**Propaganda, misinformation and the epistemic value of democracy**

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**Abstract:** Proponents of an epistemic conception of the legitimacy of democracy contend that unless democracy has epistemic value, there is no adequate case for its legitimacy. This paper contributes to the non-ideal theory of epistemic democracy by considering whether the benefits of democratic decision-making under idealized conditions translate to the real world. More precisely, I suggest that misinformation undermines the epistemic value of democracy.

If citizens are to make enlightened collective decisions, they need to rely on true factual beliefs, but misinformation impairs their ability to do so. Although some cases of misinformation are deliberate and amount to a form propaganda, I suggest that cases of inadvertent misinformation are just as problematic in terms of the traces they leave on the beliefs and behavior of democratic citizens. I then discuss the prospects of democratic deliberation and fact-checking conceived of as corrective strategies against misinformation.

**Keywords:** Political Epistemology; Propaganda; Misinformation; Epistemic Democracy; Fake News

Is democracy fundamentally threatened by those who aim to mislead the public? Past philosophers frequently worried about the nocuous effects of demagoguery on the civic life of city-states. In the *Protagoras*, for instance, Plato writes that when talented orators try to conceal their art, “the masses, needless to say, perceive nothing, but merely sing the tune their leaders announce” (1977, 754).[[1]](#footnote-1) Aristotle is even more explicit about the dangers of demagoguery: “revolutions in democracies, he explains, are generally caused by the intemperance of demagogues” who “are always cutting the city in two” and lead the masses astray (1984, 4444-4461).[[2]](#footnote-2) In a recent contribution to the study of propaganda, Jason Stanley (2015, 27) revives the ancient concern for demagoguery by arguing that “a certain form of propaganda, associated with demagogues, poses an existential threat to liberal democracies.” More specifically, he defends the claim that propaganda poses an “obvious threat to the *epistemic conception* of democracy, championed by the philosopher David Estlund and the political scientist Hélène Landemore” (2015, 12). In Stanley’s book, however, such a strong statement is not supported by a detailed argumentation, and reviewers of the book have therefore argued that the threat posed by propaganda to the epistemic value of democracy is not at all obvious (Brennan, 2017).

Stanley’s arguments can be attacked on several fronts. First, it may be that his case is overstated and we do not have any serious reason to believe that propaganda is effective. Moreover, even if we believe that under the right conditions, propaganda is effective, its very existence may not pose any newchallenge to democratic life. After all, social scientists have long argued that citizens are politically ignorant, and it remains unclear how a deceived public is more dangerous to the epistemic potential of democracy than an ignorant one. Finally, the pernicious effects of propaganda might be adequately countered by the epistemic value of democratic deliberation, which weeds out “the good arguments, interpretations and information from the bad ones” (Estlund and Landemore 2018, 121).

Against these grounds for skepticism, my suggestion in this paper is that a phenomenon related to propaganda – misinformation – undermines the epistemic value of democracy. More specifically, I contend that in real democracies, misinformation prevents the effective functioning of mechanisms of collective intelligence conceived of by epistemic democrats, and more specifically by Landemore. If citizens are to make enlightened collective decisions, they need to rely on true factual beliefs, but misinformation impairs their ability to do so. As it will become apparent, however, my claim is distinct from Stanley’s for I contend that all cases of misinformation – not only those that qualify as propaganda – threaten the epistemic potential of democratic decision-making

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the relationship between propaganda and misinformation and suggest that non-propagandistic misinformation are just as problematic in terms of the traces they leave on the beliefs and behavior of democratic citizens (Section 1). I our concern is the epistemic value of democracy, then there are few reasons to limit our analysis to cases of propaganda instead of considering all cases of misinformation. I then present evidence that misinformation influences public opinion, and that even sophisticated consumers have few reasons to believe that they are immune to it (Section 2). To do so, I discuss both instances of intentional misinformation and more ambiguous cases that can reasonably be conceived of as involving the accidental communication of faulty information. In section 3, I explain how misinformation poses a challenge to the non-ideal theory of epistemic democracy by discussing the mechanisms of collective intelligence defended by Landemore, more specifically what she calls the Numbers Trump Ability Theorem. Finally, in section 4, I consider the strengths and weaknesses of democratic deliberation and fact-checking conceived of as corrective strategies against misinformation.

