

# **The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media**

Alex Worsnip

Forthcoming in Carl Fox & Joe Saunders (eds.), *Media Ethics: Free Speech and the Requirements of Democracy*, Routledge

Penultimate version; please cite published version where possible

## **Introduction**

It’s a truism that in light of the media’s power in shaping public opinion and discourse, it also has important obligations and responsibilities. Many of these obligations are frequently violated, and this doesn’t look like changing any time soon. In light of that, what are the obligations and responsibilities of *consumers* of the news media?

We can divide consumer-focused questions, very roughly, into three stages. At the first stage, there are questions about *what* media to consume: which newspapers to read, which television programmes to watch, who to follow on social media. At the second stage, there are questions about how to respond to the media that one does consume in belief-formation – whether to trust it at its word, dismiss it as “fake news”, or something intermediate. And at the third stage, there are questions about how to act on the basis of the beliefs one has arrived at. Roughly speaking, these three stages correspond to three more general agential processes: evidence-gathering, forming beliefs on the basis of the evidence that one has gathered, and acting on the basis of those beliefs.

This paper focuses most directly on the first stage: our obligations as consumers in deciding *what* media to consume (though I’ll also at times discuss the second stage too). The view I’ll defend is that it is wrong for us to consume only, or overwhelmingly, media that broadly aligns with our own political viewpoints: that is, it is wrong to be politically “partisan” in our decisions about what media to consume. We are obligated to consume media that aligns with political viewpoints other than our own – to “diversify our sources”.<sup>1</sup> When stated as a philosophical thesis, that may sound rather banal. But note that if this is an obligation, it is one that is evidently widely violated – even among well-educated and reflective people, and on all sides of the political spectrum. I take it that some of those who violate it even think they’re justified in so doing. And as we’ll see, whether or not they’re right turns on some subtle issues.

## **1. Epistemic or Moral Obligation?**

One might ask: when I say we are obligated to consume media that aligns with political viewpoints other than our own, what kind of “obligation” am I talking about? Is it an *epistemic* obligation, or

*moral* obligation? In fact, the case of media consumption provides an example of how it can be harder to draw the boundaries between these categories than it first seems.

Recall the stages of consumption distinguished above. On what we might call an “austere” conception of the epistemic domain, beliefs are the only thing that can be evaluated epistemically. If this is right, only the second stage – forming beliefs on the basis of the media one consumes – can be evaluated epistemically. The first stage – that of deciding what media to consume – is, by contrast, is a practical decision, one that can only be governed by moral and prudential norms. And so (assuming it’s not prudential), my claim about an obligation to consume media that aligns with political viewpoints other than our own must be interpreted morally, rather than epistemically. The more general position here is that epistemic evaluation concerns how agents respond to their evidence, not what evidence they gather in the first place.

One might object, to such a view, that it yields unintuitive verdicts about agents who filter their evidence in very selective or biased ways, but respond correctly to the evidence that they *do* gather. It seems that the austere view says that such agents have epistemically justified beliefs – but it seems that there is something *epistemically* objectionable about such agents.

However, there’s a reply to this objection on behalf of the austere view. When agents filter their evidence in very selective or biased ways, responding to that evidence correctly will involve *discounting* the apparent force of the evidence in light of the fact that it was biased. To illustrate with a case adapted from Roger White (2010, p. 586): suppose that you arrive at a party full of economics professors, and you’re interested in finding out whether interest rates will go up this year. You ask a number of the economics professors, and to your surprise you discover that they all agree: interest rates *will* go up this year. Normally, this would be at least somewhat good evidence that interest rates will go up this year. But suppose you now discover that every professor was asked, at the door to the party, whether they believe that interest rates will go up this year. Those that didn’t answer in the affirmative were quietly led away to another room and shot. So your sample was biased: only the professors who believed interest rates will go up made it into the room. Now you know that your sample was biased in this way, it seems that the evidence provided by the economics professors’ testimony loses much, perhaps even all, of its would-be force. And so the correct *response* to this evidence involves discounting it.

So, the thought is, the same is true (to a lesser degree) when you yourself impose the selective or biased filter on your evidence. Though that is not *itself* the right sort of thing to be epistemically unjustified, the austere view says, it *is* epistemically unjustified to form beliefs that fail to *discount* the (would-be) force of this evidence in light of the biased nature of the filter.

Still, the austere view isn’t home and dry yet. Consider again the case of the party, but now suppose that though every professor who didn’t believe that interest rates will go up was shot, *you* don’t have any way of knowing this. In this case, it seems clear that you’re *not* epistemically required to discount the evidence provided by the professors’ testimony. So what triggers the epistemic requirement to discount is not the *fact* that the evidence was selectively filtered, but rather your *knowing* that the evidence was selectively filtered. But now return to the case where *you* filter your evidence in selective and biased ways, and add that you don’t *realize* that you’re

filtering your evidence in these selective and biased ways. As in the party case, it seems like you then won't be incorrectly responding to the evidence you have gathered if you don't discount it: after all, you don't realize it was selectively filtered. But, *unlike* the party case, insofar as *you* were the one who did the selective filtering, it seems like you're still epistemically criticizable in some way. The obvious way to accommodate this is to say that the selective filtering was *itself* epistemically criticizable, but the austere view can't say this, since it says that only beliefs are epistemically criticizable.

Moreover, the austere view seems to fit better with an "ideal theory" approach to epistemic evaluation than with a "non-ideal theory" approach. The austere view says, in effect, that it doesn't (epistemically) matter what evidence you gather, because you can always correct for any flaws in that evidence-gathering process through discounting later. But our own biases can be very hard to detect and correct for.<sup>2</sup> A non-ideal epistemic theory that seeks to account for those cognitive limitations should cut the problem off at the source by imposing some constraints on the ways that we gather evidence in the first instance. That requires us to go beyond the austere view. I'm a pluralist about ideal vs. non-ideal theory, but I think of the project I'm engaged in as belonging to the latter category.

Finally, insofar as one is aiming at *true* belief, or at *knowledge* – as opposed to merely at *justified* belief – it is clear that evidence-gathering procedures matter in and of themselves. Even if we consider a perfect epistemic agent who always responds to the evidence she has at any single point in time in a maximally justified way, it seems clear that she (usually) stands a better chance of arriving at a *true* belief, or at *knowledge*, if she gathers more, and better, evidence.<sup>3</sup> This provides a good sense in which some evidence-gathering procedures are epistemically superior to others, even for agents who respond perfectly to the evidence that they have gathered.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, then, I'm inclined to reject the austere view and say that we can have epistemic obligations that pertain to the gathering of evidence – and, specifically, that the obligation to consume media that aligns with viewpoints other than one's own is one such epistemic obligation. However, there is a further way in which epistemic and moral obligation are entangled here. As our three-stage model illustrates, media consumption habits influence beliefs, which in turn influence behavior (such as voting and other political action). Now, we have moral obligations concerning these forms of behavior, and one of those *moral* obligations is plausibly that we base them on *epistemically* responsible beliefs,<sup>5</sup> that have themselves been based on responsible gathering of evidence. It's morally reckless to base important political decisions on epistemically irresponsible beliefs, or on beliefs based on very limited or selective gathering of evidence. This is an instance of a more general, undertheorized phenomenon, where it's not just that our moral and epistemic responsibilities *happen*, luckily, to line up, but rather we're morally required to be epistemically responsible *as such*.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. First Competitor View: Consuming Only Unbiased Media Sources**

My view, as I've said, is that we ought to consume news from media sources that align with a variety of different viewpoints across the political spectrum. An obvious competitor view is that we should simply consume news from media sources that are *unbiased*. However, it is not straightforward to say what makes a media source "biased" or "unbiased" in the relevant sense. I will contrast two different potential conceptions of bias, and suggest that neither is a good conception of what it is for the media to be biased.

