* SNS like facebook already have a fact-checking function to dispute fake news stories, however by the time a story is flagged as false, most of the audience would have already seen it, therefore, SNS should provide the infrastructure to track the testimonial reputation of individual users to hold people accountable, such as a credibility rankings *(Rini, R. 2017. p.57)*. It could be debated whether this is a morally acceptable way of proceeding as people could then see this as a gamification and invest too much time in trying to obtain a positive rating, almost in a dystopian way. My response to this would be to suggest that as long as any solution is institutional and social media platforms provide some sort of infrastructure to make users more accountable for what they like, share or re-tweet, then it is likely to be the most effective, based on the arguments discussed so far.

Arnold challenges the assumption that accountability is necessary in order to address the spreading of false information on social media platforms and claims that mechanisms of accountability designed to threaten or remove anonymity is not a good idea, as it would come with significant epistemic and veritstic costs*.* Frost defines accountability as a ‘relation of non-coordinatability of traits, such that aspects of an anonymous person's identity are not coordinatable with traits known to others’*(Arnold, K. 2014. p. 64).* Anonymity can therefore include pseudonymity, where a user can have a coherent and accurate online persona, just with a different name. Accountability mechanisms, according to Arnold, are attempts to increase the trustworthiness of agents who engage in antisocial and untrustworthy behaviour. What Arnold seeks to do is to aim to increase the trustworthiness of speakers without increasing the discriminatory ability of readers. To do so, she chooses to focus on the speaker in an attempt to make them more honest, rather than focusing on the hearer and attempting to shield them from dishonesty *(Arnold, K. 2014. p. 64)*. Arnold states four arguments about the epistemic costs of requiring de-anonymization online. The first argument she poses is that when anonymous, users provide better and more innovative ideas as anonymity forces creativity. Secondly, Arnold asserts that anonymity allows members of stigmatized groups to contribute without fear of reprisal. For example, anonymity has allowed activists in the middle east to engage in citizen reporting and to share information with other activists. In dangerous circumstances like these, anonymity provides a great measure of safety. Additionally to this, members from these groups, because of their life experiences, increase the variety of viewpoints available on the internet which Arnold argues, maximises truths online *(Arnold, K. 2014. p. 70).* However, this statement implicitly assumes that everyone who engages in the discussion is not consciously misleading. Rather, it maximises the amount of information online, but does not necessarily maximise the truth. Her final argument states that because anonymity means you do not know what group someone belongs to e.g. race or sexuality, people are more inclined to take them seriously who may have chosen to discriminate beforehand *(Arnold, K. 2014. p. 71).* I would hold that this still seems problematic as anonymity tends to decrease the authority of speech, people are less inclined to take post seriously if the authors are anonymous, and so this is counterproductive. Arnold proposes two solutions to improve the epistemic quality of online communication and to address the spreading of false information online. The strongest solution of the two is to impose reminders of ethics and moral codes to users when posting/commenting. Arnold highlights how ‘experimental research shows that when people are asked to reflect on their own moral values before being tempted with an opportunity for profitable deception, they are less likely to be dishonest, even with anonymity’ *(Arnold, K. 2014. p. 77,78)*. However, I would contend that this solution seems naive. If a person is seeing a reminder or message like this every time they post, they will eventually become desensitised to it, and skip past it in order to meet their own ends. As previously discussed, there are too many motivations behind the spreading of false information on social media, and malicious intent is just a small part of a wider issue.

In conclusion, I would hold that measures should be taken to address the spreading of false information on SNS, as not only are people left in a situation where they become skeptical of everything, but also, people are even being completely misled into making decisions such as political votes based on information that is completely false and fabricated for the sakes of clicks and shares. After a careful discussion and evaluation of all the solutions each thinker has imposed, I would maintain that measures which make users more accountable, should be imposed in order to combat this. Just like people are held accountable for what they do in the real world, users should be held accountable for their content online, otherwise all knowledge as we know it would become a matter of skepticism, and all online communications will lose their meaning, if they haven't already.

**Bibliography**

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