Before I begin, two methodological clarifications are in order. First, although I discuss various instances of misinformation below, most of this article focuses on *online* misinformation (such as “fake news”), which proliferates better and faster than any other kind. My intention in doing so is to contribute to a growing philosophical subfield: the political epistemology of online interaction. Second – and perhaps most importantly – my intention is not to offer a general critique of the ideal of epistemic democracy. Epistemic democrats make several idealizing assumptions in order to defend the epistemic value of democratic decision-making, and an important part of their reflection belongs to ideal political theory. By way of contrast, misinformation is a political problem that affects the democracies we currently live in, and my interest is in assessing whether the benefits of democratic decision-making discussed by epistemic democrats translate to the real world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1. From propaganda to misinformation**

Like many political buzzwords such as populism and ideology, propaganda is notoriously difficult to define. This can be explained by the fact that it mostly functions as a *Kampfbegriff*, that is, as a rhetorical weapon rather than as a precise analytical tool. If we accuse someone of engaging in propaganda, the implied judgment is usually that this person intends to achieve questionable political ends by misleading the masses. Yet, some philosophers have recently undertaken the challenge of providing a precise definition of this concept so that we can envision it as something other than a vague notion used by political rivals seeking to win a public argument. For instance, Jason Stanley (2015, xiii) broadly defines propaganda as “the employment of a political ideal against itself,” and further differentiates between *supporting* and *undermining* propaganda. His proposed definitions are the following:

*Supporting propaganda*: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as the embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other nonrational means.

*Undermining propaganda*: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of a certain ideal, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals.

In Stanley’s view, a patriotic appeal to a romantic vision of a country’s history is a form of supporting propaganda. When delivering an impassioned nationalistic speech, a politician tries to foster love for her country by affecting emotions rather than by presenting arguments. As for the concept of undermining propaganda, it remains considerably nebulous despite Stanley’s conceptual efforts, and many typical instances of propaganda do not seem to fit its definition. For instance, Jason Brennan (2017, 8) notes that “instances of wartime propaganda in which the Germans or Japanese are depicted as subhuman animals” do not clearly reference a specific ideal. Developing a similar criticism, Leiter and Leiter (2015) remark that “much of the propaganda that mobilized support in America for the 2003 invasion of Iraq […] involved simple falsehoods or misleading statements” and was not presented as the embodiment of ideals that it implicitly distorted or undermined. As we will see below, the failures of intelligence and communication surrounding the Iraq war are more complicated than appear at first sight. Yet, like Brennan, the authors’ point is that Stanley’s requirement according to which communicative acts must subvert ideals to qualify as propaganda significantly restricts the extension of the concept, and such a restriction seems arbitrary.

A more inclusive definition of propaganda is put forward by Randal Marlin. In his view, propaganda is:

The organized attempt, through communication, to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment.

One advantage of Marlin’s definition over the one proposed by Stanley is that it includes communicative acts that we are intuitively inclined to qualify as propaganda even if they are not presented as the embodiment of ideals that they erode. Thus, simple falsehoods and misleading statements intentionally directed at a large audience for political purposes fall within this definition, as they are the result an attempt to bypass individuals’ rational capacities by inciting them form false beliefs. By leading his audience to lose cognitive contact with reality, the propagandist hopes that its members will be more prone to help him achieve his goals.