On a first conception of what it is to be "unbiased", to be unbiased is to be *even-handed* or *neutral* in one's reporting. An unbiased media source is one that (at least when it comes to disputed or controversial matters) reports what the different views on the controversy are, without seeking to arbitrate between them as to which is true.<sup>7</sup> On a second conception of what it is to be "unbiased", to be unbiased is to be *accurate*. An unbiased media source is one that reports what is true (or what is most probably true on the evidence), and, to the extent that it reports views to the contrary, represents those views as false. For a nice illustration of how these conceptions of what it is to be unbiased can come radically apart, consider Elizabeth Anderson's (2011) discussion of media coverage of climate change. Anderson charges that one of the sources of public distrust in climate science is "biased and misleading media reports" (Anderson 2011, p.153). More specifically, she suggests that one kind of biased, misleading media reporting consists in "a media norm favoring "balanced" reports, in which major scientific conclusions are "balanced" by contrary opinions, regardless of the weakness of the evidence for them." Clearly, the conception of bias Anderson favors here is closer to second conception I just identified. Her charge is that sources that are "unbiased" in the first sense are, at least when it comes to climate change, *ipso facto* biased in the second (favored) sense.

In my view, Anderson is right that the first conception of bias has serious shortcomings. First, as she points out, even-handedly reporting contrary views on an issue on which the evidence is in fact quite clear creates false and misleading perceptions of inconclusivity or ambiguity in the evidence. Secondly, a media norm accord to which media sources must remain neutral on disputed or contested matters seems to significantly blunt the media's role in exposing falsities and lies; if the media follows such a norm, it is too easy for malign actors to suppress the truth simply by denying it. Thirdly, it is on reflection clear that the media cannot represent *all* views on disputed topics; there simply isn't time to represent *all* views, and not every crank can or ought to be heard. So the media is inevitably involved in making judgments about which views do need to be heard, a question that surely ought to be answered at least partly by asking which views are vaguely within the space of reasonable debate.<sup>8</sup> If that's so, the media can't stay out of the game of arbitrating, to some extent, which views are reasonable and which aren't. In light of this, the first conception of "unbiased" media reporting seems neither desirable nor attainable, and thus to constitute a poor criterion for which media we should consume.

Unfortunately, however, the second conception of bias *also* has its shortcomings. The primary among them, in my view, is this: given this conception of bias, it will always seem, from any individual's point of view, that those who disagree with her on *any* given issue are biased. After all, believing some proposition *p* commits one to thinking that *p* is true, and so to thinking

of anyone who disputes it – including any media source that disputes it – as saying something false. But according to the second conception of bias, a media source is unbiased just to the extent that it reports the truth – and so, to the extent that it reports anything false, it is biased. But now it just follows that, from my perspective, any media source that says anything that I disagree with is *ipso facto* biased.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, it doesn't follow from this that everyone I disagree with *actually is* biased. Nevertheless, even the result that it *seems from my perspective* as though everyone I disagree with is biased, I think, makes the concept of bias significantly less useful. It's a pretty familiar feature of our political culture that those on the left view those on the right as biased, and vice versa. Indeed, there's a rather cynical cottage industry of books about the media designed to exploit this – one set accusing the “mainstream media” of pervasive right-wing bias, and another set accusing it of pervasive left-wing bias.<sup>10</sup> I suspect that such accusations of “bias” often amount simply to disagreement with what the relevant source says. But we might have been *hoping* that the charge of bias would amount to something more than that.

At our most hopeful, we might have hoped at least in principle for criteria for biased reporting that can themselves be applied in a non-partisan manner – such that you and I could recognize and agree on signs of biased reporting even though we have substantive first-order political disagreements. The second conception of bias gives up on this hope. Moreover, on such a view, it also doesn't seem like we can reasonably hope to persuade others who don't share our views to improve their epistemic practices. For if, when I claim that you're relying on a biased source, my grounds are simply that your source doesn't comport with what *I* believe to be true, then I can hardly expect *that* to move you to change your epistemic practices.

Relatedly, if we *advise* people to consume only unbiased sources, where ‘unbiased’ is read in the second way, the *de facto* result of people trying to follow this norm will be that each person consumes only sources that conform with their own political views. Since it's trivial that each individual *thinks* their own views are true, each person will think that sources that conform with their own views are unbiased, and so it will seem to each individual that they are following the norm of consuming only unbiased media sources when they just read those sources that conform with their own views.<sup>11</sup> Now, admittedly, those individuals who have false beliefs will be *wrong* that they are conforming to the norm; the norm doesn't *in fact* license every individual being partisan (I'll consider a different view that *does* embrace that result in the next section). That said, again, I consider the project here to be one in non-ideal theory, and one way in which non-ideal theory differs from ideal theory is that the former tries to pick and endorse norms that it's actually good to advise people to (do their best to) follow. This can be seen as a consequence of taking seriously the limitations that affect our performance in conforming with “ideal” norms.

Neither conception of bias surveyed so far, then, seems to plug into the norm “consume only unbiased sources” in a way that makes the norm plausible. Indeed, neither seems to be a good conception of bias in and of itself. So should we conclude that bias is a flawed, ill-defined concept? This would be too hasty. Both of the first two conceptions of bias focus on *what* news outlets say: respectively, on whether what they say is “even-handed”, and whether it is true. In my view, a

more promising conception of bias turns away from a focus on *what* is said toward the explanation of *why* it is said. On this conception of bias, biased reporting is reporting that has been influenced in one or more of a particular cluster of illicit ways, all of which are in some good sense “non-epistemic” factors. In section 4, I will discuss which ways count as illicit in more detail. For present purposes, however, the question is whether this conception of bias is what we need to make the first competitor view work. And even without spelling out what sorts of influences are illicit, we can already see that, though this is a promising conception of bias, it doesn’t ultimately help out the first competitor view.

First, whilst it’s relatively easy to determine *what* a news outlet is saying, it’s much harder to determine *why* they said it. The latter is a psychological question that requires knowing what psychological mechanisms were operative in the relevant journalists and editors. So, to the extent that bias is a matter of reporting’s being influenced in illicit ways, it becomes hard for the average news consumer to know whether a particular news outlet is biased. Thus, the norm “consume only unbiased media sources” becomes extremely hard to follow. Maybe there are some extreme offenders that it’s easy to know about: if a news channel is being bankrolled by the oil industry, there are good reasons to be suspicious of its coverage of environmental issues. But many cases will be hard to know about. I’m not saying that our default should be to assume that news outlets *aren’t* influenced illicitly; it’s just as hard to know that a given news outlet *isn’t* being influenced illicitly. This still makes it hard to follow the norm “consume only unbiased media sources” on this conception of bias. Again, I don’t take that to count against the conception of bias *as a conception of bias*, but it does count against the norm, at least construed as actionable advice.