Yet, the communication of faulty information is not always the work of ill-intentioned individuals. Misinformation, I contend, is the dissemination of false or misleading information, often on a mass scale and for political or commercial purposes, but such dissemination need not be intentional.[[4]](#footnote-4) When it is not, it can hardly be conceived as propaganda – at least on Marlin’s definition – for it does not involve an *attempt* to bypass individual’s rational capacities. Yet, an important point to note is that false or misleading claims need not be deliberately spread to have a negative impact on the epistemic potential of democracy.[[5]](#footnote-5) For this reason, my suggestion in the rest of this paper is that misinformation of both the intentional propagandistic kind *and* the inadvertent kind undermine the epistemic value of democracy. If our concern is the epistemic potential of democratic decision-making, then there are few reasons to focus on propaganda and neglect cases of misinformation that do not qualify as such. In fact, many cases of misinformation do not fit squarely on one side of the intentional/unintentional divide, as faulty information is often spread *both* by individuals who believe the claim they share with others to be false *and* by individuals who believe such claims to be true. Indeed, misinformation cascades customarily involve individuals who deliberately produce and diffuse false or misleading claims while counting on the fact that it will be relayed by individuals who do not perceive it as flawed. This is precisely how fake news – at least those produced by so-called “troll farms” – spread on social networking sites. When misinformation is produced, those who produce it customarily hope that those to which it is targeted will not see it as such. That said, and as my discussion in the next section will make clear, cases in which the spread of misinformation is the result of accidents in intelligence gathering and communication rather than the fruit of the intention to deceive the public cannot be ruled out.

I suggested that some cases of misinformation do not qualify as propaganda, but such cases nevertheless pose a threat to the epistemic value of democracy. Yet, the reverse is also true: not all instances of propaganda qualify as misinformation. To clarify the relationship between propaganda and misinformation, let us consider the following distinction between the diverse means used by propagandists. Propaganda sometimes aims to trigger emotions and elicit desires: think, for instance, of World War II “We can do it!” posters, a slogan designed to motivate women to aid in the war effort by replacing male factory workers who were engaged in the military. In other cases, propaganda mostly affects beliefs. By way of example, a poster on which we can read that “Migrants commit more crimes than native citizens,” – perhaps set against a background image of migrants waiting at a border crossing – aims to induce the belief that immigration is dangerous. I therefore propose to distinguish between the following three *ideal-types* of propaganda:

*Affective propaganda:* The organized attempt, through communication, to *trigger emotions* in a large audience in ways that circumvent an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment.

*Conative propaganda:* The organized attempt, through communication, to elicit desires […]

*Cognitive propaganda:* The organized attempt, through communication, to shape beliefs […]

I define these three kinds of propaganda as ideal-types given that numerous concrete instances of propaganda are not purely affective, conative or cognitive. In fact, they are often all of these at once: a placard on which people from a specific ethnicity are compared to animals or insects, for example, simultaneously aims to trigger disgust, induce the false belief that these people are inferior to others, and elicit the desire to rid the country of them. Nevertheless, distinguishing between the three ideal-types is analytically useful: it helps us scrutinize instances of propaganda from different angles and identify its various goals. Contrary to those who design fake news, Uncle Sam did not want to disseminate false beliefs: as he made very clear, he wanted you to join the U.S. Army, that is, to induce behavior by eliciting the desire to defend your country. By way of contrast, misinformation is essentially cognitive: it primarily affects beliefs. Moreover, when it elicits emotions and triggers the desire to act, it usually does so *through* the shaping of one’s beliefs. Most cases of what I define as cognitive propaganda involve the communication of faulty or misleading information, and we can therefore conceived of cognitive propaganda as a subset of misinformation which involves the intentional deceit (or attempt to deceive) large segments of the population. Yet, in the rest of the article, my focus will be on misinformation

1. **Assessing the effectiveness of misinformation**

Misinformation would not be a challenge to the epistemic value of democracy if we did not have reasons to believe that it influences the beliefs of those who are exposed to it. Yet recent findings in political science, communication studies and social psychology suggest that it is. Consider first the example of the framing of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Prior to the invasion, members of the Bush administration – including the President and the Vice-President – made statements which suggested that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) had been found in Iraq and that Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda. Whether they did so because they believed these claims to be true or were attempting to deceive the public for political purposes remains a matter for debate. As the Duelfer report indicates, the American intelligence community did believe that Hussein wanted to recreate Iraq’s WMD capability, and some of its members also believed that there were WMD in Iraq because of failures in intelligence gathering (Jervis, 2010). Thus, portraying the Bush administration’s statements as an unambiguous case of intentional misinformation amounts to an oversimplification.