In the absence of being able to confidently make judgments about the psychological mechanisms at work in individual reporters, we are forced to rely on general background evidence about the likelihood of such mechanisms being at work. But the evidence strongly suggests that we are *all* vulnerable to being influenced by non-epistemic factors in belief-formation; it isn’t a vice limited to one side of the political spectrum (see section 5).<sup>12</sup> Maybe one could hold that there are some media sources that are resistant enough to these sorts of influences to count as sufficiently unbiased for the purposes of the norm “consume only unbiased media sources”. But if that’s so, I don’t see any reason to expect those sources to all align on one side of the political spectrum, and so then the norm ceases to *compete* with my view that we should diversify our media consumption.

### **3. Second Competitor View: Across-The-Board Partisanship**

In considering the second conception of bias above, I objected that given this conception of bias, the advice to consume only unbiased media sources will have the *de facto* result of encouraging everyone to be partisan in their media consumption, consuming only news media that aligns with their own political point of view. As I acknowledged, though, the view I was considering doesn’t affirm that such behavior is actually reasonable, across the board. Rather, it only affirms that it’s reasonable for those who genuinely have *correct* beliefs to be partisan. A different view, recently

defended by Regina Rini (2017) positively embraces the view that *everyone* can permissibly be partisan in their decisions about which media sources to trust.<sup>13</sup>

Rini describes herself as “defend[ing] partisan epistemology”, Rini (2017, p.50). But since her view licenses practices of epistemic partisanship for *everyone*, in a sense Rini’s *epistemology* is highly non-partisan. It doesn’t say that individuals on the left are justified in being epistemically partisan, but that the right isn’t (or vice versa); rather, it says that those on the left are being reasonable in being partisan toward left-leaning media sources, and that those on the right are being reasonable in being partisan toward right-leaning media sources. Why does Rini think this? She writes:

“When I learn that another person shares my partisan affiliation, I learn that she and I share at least some significant number of normative values. Or, to put it another way, I learn that she *tends to get normative questions right* (by my normative lights). She establishes herself as a more reliable normative judge than I would take her to be by default, or especially if she were affiliated to an opposed party.” (Rini 2017, p.51; her italics)

Rini’s conclusion is that being partisan in one’s practices of epistemic trust, specifically with respect to news sources, is “compatible with individual virtue” (*ibid.*, p.43) and is “reasonable” (*ibid.*, p.54).

As I see it, there are two problems with Rini’s argument. The first is that she tacitly assumes a tendentious kind of epistemic subjectivism.<sup>14</sup> Rini seems to be assuming that if some co-partisan of mine tends to get normative questions right *by my lights*, that suffices for making (or at least strongly contributes toward making) my decision to invest greater trust in her reasonable. This is highly questionable. Many philosophers deny that I can “bootstrap” my way into being reasonable in  $\Phi$ -ing simply by believing that I ought to  $\Phi$  or by believing propositions that *if true* would make it the case that I ought to  $\Phi$ .<sup>15</sup> To take an example that is close to home in debates about trust, consider the phenomenon of testimonial injustice, whereby one gives someone less trust than one epistemically ought to due to ethically bad (paradigmatically, prejudiced) misjudgments of their trustworthiness.<sup>16</sup> This characterization makes vivid that testimonial injustice is based on a *misjudgment* of a speaker’s trustworthiness. So, it follows that whenever I commit a testimonial injustice, it’s nevertheless the case that *in my judgment* – and thus, *by my lights* – the speaker *isn’t* (that) trustworthy. In at least many cases of epistemic injustice, this judgment of mine will be explicit, and in some it will be part of a broader and more systematic constellation of judgments or “lights” such that *by my lights* the speaker isn’t trustworthy. (Consider the *explicit* racist who thinks that black people constantly lie or forget the truth and thus can’t be trusted.)

I take it that few would claim that, in these cases, the fact that the speaker is untrustworthy *by my lights* suffices to make, or even seriously contributes towards making, my distrust of the speaker reasonable or justified or virtuous, in any non-anemic sense. It’s just not that easy to make my dismissal of the speaker’s testimony reasonable. The concept of testimonial injustice is situated within a critical project that holds us to higher standards than this. But if that’s so, why think that

the mere fact that a media source is untrustworthy *by my lights* makes it reasonable to discount it – or that its being trustworthy *by my lights* makes it reasonable to trust it? More broadly, the kind of subjectivism that Rini is assuming here also has the effect of licensing extremely dogmatic epistemic practices. For example, in instances of peer disagreement, it's clearly true that *by my lights* my disputant has got things wrong: does that make it reasonable for me to dismiss my disputant's view and remain steadfast? This seems far too quick a resolution to the peer disagreement debate.

The second problem with Rini's argument is that one that she recognizes (Rini 2017, p.52). Rini identifies my co-partisans as those who share my *normative* values. Even granting the subjectivist assumptions that I've just been putting pressure on, this seems to only yield the conclusion that I'm reasonable in giving their testimony *on normative matters* more weight. But it seems that this falls far short of making it reasonable to trust partisan media sources *generally*, since news reporting (while doubtlessly often normatively loaded) has at least a descriptive *component*. And it's not clear why I should think that someone who shares my normative values is a more reliable source of descriptive information.

Rini's answer to this objection (*ibid.*, pp. 52-3) is that even when a news source is reporting descriptive information, its decisions about which descriptive information to communicate is based on, and implicates, normative claims about which descriptive information is important. I entirely agree with this claim – and will discuss it further in section 4b below – but I don't see how it helps Rini out here. For even if I think some source is reliable in making judgments about which descriptive claims are (if true) important, this provides no direct support for thinking that the source is reliable in determining which descriptive claims are true. And it's the latter question that's relevant for determining whether to believe the descriptive claims that the source makes. So I don't see how Rini's point explains why it's reasonable to be partisan in deciding which media outlets to *trust*, in the sense of giving strong evidential weight to their testimony in forming beliefs about descriptive claims.

One might object that even if Rini's argument fails to establish that we should *trust* those on our own political side more (as she claims), it might still show that we should *listen* to those on our own political side more. For supposing that we have limited time to devote to consuming news, we might want to devote that time to consuming news from outlets that are likely to cover the most *important* stories. And here the issue of whether the source is reliable in making judgments about which descriptive claims are important *is* relevant. I will respond to this objection at the end of section 4b, when I'll have introduced a distinction that helps me to answer it. But in any case, it at most disarms my second objection to Rini, and not my first.

#### **4. When Are Influences on Reporting Illicit?**

In section 2, I said that on a promising conception of bias, biased reporting is reporting that has been influenced in one or more of a cluster of illicit ways, all of which are in some sense “non-epistemic”. I now want to say more about exactly which kinds of influences count as illicit in the

relevant sense. This will help me to set the stage for my positive argument for diversifying one's sources.

To begin, we need to distinguish two stages at which the illicit influence might enter. First, a journalist's (descriptive) *beliefs* about some potential news story (its accuracy, the credibility of the sources involved, and so on) might be illicitly influenced. Secondly, a journalist's decision about which of two or more potential news stories to give air-time to might be illicitly influenced. Which influences are illicit, exactly, will depend on which stage we're considering. Let's take them in turn.

a) *Illicit influences on belief*

To the extent that we're focused on the first stage, that of belief-formation, media bias can be assimilated to biases in belief-formation more generally. The paradigm of an illicit influence here, and the one I'll focus on, is "motivated reasoning", where (in the terms of Kunda 1990), one lets one's "directional" goals (i.e. aims or desires to reach some particular conclusion about whether *p*) influence one's reasoning about whether *p*, overcoming one's "accuracy" goals (i.e. aims or desires to reach an accurate answer as to whether *p*).<sup>17</sup> As Kunda stresses, one's directional goals don't typically influence one's beliefs *directly*; rather, they typically do so indirectly, by causing one to engage in selective filtering and processing of evidence that favors the conclusion one wants to reach.

There are various reasons why one might have such directional goals. Some such goals are due to material or financial incentives. If the funder or owner of some news organization believes that climate change is not man-made, and reporters know that their jobs depend on towing that line, but they also don't want to think of themselves as liars, then they might (perhaps subconsciously) *want* it to be true that climate change is not man-made. If a reporter is influenced to believe that climate change is not man-made for this reason, then they are being influenced in an illicit way that clearly counts as a kind of bias.

A more complex and subtle, but very common, source of directional goals is one's pre-existing normative views. We have to be careful about exactly when being influenced by one's pre-existing normative views constitutes an example of motivated reasoning, that is, of being influenced by directional goals. Clearly, it need not necessarily be a vice to reason from one's pre-existing normative views to reach further conclusions that follow from those views.<sup>18</sup> What seems distinctively epistemically vicious is to let one's normative views influence one's conclusions about *descriptive* matters of fact upon which the normative claims do not bear.<sup>19</sup> Dan Kahan has dubbed this phenomenon "cultural cognition".<sup>20</sup> To stick with the climate change example, it would be epistemically vicious to let one's normative view that government regulation of individual behavior is a bad thing influence one's descriptive belief about whether man-made climate change is real. For even if government regulation is a bad thing, that simply doesn't evidentially bear on whether man-made climate change is real.<sup>21</sup>

I'll explore two ways in which one's normative view that government regulation is a bad thing might influence one's belief about whether man-made climate change is real; this will help to see how such influences constitute motivated reasoning. To illustrate the first way, consider Jayla. Jayla believes that government regulation of individual behavior is a bad thing, but her belief that it is bad rests at least in part upon the empirical assumption that government regulation leads to worse outcomes (measured in, say, utilitarian terms) than a laissez-faire approach.<sup>22</sup> To illustrate the second way, consider Bobby, who believes that government regulation is an *inherently* bad thing, even when its effects would be good: he thinks it is an invasion of personal rights and liberties.

For both Jayla and Bobby, the fact that climate change is man-made is a potentially "inconvenient truth".<sup>23</sup> If climate change *is* man-made, and the scale of the threat that it poses is huge, then very plausibly, averting environmental catastrophe requires some measure of regulation of individual behavior. (By contrast, if climate change *isn't* man-made, the solution can't be to regulate human activity.) However, the sense in which the fact that climate-change is man-made is inconvenient differs for Jayla and Bobby. For Jayla, the truth is inconvenient because it directly undermines her normative belief. Jayla's normative belief that regulation is bad (in the sense of: to be avoided) explicitly rests upon the assumption that it does more harm than good (in utilitarian terms). But if regulation is a prerequisite of avoiding environmental armageddon, that assumption is hard to sustain, at least with respect to the example of environmental regulation. But even though Jayla's normative belief rests upon empirical assumptions, she might nevertheless be quite psychologically attached to this normative belief. Given that, she might be motivated to deny claims – such as the claim that climate change is man-made – that undermine the empirical assumption upon which the normative belief, in turn, rests. Needless to say, this pattern – being motivated to deny the veracity of counter-evidence in order to preserve a belief that, *by one's own lights*, there is no reason to hold in the presence of such counter-evidence – is perverse.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, it seems to be fairly common.<sup>25</sup>

Bobby's belief that regulation is bad, by contrast, does not rest on any empirical assumptions that are undermined by the fact that climate change is man-made. That said, this fact may still be an inconvenient truth for Bobby in a different way, namely that it gives rise to psychologically uncomfortable trade-offs. Given that climate change is man-made, Bobby is faced with an uncomfortable trade-off between the kind of government regulation that he believes to be inherently bad or unjust, and the possibility of environmental catastrophe. Bobby can avoid facing down this psychologically uncomfortable trade-off by denying that climate change is man-made, so that the conflict between preserving personal liberty and avoiding environmental catastrophe never arises. Bobby might be motivated to deny that climate change is man-made, so as to avoid facing down this trade-off.

To the extent that he is so motivated, Bobby, like Jayla, seems clearly irrational. Though trade-offs are *uncomfortable* to face, there is no general *a priori* reason to suppose that they do not arise for many political issues. Here it's important to keep straight the distinction between two kinds of (in)congruence that are sometimes inadequately distinguished. There is a very loose sense

in which the belief that regulation is inherently bad (because freedom-inhibiting), and the belief that such regulation is necessary to prevent environmental disaster, are not “congruent”. As we’ve just seen, given our desire to avoid facing down trade-offs, they may be psychologically uncomfortable to hold together. Moreover, the two beliefs (if true) provide conflicting *pro tanto* reasons to pursue incompatible courses of action: the former, to avoid environmental regulation, and the latter, to pursue it. That said, the beliefs are perfectly logically consistent with one another, and there’s nothing rationally incoherent about holding both of them. Indeed, neither (even if true) provides any *pro tanto* evidence against the other.<sup>26</sup> And though (as just noted), if both beliefs are true, there are conflicting *pro tanto* reasons to pursue incompatible courses of action, that’s life; it’s something that happens (unlike logical contradictions). So in a stronger sense of ‘incongruent’, there’s nothing incongruent about the two beliefs.

Some of the psychological literature on cognitive dissonance and related topics seems to throw together the weaker kind of incongruence with the stronger kind of incongruence when using words like ‘incongruent’, ‘dissonant’, ‘incoherent’ and ‘inconsistent’.<sup>27</sup> This obscures an otherwise clear normative asymmetry between the weaker and stronger kinds of incongruence. Various complications notwithstanding, having beliefs that are incongruent in the stronger sense – that are logically inconsistent, or that evidentially undermine one another – is an epistemic defect. By contrast, there is nothing epistemically defective about having beliefs that are incongruent only in the weaker sense of being psychologically uncomfortable to hold together, or of providing conflicting *pro tanto* reasons for incompatible courses of action. So, correspondingly, whereas the desire to eliminate the stronger kind of incongruence might be understood (again, complications notwithstanding) as an “epistemic” or “accuracy” goal that it might be epistemically rational to pursue, the desire to eliminate the weaker kind of incongruence is clearly a “directional” goal, and pursuit of it is a kind of epistemically irrational motivated reasoning. Bobby falls into the latter, rather than the former, category.

*b) Illicit influences on decisions about what to report*

Let’s now pass to the second stage at which illicit influences on reporting might enter – that of influences on which facts journalists choose to give airtime to. Here, arguably, it’s less easy to determine what amounts to an “illicit” influence than at the first stage. When we’re talking about influences on belief, it’s at least a good rule of thumb that “non-epistemic” influences are illicit. But it’s not clear what it would mean to say that only epistemic considerations ought to determine one’s decisions about what to report. Moreover, there are complex ethical questions about decisions about what to report that I can’t settle here – for example: is it (always) wrong to report one story rather than another because it’s what your audience wants to hear? That said, we can describe at least some influences on decisions about what to report that are illicit, as well as some that aren’t. In particular, it’s instructive to focus, as we did in the previous subsection, on the influence of normative beliefs.