Yet, the important point here is that such statements incited the public to assume erroneous beliefs (Kull, Ramsay and Lewis 2003, 597). In 2003, the Program on International Policy Attitudes conducted a series of polls with randomly selected participants about their misperceptions regarding the war in Iraq. The results suggest that in June, 48 percent of respondents believed that clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda had been found, and 35 percent of respondents believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq.[[6]](#footnote-6) As Kull, Ramsay and Lewis note, “among those who did not hold the key false beliefs, only a small minority supported the decision to go to war.” In fact, “in a regression analysis, the presence of misperceptions was the most powerful factor predicting support for the war” (2003, 597). Notice that in this case, the data suggests that reliance on false information had an impact on citizens’ normative judgment about the desirability and legitimacy of the President’s decision to invade Iraq.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A second heavily mediatized topic that lends itself to misleading statements is climate change. Like in the previous case, faulty information on this subject is not always disseminated by individuals who unmistakably attempt to deceive the public. This can be explained by the fact that the scientific literature on anthropogenic global warming is intricate, and that news stories covering it are prone to oversimplification. For instance, news articles from liberal outlets sometimes suggest that most scientists expect catastrophic changes to happen in the next ten years while there is in fact disagreement on this issue.[[8]](#footnote-8) They thus expose their audience to a one-sided misleading treatment of this topic. On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative media often disseminate the beliefs that climate change is either not occurring or is not anthropogenic despite the scientific consensus that anthropogenic global warming is real. In a recent study on the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of global warming, Hmielowski and associates (2013, 866)found that “conservative media use decreases trust in scientists which, in turn, decreases certainty that global warming is happening.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This is consistent with the previous finding that “watching Fox News (Feldman et al. 2012; Krosnick and MacInnis 2010), consuming news stories that present evidence questioning the certainty of climate change (Corbett and Durfee 2004), and watching stories that include an interview with a skeptical scientist commenting on global warming (Malka et al. 2009) all decrease belief that global warming is happening and human caused” (Hmielowski et al. 2013). In fact, a UK survey conducted in 2010 indicates that fewer people believed in climate change in that year (78%) than in 2005 (91%).

In the previous cases, we can reasonably doubt that the communication of misleading information is deliberate. Yet, in the rest of this article, I want to draw attention to the effects of a growing kind of misinformation that can more hardly be conceived of as accidental. During the last few years, we have witnessed the rise of fake news which, borrowing Axel Gelfert’s (2018) definition, we can describe as “the deliberate presentation of false or misleading claims *as news*, where the claims are misleading by design.” When misinformation is presented as fake news, Gelfert explains, “the originator of an instance of fake news either intends a specific claim to be misleading in virtue of its specific content, or deliberately deploys a process of news production and presentation that is designed to result in false or misleading claims.” (Gelfert 2018, 11).[[10]](#footnote-10) As mentioned, this does not require that all individuals involved in a misinformation cascade have the intention to deceive others. Consider for instance a much discussed example of fake news which implied that members of the Democratic Party were involved in a sex-trafficking ring. Before becoming an instance of fake news, this conspiracy theory was circulated on a discussion website (reddit.com) by individuals who arguably believed it to be true. It was then transformed into a fake news article and published on a website that specializes in such content (Yournewswire.com; now newspunch.com). The story eventually made its way to social networking sites, and finally went viral. In this instance, a conspiracy theory was exploited and transformed into a fake news article by individuals who hoped to profit from its diffusion; it was then relayed on social networks by users who deemed it sufficiently interesting to be shared. In other cases, fake news is politically motivated and fabricated by individuals who aim to bolster support for a specific cause. Indeed, false claims are often presented in the format of news articles by individuals who believe them to be false, and who mimic the conventions of traditional media reportage to make financial or political gains (Rini, 2017 p. E-45).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute suggests that fake news is now widespread on social networking sites. For instance, Neudert (2017, 23) found that “misinformation and junk news content play a substantial role on German social media, accounting for roughly 20 percent of all political news and information on Twitter.” During highly politicized periods such as presidential elections, this 4 to 1 ratio of political news and information to misinformation can increase to a 1 to 1 ratio (Neudert 2017, 17). For their part, Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2018) found that approximately 1 in 4 Americans visited a fake news website during the 2016 election campaign. A more conservative estimate comes from Alcott and Gentzkow (2017), who found that the average American encountered between one and three stories from known publishers of fake news during the month before the 2016 election (Lazer et. al 2018).[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the largest study of online misinformation available today, Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018, 1146) also found that “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information,” and that “the effects were more pronounced for false political news” than for other types of fake news. Studying the “tweeting” and “retweeting” of 126,000 statements during the entire lifespan of Twitter, they more precisely concluded that the truth rarely diffuses to more than 1000 people while the top 1% of fake news “routinely diffused between 1000 and 100,000 people” (Vosoughi et. al 2018, 1148). Moreover, it takes the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1500 people, and falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth. Like Neudert, these researchers found that the total number of false rumors peaks during highly politicized periods such as U.S. presidential elections or the Russian annexation of Crimea.

How is it possible that masses are often led to believe that which is simply not the case? Fake news articles often contain false statements so far-fetched that we might plausibly suppose that individuals possess the critical abilities necessary to identify them and avoid letting falsehoods influence their opinion. Should we not believe, then, that individuals are immune to misinformation? Such an assumption needs to be rethought. Indeed, at least five psychological findings that suggest can influence the beliefs of individuals. First, “when people know little about a source, they treat information from that source as credible” (Rapp 2016, 284). In fact, it is very useful for us to do so as we often gain valuable insights from strangers by giving them our epistemic trust, and constantly doubting the veracity of their claims would hinder the achievement of our goals. Yet, individuals who deliberately engage in online misinformation exploit this fact by creating unknown websites the content and design of which imitate those of traditional media outlets. Think, for instance, of the now defunct *Denver Guardian*, a fake news website that was virtually indistinguishable from the real newspaper *The* *Denver Post* (for non-Coloradans, at least).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Second, psychologists have long been interested in what they call the ‘truth effect,’ which results from repeated exposure to a piece of information. When presented with the same piece of information multiple times, we are more likely to believe it.[[14]](#footnote-14) As Neil Levy (2017) notes, repetition increases processing fluency – the subjective ease of information processing – and individuals tend to accept claims that are processed fluently. In fact, Levy (2017, 29) argues that fluency effects may lead us to eventually accept claims we previously knew to be false:

Repetition of a claim powerfully affects fluency of processing. This effect may lead the agent accepting the original claim, when she has forgotten its source. Even when repetition is in the service of debunking a claim, it may result in higher levels of acceptance by promoting processing fluency.

This is of interest given that we are repeatedly exposed to misinformation, either because our friends and families post and share it online or because we read genuine newspaper articles that try to debunk them.

Third, people “rely on fiction as a source of information, even when fiction contradicts relatively well-known facts about the world” (Marsh and Fazio 2006). For instance, when Prentice, Gerrig and Baillis (1997) asked participants in an experiment to read different versions of a fictional story – one of which contained claims that mental illness is contagious while the other did not – they found that individuals who read the stories associating mental illness with contagion were significantly more likely to believe that mental illness really was contagious. Moreover, acceptance of false claims does not decrease when participants are warned that the stories presented may contain false information (Marsh and Fazio 2006). As it turns out, the intuitive idea according to which a fake news article will not influence the beliefs of a reader who knows that he is reading a one is not supported by empirical evidence.