Now, there's a way in which it's unavoidable that one's normative outlook influences one's reporting of the descriptive facts. News outlets, obviously, cannot report everything that happens in the world on a given day, nor would this be desirable. So they have to decide which stories are most important. That is, unavoidably, a value judgment, and has to be informed by normative considerations. So, a news outlet might have to decide whether an accident that killed two people in a local town is more newsworthy than a bomb attack in a faraway country that killed one hundred.<sup>28</sup> Different normative views will yield different answers here, and some of these answers may be more plausible than others. But the influence of normative views *as such* is not out of place here, as it was with letting one's normative views determine one's descriptive beliefs. For that reason, while it seems perfectly appropriate to criticize news outlets for making the wrong moral decisions about which news stories to cover, I don't think it's appropriate to describe such decisions (where they really do result simply from a mistaken evaluation of what's most newsworthy) as "biased". Given that *everyone* will have to be influenced by their normative views in deciding what to cover, to describe such influence as "biased" only when the normative views in questions are ones that we disagree with is to revert to the partisan conception of bias that I argued against in section 2.

That said, there is a different way in which one's normative convictions might influence one's decisions about which descriptive facts to give airtime to, that does seem to constitute a kind of bias. It mirrors the illicit influence of normative views on descriptive beliefs identified in the previous subsection. Recall that some descriptive truths are *inconvenient* for particular normative views; this might illicitly motivate some people to avoid *believing* those truths. But it also might motivate some reporters not to *report* those truths. To the extent that some reporters are motivated not to report information *because* it is inconvenient for their, or their news organization's, normative stance, I suggest, they are succumbing to a kind of bias, and being influenced illicitly in their decisions about what to report.

Again, this inconvenience could either be a matter of the facts in question *undermining* the normative stance, or a matter of their throwing up difficult trade-offs or conflicts given that normative stance. Moreover, now we're talking about decisions about what to report, the fact in question may be inconvenient *for the purposes of persuading an audience*. Consider a talk show host who is strongly against government regulation. Since we're considering the second stage rather than the first, let's stipulate that the talk show host *does* believe that climate change is man-made. So his anti-government regulation views, by hypothesis, have *not* biased his *belief* about whether climate change is man-made. Nevertheless, nor has his belief that climate change is man-made shaken his anti-government regulation views: perhaps he simply doesn't *care* about averting environmental catastrophe or about the well-being of future generations. Still, the talk show host might recognize that, were his audience to come to believe that climate change is man-made, it might shake *their* anti-government regulation views. And for that reason, he might choose to avoid reporting on the evidence for man-made climate change. Here, the fact that climate change is man-made is not inconvenient for the talk show host's own stance *per se*, since his stance is simply impervious to this fact. But it is inconvenient for his goal of persuading others of his stance.

It's really important, I think, to pull apart the two different ways that I've just described in which a reporter might be influenced by her normative views in deciding what to report. To reiterate, on the first way, the reporter picks Story A over Story B because given her normative views, it follows that Story A is more newsworthy than Story B. On the second way, the reporter picks Story C over Story D because Story D is *inconvenient* for her normative views. These two kinds of influence are crucially different, in kind and normatively. The former kind is only criticizable insofar as the reporter's normative views are mistaken, and even then, not (thereby) for *bias* as such. The second kind of influence, by contrast, is *in principle* illicit and biased, regardless of the correctness of the reporter's normative views.

This bears directly on the point that I mentioned on behalf of Rini at the end of section 3. The objection was that given that we have limited time to consume media, it makes sense to listen to the sources that have (by our lights) the correct normative views, since they'll make decisions about what to cover that reflect those correct normative views. But this only takes into account the *first*, virtuous, way in which a news organization's normative views might influence their decisions about what to report. It neglects the counterbalancing danger of the second, non-virtuous, way in which a news organization's normative views can influence their decisions about what to report. As I'll be arguing later, it's in part because of that danger that we're obligated to diversify our media consumption.

## 5. Illicit Influences Across the Political Spectrum

Throughout the last section, in seeking to explain which influences on reporting are, illicit I used, in various forms, the example of climate change denial. This example is, of course, a safe one for a left-liberal audience. But the empirical evidence on motivated reasoning and related influences on belief and choice suggests that these phenomena are pervasive, and not limited to one side of the political spectrum.<sup>29</sup> To take a specific example, a study conducted by Lord, Ross & Lepper (1979) shows that normative orientations concerning the death penalty caused biased processing of evidence regarding the descriptive question of whether the death penalty deters crime, *for groups on both sides of the issue*.

To give a more speculative but hopefully illustrative example, consider left-wing protectionists such as Bernie Sanders who seek to protect domestic jobs through protectionist trade measures.<sup>30</sup> Unlike right-wing, overtly nationalist protectionists such as Donald Trump, left-wing protectionists are reluctant to think of protectionist trade measures as designed to protect domestic jobs *at the expense of the global poor*. Rather, left-wing protectionists often claim that their protectionist measures will *also* benefit the global poor, since (according to them) liberalized trade exploits and therefore harms the global poor.<sup>31</sup>

But the claim that Western protectionism would benefit the global poor flies in the face of the most basic tenets of economic theory, and is rejected by the overwhelming majority of experts on both trade and development (who disagree on a wide variety of other theoretical and policy questions).<sup>32</sup> Note that the question here is not the (somewhat) more disputed one of whether it

can benefit developing countries to protect *their own* industries, nor that of whether Western protectionism does in fact maximize domestic (Western) employment in the long-run. Rather, it is just of whether *Western* protectionism benefits the poor in *developing* countries. And on *that* claim, there is little to no dispute among the relevant experts.<sup>33</sup> (Of course, left-wing protectionists might propound conspiracy theories about why all these experts are biased or lying, but it is hard to see how such conspiracy theories have any better epistemic standing than equivalent conspiracy theories propounded to explain away the expert consensus about climate science.)

In light of this, I offer the admittedly speculative psychological hypothesis that many left-wing protectionists are engaged in motivated reasoning about the effects of Western protectionism on the global poor. On this hypothesis, because such people are committed to protectionist policies that are popular with unions and that (in their eyes, at least) protect the domestic working class, but they *also* don't want to think of themselves as harming the global poor or as sacrificing the global poor for American benefit, they are motivated to conclude that protectionism doesn't hurt, and in fact helps, the global poor.

That wasn't an example pertaining to media coverage specifically, but it illustrates how motivated reasoning can be present on all sides of the political spectrum, and we can expect that to apply to the media as well. Indeed, think of how many newspaper op-eds argue, with respect to some given issue, that *all* the relevant considerations line up on the same side of the issue. We're told that some criminal justice policy is bad (or good) for deterring crime, *and* for racial justice, *and* for public faith in policing. We're told that some immigration policy is good (or bad) for incoming immigrants, *and* for reducing community tensions, *and* for economic growth. We're told that some foreign policy initiative is morally just, *and* protects our domestic security, *and* advances our international standing. Now, maybe on some of these issues, certain policies really are beneficial in *all* relevant respects. But we should at least pause, when we read such op-eds, to note how striking it would be if all the significant *pro tanto* reasons bearing on that policy neatly lined up on the same side, and to ask whether the author might be engaged in motivated reasoning, in trying to get them to do so. Again, it's more psychologically comfortable for us not to acknowledge the existence of trade-offs; moreover, when we're engaged in *argument* with others, we sometimes enter a defensive mode where we don't want to concede *anything* to the "other side". So the possibility of motivated reasoning seems a real threat – again, regardless of one's position on the political spectrum.