Fourth, people sometimes fail to recall the source of the information they acquire. As Levy (2017) notes, individuals first exposed to a claim while reading a fake news article may eventually misattribute this claim to a reliable source or to common knowledge (Marsh, Cantor & Brashier 2016; Rapp 2016). In fact, such psychological findings lead Levy to reject what he defines as the naïve view of belief and its role in behavior, that is, the view that “mental representations are *reliably* and *enduringly* categorized into kinds: beliefs, desires, fantasies and fictions” (2017, 22). Contrary to this view, indeed, evidence suggests that we often unknowingly and unintentionally reclassify fantasies and fictions as beliefs.

Finally, a fifth finding of interest is that fake news articles arouse surprise and disgust more strongly than true information (Vosoughi et al. 2018, 1150), which makes them more likely to be shared and become part of our world-view. Indeed, as Peters, Kashima and Clark (2009, 2007) note, “emotional social events (particularly those that arouse disgust and happiness), are likely to become part of a society’s social beliefs.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Contemporary psychological findings thus suggest that repeatedly reading or hearing that Hillary Clinton sold arms to a terrorist organization or that the pope endorsed Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. Electoral campaign will affect cognition, even in cognitively sophisticated individuals who know that the sources to which they are exposed are communicating false claims. Indeed, such individuals risk memorizing the content of a fake news article without remembering how they became aware of that content. As we will see below, once we acquire false beliefs, we may in fact continue to hold them even when provided with undeniable evidence that they are false. As we have seen, this is not only so because online misinformation repeatedly presents us with false assertions, but also because such assertions arouse strong emotions.

In summary, there is empirical evidence that misinformation effective, and that confidence in our mental ability to immunize ourselves from its effects is unwarranted. Yet, some epistemic democrats may accept these claims while rejecting the idea that misinformation really endangers collective wisdom. In the following section, I therefore take up the challenge of explaining how it threatens the epistemic value of democratic decision-making.

1. **Misinformation and the epistemic value of real democracies**

Epistemic democrats argue that the value of democracy does not entirely depend on the intrinsic fairness of democratic procedures. If democracy is to be considered legitimate, it must also be the case that such procedures yield good normative outcomes (Estlund and Landemore 2018). A weak version of the epistemic argument for democracy is defended by David Estlund, who argues that democratic decision-making procedures are better than random selection procedures at avoiding primary bads.[[16]](#footnote-16) A stronger version of the epistemic argument is defended by Landemore (2013, 3), who argues that a “democratic decision procedure is likely to be a better decision procedure than any non-democratic decision procedures, such as a council of experts or a benevolent dictator.” Although Landemore (2013, 9) is primarily interested in the “ideal of democratic decision-making,” she also believes that there is value in discussing whether the theoretical assumptions behind the various theorems she uses to defend the epistemic value of democratic decision-making plausibly translate to the real world.

In this section, I argue that are significant reasons to doubt that the most important theorem on which Landemore relies to establish the epistemic value of democracy – the Numbers Trump Ability Theorem – applies to real democracies. More specifically, my contention is that misinformation creates a gap between the degree of political competence individuals must possess in order for the mechanisms of collective wisdom to function and the epistemic situation of our actual compatriots. As I previously mentioned, the conclusion of such argument is not that epistemic democracy is not a valuable ideal, but that misinformation currently prevents the citizens of contemporary democracies from reaping the benefits of the so-called wisdom of crowds.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Landemore’s Numbers Trump Ability Theorem draws on Scott Page’s Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem. Relying on computer models consisting of simulated agents, Page (2007, 162) demonstrates that “a randomly selected collection of problem solvers outperforms a collection of the best individual problem solvers.” This is explained by the fact that the group of randomly selected problem solvers has an epistemic advantage over the collection of best individual problem solvers: cognitive diversity. To solve problems in an efficient manner, it is preferable to give decisional powers to a group of cognitively diverse people than to a group of very smart people who think alike. According to Landemore (2013, 104), we can draw democratic insights from Page’s demonstration. Indeed, democratic modes of decision-making such as collective deliberation are eminently egalitarian and inclusive, so there is reason to believe that they effectively foster cognitive diversity:

To the extent that cognitive diversity is a key ingredient of collective intelligence, and specifically one that matters more than average individual ability, the more inclusive the deliberation process is, the smarter the solutions resulting from it should be, overall.