Likewise, in terms of decisions about what to report, illicit influences seem present on both sides of the spectrum. Take the issue of Brexit. It's doubtlessly true that the right-wing elements of the British media were extremely selective in their decisions about what to report, both in the run-up to and the aftermath of the Brexit referendums – omitting information that might cast the decision to leave the European Union in a bad light.<sup>34</sup> That said, similar but inverse behavior is not entirely absent in more left-leaning publications. For example, while the immediate crash of the pound after the Brexit vote garnered a lot of attention from the left-leaning elements of the media, with many proclaiming it as a sign of irreparable damage, reporting of the pound's subsequent recovery to a level relatively close to where it was before the Brexit vote<sup>35</sup> has been relatively

muted. That's not, to be fair, to say they haven't written about it at all. But when they have, it has typically been relegated to the 'Business' section (rather than the front pages, as the crash was), and it has been left out of daily email digests of the most important stories of the day. Similarly, despite much prior reporting on the failure of the UK Conservative government's austerity policies to eliminate the deficit on the current budget, the *Guardian* did not report on their eventual success in doing so, unless you count a comment piece arguing that the success wasn't worth it.<sup>36</sup>

To be clear, my argument does not rely on the assumption that all media outlets (or outlets on all sides of the media spectrum) are illicitly influenced in their decisions about what to report to the same degree as each other.<sup>37</sup> As long as all media outlets are illicitly influenced to a non-trivial degree, it will be problematic to rely on only one source for one's news. The examples I have offered of illicit influences on reporting could each be disputed, but in general, I suggest, we have good reason to believe and expect that all outlets are, to some extent, influenced in their decisions about what to report (and how much prominence to give it) by how (in)convenient some piece of news is, given their prior stances.<sup>38</sup> If you're doubtful of this, I suggest subscribing to the daily email updates from a left-leaning newspaper and a right-leaning newspaper (say, in the UK, the *Guardian* and the *Times*) – and just comparing them over a two-week period, noticing the stories that each covers but the other doesn't, and which aspects of the stories they both cover they choose to focus on.<sup>39</sup> For these two publications, at least, you won't find outright descriptive falsehoods in either publication. But you will, I predict, find that each newspaper to some degree plays down news that isn't convenient for its editorial line – which you can only really see by comparing with the other publication's coverage. And you might learn about some inconvenient truths for your own views, whatever those views are.

## **6. Conclusion: Why We're Obligated to Diversify Our Sources**

This leads me into what I've been building up to throughout the last two sections, namely the positive argument for why we are in fact obligated to diversify our sources. The argument is, with the background work done, relatively simple to make, and it draws together points I've already been making. I argued that we should expect publications (and individual journalists) on all sides of the political spectrum to be, to some degree, illicitly influenced in what they believe, and in what they choose to report. When they are illicitly influenced in what they believe, it will be epistemically dangerous to take what they say on trust, without considering arguments and evidence presented by those with different views. If we restrict ourselves to reputable publications, this danger probably primarily surfaces in op-eds and comment pieces. However, illicit influences on what to *report* affect all news coverage. There, the danger is that if publications are prone to omit or minimize stories that aren't convenient for their normative outlook, then reading only news sources from any one side of the political spectrum (even if that side is normatively correct) will result in getting a skewed, incomplete picture of the evidence.

As I argued in section 1, we cannot rely on ourselves to correct for the incompleteness of this evidence – in part because we are not good at doing so, and in part because in any case we

aren't in a position to gauge just how incomplete the evidence is. Consequently, we ought to cut the problem off at the source, to whatever extent we can, by diversifying our sources to gather a richer set of evidence. Perhaps we will sometimes reach the conclusion that the other side's evidence doesn't have much weight; that the information that our own side omitted doesn't make much of a difference to anything that has much import. No doubt that will sometimes be the correct reaction. But that isn't a reason not to even *consider* the evidence, which is what consuming news from only one side amounts to.

Diversifying our sources isn't a panacea – we may still unjustifiably dismiss some evidence that we should not dismiss. But it is a concrete step that we can take that can make some difference. We know that we are prone to confirmation bias – to seeking out evidence that confirms our own views.<sup>40</sup> In the internet age, this is easier than ever: as Jonathan Haidt (2012, p.99) crisply puts it, “whatever you want to believe about the causes of global warming or whether a fetus can feel pain, just Google your belief.” Forcing ourselves to consume diverse sources is a way to mitigate this tendency to some extent.

Moreover, I want to suggest, we should do this even if it *seems* to us that our favorite news media source isn't succumbing to illicit influences on its reporting. For one can't be justified in being confident in this without comparing its output with those of other publications, and seeing what it is omitting. Moreover, if we have good general evidence that all humans will be susceptible to illicit influences, journalists included, then this constitutes evidence that particular news sources will be susceptible to these influences, regardless of their political orientation. Finally, to the extent that this general evidence suggests that *I myself* may be biased in evaluating whether my favorite news source is biased,<sup>41</sup> it is a higher-order defeater of my belief that my favorite news source isn't biased (for it suggests that my *sense* of having strong evidence for this belief is in fact a product of bias).

Some may wonder if the obligation to consume news from a diverse range of sources requires them to read news sources that are apparently “beyond the pail”. My response is that it need not. If one really is justified in believing that a particular source is simply factually unreliable, then there are independent epistemic reasons not to consume it. That said, I think we may in general overestimate the extent to which news sources on the “other side” are factually unreliable. I occasionally read the website of Fox News (which counts as the “other side” for me), and I rarely find anything that appears straightforwardly descriptively false. My objections to its coverage lie primarily in the normative views that it espouses in its comment pieces (and implied in how it frames much of its news coverage), and in its selectivity in what it chooses to cover. It also often hides its own opinions behind qualifiers like “critics are saying that...”, but this is fairly ubiquitous across news outlets of all political stripes. I actually think that, if they have the time to do so, left-liberals can learn *something* instructive by occasionally reading or watching Fox News. But there may well be better representatives of “the other side” to consume instead, and I don't say that one is obligated to consume news from every outlet.

Even with that clarification, reading news from multiple sources across the political spectrum may seem very demanding and time-consuming. My primary response to this is simply

that even if one holds the *amount* of news one consumes fixed, it's still better to consume it from a politically diverse range of sources than to consume it from a single source. But I'll also close with one further point. I have argued that we should consume news from media outlets across the political spectrum. But even just relying on one (reputable) source, *reading it by starting on its home page, or with its daily email digest*, is an improvement on an increasingly common way of consuming news, namely that of consuming it by clicking on links shared on social media. For the news stories you see on social media are filtered twice or in some cases three times: first by the news organization itself, then by the friends in your social network, and finally (sometimes) by the social media platform in using algorithms that use your own political preferences to pick which of your friends' posts to show you.

At each of these stages, your evidence is getting filtered in a way that makes it more and more selective. If you start with the front page or email digest of a news publication, you get only the first stage of filtering – so if the news organization *has*, conscientiously, reported on something that is “inconvenient” for its own normative outlook, you are more likely to see it. And so even this practice is an improvement on what many of us, increasingly, do.<sup>42</sup>

## References

- Ahlstrom-Vij, K. (2013) Why We Cannot Rely on Ourselves for Epistemic Improvement. *Philosophical Issues*, 23, pp.276-296.
- Anderson, E. (2011) Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony. *Episteme*, 8(2), pp.144-164.
- Ballantyne, N. (2015) Debunking Biased Thinkers (Including Ourselves). *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 1(1), pp.141-162.
- Berker, S. (2013) Epistemic Teleology and the Separateness of Propositions. *Philosophical Review*, 122(3), pp.337-393.
- Brock, D. (2004) *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy*. New York: Random House.
- Broome, J. (1999) Normative Requirements. *Ratio*, 12(4), pp.398-419.
- Buchak, L. (2010) Instrumental Rationality, Epistemic Rationality, and Evidence-Gathering. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24(1), pp.85-120.
- Christensen, D. (2013) Epistemic Modesty Defended. In *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*, ed. D. Christensen & J. Lackey, pp.77-97. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, G.A. (2003). Facts and Principles. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 31(3), pp. 211-245.
- Dancy, J. (2000). *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Finlay, S. (2010). What *Ought* Probably Means, and Why You Can't Detach It. *Synthese*, 177(1), pp.67-89.
- Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, M. (2016) Fault and No-Fault Responsibility for Implicit Prejudice. In *The Epistemic Lives of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*, ed. M.S. Brady & M. Fricker, pp.33-50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gore, A. (2006). *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Rodale.
- Groseclose, T. (2012) *Left Turn: How Liberal Media Bias Distorts the American Mind*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Haidt, J. (2001) The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108(4), pp.814-834.
- Haidt, J. (2012) *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Random House.
- Harman, G. (1973) *Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kahan, D. & Braman, D. (2006) Cultural Cognition and Public Policy. *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 24, pp.147-170.
- Kahan, D., Jenkins-Smith, H. & Braman, D. (2011) Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus. *Journal of Risk Research*, 14(2), pp.147-174.
- Kelly, T. (2002) The Rationality of Belief and Some Other Propositional Attitudes. *Philosophical Studies*, 110(2), pp.163-196.
- Kelly, T. (2005) The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, 1, pp.167-196.
- Kiesewetter, B. (2017) *The Normativity of Rationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kolodny, N. (2005) Why Be Rational? *Mind*, 114(455), pp.509-563.
- Kunda, Z. (1990) The Case for Motivated Reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), pp.480-498.
- Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U.K.H., Seifert, C.M., Schwartz, N & Cook, J. (2012) Misinformation and its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13(3), pp.106-131.
- Lord, C.G., Ross L., & Lepper, M.R. (1979) Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(11), pp.2098-2109.
- Miller, D. (2008) Political Philosophy for Earthlings. In *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. D. Leopold & M. Stears, pp. 29-48. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Neta, R. (2013) Easy Knowledge, Transmission Failure, and Empiricism. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, 4, pp.166-184.
- Rini, R. (2017) Fake News and Partisan Epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 27(2), pp.43-64.
- Rosen, G. (2003) Culpability and Ignorance. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103, pp.61-84.
- Titelbaum, M. (2015). Rationality's Fixed Point (or: In Defense of Right Reason). *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, 5, pp.253-294.
- te Velde, D.W. (ed.) (2012) *The Next Decade of EU Trade Policy: Confronting Global Challenges?* London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Watson, L. (2018) Systemic Epistemic Rights Violations in the Media: A Brexit Case Study. *Social Epistemology*, 32(2), pp.88-102.
- Whaples, R. (2006) Do Economists Agree on Anything? Yes! *The Economists' Voice*, 3(9), pp.1-6.
- White, R. (2007). Epistemic Subjectivism. *Episteme*, 4(1), pp.115-129.
- White, R. (2010). You Just Believe That Because... *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24, pp.573-615.
- Wodak, D. (ms.). Fake News and Echo Chambers.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wodak (ms.) defends roughly the same conclusion, but on different grounds. I hope to have an opportunity to engage with his arguments elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> For relevant data, see e.g. Ahlstrom-Vij (2013); Ballantyne (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps not always, though. See Buchak (2010) for discussion.

<sup>4</sup> This will perhaps not be entirely uncontroversial. Many epistemologists are skeptical of epistemic consequentialism, according to which beliefs are evaluated according to their (expected) epistemic consequentialism (with respect to true belief and/or knowledge), on the grounds that the fact that my having some belief *p* is likely to lead to *other* true or known beliefs in future doesn't make it more justified or rational to believe *p* itself. (See, e.g., Berker (2013).) Such philosophers might claim that since the epistemic effects of *beliefs* don't bear on the epistemic justification of those beliefs, the epistemic effects of evidence-gathering procedures don't ground a sense in which such procedures can be epistemically justified either. But I'm not sure about this argument: one might hold that there are good reasons to be consequentialist about the epistemic evaluation of evidence-gathering procedures without being consequentialist about the epistemic evaluation of beliefs.

<sup>5</sup> Here I'm using 'responsible' in the sense whereby it denotes a positive epistemic status, not in the sense concerned with whether we are responsible *for* our beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> This also relates to, but again goes beyond, the point that whether I'm morally *culpable* for wrongdoing committed out of ignorance can depend on whether I was epistemically culpable for the ignorance in question. Compare Rosen (2003); Fricker (2016).

<sup>7</sup> It's worth mentioning, just to clear out of the way, that occasionally in popular discourse being "neutral" between political views seems to mean occupying a position in the political center. The "Media Bias Chart", for example, (available at <http://www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com/>), which was recently widely shared on social media, presupposes that if an outlet doesn't "skew liberal" or "skew conservative", it is thereby "neutral". But this is preposterous: centrism is a political outlook like any other, characterized by a distinctive set of views and policy proposals, and if it's possible to be biased in favor of liberalism or conservatism, it's evidently possible to be biased in favor of centrism too. So I pass over this view.

---

<sup>8</sup> That's not to say that this always or even often *is* how this question is answered. Often, which voices are represented in the media is determined simply by what power they have. But I take it that it's hard to really normatively defend that practice. And moreover, even if one did that, the judgment that what determines whether a voice ought to be heard is whether it comes from a position of power is still a value judgment in a way that the conception of "unbiased" reporting as simply "reporting all sides" obscures.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, on *some* particular issues, it might be correct to think that everyone, or nearly everyone, who disagrees with one's stance is biased. Perhaps there are some views that fly in the face of evidence to such an extent that bias is simply the best explanation of why such views are held. I allow this. What is objectionable about the conception of bias I'm presently discussing is not that it will allow me to think that in *some* cases, everyone who disagrees with me is biased, but that it will rationalize (and even require) thinking that in *all* cases, everyone who disagrees with me is biased – merely in virtue of their disagreeing with me, and not on further, independent grounds. Thanks to Joe Saunders for helping me to sharpen this point.

<sup>10</sup> Compare, e.g., Brock (2004); Groseclose (2012).

<sup>11</sup> The point here is similar to one that arises in the debate about peer disagreement. The "right reasons" view of disagreement (defended by Kelly (2005) and Titelbaum (2015), says (roughly speaking) that *if* your pre-disagreement doxastic state is antecedently rational, then your view need not change in response to disagreement. But of course, epistemic akrasia to one side, it's always going to *seem*, from the first-person perspective, as if your own pre-disagreement view *is* epistemically rational. So the *de facto* result of advising people to follow the Right Reasons view will be that *everyone* remains steadfast. Part of the motivation behind more conciliatory views about peer disagreement is to give advice that takes account of our limitations and fallibility in correctly assessing the evidence. See, e.g. Christensen (2013, p.77, 90).

<sup>12</sup> Here I'm also echoing some arguments given by Ballantyne (2015, esp. pp.152-8).

<sup>13</sup> Rini's argument is situated in the context of a discussion of *fake* news specifically; she defends the surprising conclusion that it's often reasonable to believe fake news. But I take it that her view rests on wider claims about which news sources more generally it's reasonable to consume and trust.

<sup>14</sup> White (2007) introduces this term, and argues against the view it describes.

<sup>15</sup> See, *inter alia*, Broome (1999, esp. pp.404-5); Dancy (2000, ch. 3); Kolodny (2005, pp.512-542); Finlay (2010, pp.68-9); Kiesewetter (2017, ch.4).

<sup>16</sup> See (obviously) Fricker (2007, esp. ch.1).

<sup>17</sup> As Thomas Kelly (2002, p.177), amongst others, has observed, with many examples of this phenomenon, it is actually a desire *that* p, rather than a desire *to believe* p as such, that is fundamental. Still, when a desire that p actually motivates belief in p, it also seems reasonable to ascribe a desire to believe that p, albeit one that is somehow derivative on the desire that p.

<sup>18</sup> At least, barring "transmission failure" – see n. 21 below.

<sup>19</sup> In some discussions of letting one's normative intuitions or beliefs determine one's judgment "in the face of the facts", the influence of the normative belief is *not* in fact on a descriptive belief. For example, Haidt (2001, p.814) reports how subjects will judge that particular acts of incest are wrong, even when it's stipulated that the facts are such that the incest causes no harm; it's clear that he thinks this is irrational. But the claim that some particular acts of incest is wrong is itself a normative claim; moreover, it's one that *follows* from the normative claim that *all* acts of incest are wrong whatever their consequences. The resulting position is perfectly consistent and not obviously irrational. If it's mistaken to hold the view that a particular act of incest is wrong "in the face of" the fact that the particular act in question is not harmful, then this is only so as a matter of substantive moral philosophy. This kind of believing "in the face of the facts" is not of the sort that I am criticizing here. I am focused only on letting one's normative views determine one's beliefs about purely descriptive matter of fact.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Kahan & Braman (2006) for an overview. For the example of beliefs about climate change that I'm about to discuss, see Kahan *et al.* (2011); also Anderson (2011, pp.156-7).

<sup>21</sup> That's consistent, of course, with any potential view about what ought to be done if it's *both* true that (i) man-made climate change is occurring *and* that (ii) government regulation is bad (because freedom-inhibiting).

<sup>22</sup> Many "particular" normative beliefs rest at least *in part* on empirical assumptions. This is consistent with the view that when normative beliefs rest partly on empirical assumptions, they *also* rest in part on a more general normative belief that explains why the empirical assumptions matter, and that ultimately, this chain of explanation must bottom out in a normative belief that does not itself rest on anything empirical. See Cohen (2003) for that view, and Miller (2008) for criticism of it.

<sup>23</sup> As reflected in the title of Gore (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, it may be a real-world example of what some epistemologists (e.g., among numerous others, Neta (2013)) call "transmission failure". In cases of transmission failure, it seems that even though a conditional of the form

---

(if p then q) is true, and one knows this, one cannot permissibly come to believe q on the basis of believing p, because one is only justified in believing p if one is already antecedently justified in believing q. For example, if my car is parked where I left it twenty minutes ago, then it hasn't been stolen in the intervening time – but (if I am away from where I left my car, and can't see it, etc.) it seems that I can't permissibly come to believe that it hasn't been stolen on the basis of believing that it is still there – since I will only be justified in believing it's there if I'm justified in believing it hasn't been stolen. Similarly, by Jayla's lights, if government regulation is to be avoided, then it does more harm than good (or, to put it more naturally: government regulation is to be avoided only if it does more harm than good). Nevertheless, she can't permissibly come to believe that the regulation does more harm than good *on the basis* of the belief that it's to be avoided, since the latter belief itself rests upon the former for its justification. The pattern here is also related to the “dogmatism paradox” due to Kripke and reported by Harman (1973, pp.148-9): if you *know* p, why can't you infer from p that all counterevidence to p must be misleading, and thus dismiss this counterevidence?

<sup>25</sup> See Lewandowsky *et al.* (2012, esp. pp.112-3) for an overview of relevant literature.

<sup>26</sup> At least by Bobby's lights. Jayla, recall, by contrast thinks that the descriptive belief provides evidence against the normative one.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Festinger (1957).

<sup>28</sup> Note that the ultimate normative question that the media outlet has to determine here is just that of which story ought to be covered. It can be tempting to say that the normative question is whether the two lives in the local town are *more valuable* than the hundreds of lives in the faraway country, such that if the outlet covers the local accident, they implicitly judge the lives of the local people more valuable. But that need not be so: it's at least a *consistent* normative position to hold that the normative question of which story ought to be covered is not determined by the value of the lives lost, and so a judgment on the former question *need* not reflect a judgment on the latter.

<sup>29</sup> See Kunda (1990); Ballantyne (2015).

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/legislation/issue/trade>

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/29/opinion/campaign-stops/bernie-sanders-democrats-need-to-wake-up.html>

<sup>32</sup> For the general consensus on trade among economists, see e.g. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/04/4-politically-controversial-issues-where-all-economists-agree/255600/>; Whaples (2006). For the effect on protectionism on the global poor specifically, see e.g. te Velde (2012), a report by the London-based Overseas Development Institute's on the effect of proposed protectionist EU policies on the global poor, with contributions by many development and trade experts.

<sup>33</sup> To illustrate: some development charities like Oxfam (see <https://policy-practice.oxfamamerica.org/work/trade/>) oppose certain free trade agreements on the grounds that they prevent *developing* countries from engaging in (what they regard as) necessary protection of their own industries. But these organizations still don't claim that *Western* protectionism benefits the global poor; in fact, they actively oppose Western protectionism, and argue that trade agreements ought to give developing countries *more* scope to protect their own economies than is given to Western countries to protect theirs.

<sup>34</sup> See Watson (2018, esp. §4.3).

<sup>35</sup> At the time of writing (April 2018), the pound is worth \$1.43, as compared with \$1.47 the day before the Brexit referendum. It hit a low of \$1.20 in January 2017.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/04/george-osborne-eliminating-current-deficit-austerity-terrible-cost-hubris>

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Daniel Wodak for pushing me to clarify this.

<sup>38</sup> Note also that this can be true even if, as a matter of fact, there are some individual sources that aren't illicitly influenced. It will be enough to make our relying on only one single source epistemically irresponsible if we have strong reasons to *think* that this source is illicitly influenced, even if, as a matter of luck, it isn't.

<sup>39</sup> In the US, a nice way to do this is to use the Wall Street Journal's *Red Feed*, *Blue Feed* tool, available at <http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>. You can pick an issue, and it shows you up-to-date news and opinion from both “liberal” and “conservative” sources on that issue, side by side.

<sup>40</sup> Again, see Kunda (1990).

<sup>41</sup> And attributions of bias *are* one of the things that we're biased about. See Ballantyne (2015).

<sup>42</sup> For helpful discussions in the course of writing this paper, I'm grateful to Amy Berg, Daniel Fogal, and Jessica Marsden. I'm especially grateful to Joe Saunders and Daniel Wodak for very helpful written comments. I'm also grateful to Jonathan Phillips for pointing me to several relevant readings from the empirical psychology literature. Finally, I want to thank the students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who were in my undergraduate honors course, Knowledge and Society, with whom I discussed some of this material in this paper.