In other words, numbers function as a proxy for diversity, and the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem can therefore be generalized into a Numbers Trump Ability Theorem. Democratic masses are more likely to make normatively desirable decisions than a small group of knowledgeable individuals, and this gives us reason to think that democracy has greater epistemic value than other modes of political decision-making, such as the rule of experts.

However, certain conditions must be met for the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem to hold, as both Page and Landemore admit. More precisely, it must be the case that (1) “the problem must be difficult enough, since we do not need a group to solve easy problems”; (2) “all problem solvers are relatively smart (or not too dumb)”; (3) “the participants think very differently, even though the best solution must be obvious to all of them when they are made to think of it”; and (4) “the initial population from which the problem solvers are picked must be large and the collection of problem solvers working together must contain more than a handful of problem solvers” (Landemore 2013, 104).

Critics have argued that Landemore is overly optimistic when affirming that these conditions are not unduly demanding (Ancell 2017). In fact, even Page himself seems more pessimistic than Landemore about the epistemic merits of diversity. In the prologue of *The Difference* (2007, xxix), he writes:

Of course, difference does not magically translate into benefits. My claims that diversity produces benefits rest on conditions. These conditions require, among other things, that diversity is relevant—we cannot expect that adding a poet to a medical research team would enable them to find a cure for the common cold. […] Diversity, like everything else (excepting, of course, moderation), has its limits.

A certain level of individual epistemic competence is therefore required so that inclusive democratic deliberation can bear fruit. Yet, misinformation frequently impedes democratic citizens from reaching such level. A group of individuals who believe that vaccines cause autism, for instance, is not likely to propose judicious public health policies to fight measles outbreaks. Notice indeed that many instances of misinformation disseminate false beliefs that impair individuals’ ability to make sound normative judgments: if an individual faces the task of determining whether the government should try to reduce carbon emissions, holding the true belief that most climate scientists conceive of global warming as anthropogenic will be of great help. If she must decide whether the United States Armed Forces should invade a foreign country, holding the false belief that this country’s government hides weapons of mass destruction will undermine her reasoning.

One influential study that supports the conclusion that holding false beliefs influences political reasoning focuses on the views of Americans on welfare policies. More precisely, it studies the consequences of its participants’ beliefs about the percentage of families who are on welfare, the average annual benefit amount for a welfare family, the proportion of the federal budget that welfare absorbs and the percentage of welfare families who are African-American (Kulinski et al. 2000). According to its results, on none of these items did a majority of participants, or close to it, get the fact right (796). In fact, the proportion of getting an individual fact wrong ranged “from two-thirds on the percentage of all welfare who are African-American to a striking 90% on the percentage of the federal budget that goes to welfare.” What is more, those who held the least accurate beliefs expressed the highest confidence in them. For instance, “47% of those who estimated the proportion of American families on welfare correctly (at 7%) said they were very or fairly confident, while 74% of those who grossly overestimated the figure (at 25%) did.” Relying on simulations, Kuklinski and associates also found that misinformation skews political preferences in both pro- and anti-welfare ways, at least if we compare groups of subjects that are strongly misinformed with subjects that are only moderately so. As the authors remark (2000, 805), “it is one thing to find misinformed citizens, quite another to show that misinformation has an effect on the citizenry’s collective voice.” Yet, their findings suggest that it does.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The challenge posed by organized attempts to disseminate false beliefs is also distinct from one of the most frequent objections to the idea that democratic decision-making can yield good outcomes through majority rule: the argument from ignorance. Bryan Caplan (2007), Ilya Somin (2016) and Jason Brennan (2016) argue that a wide array of empirical studies demonstrate that citizens lack the political knowledge necessary to make informed political decisions. Most Americans do not know which party controls Congress, many cannot identify any congressional candidates in their district, and forty percent of them do not know whom the United States fought in the Second World War II (Brennan 2016, 25-26).

Yet, as the Oracle of Delphi taught Socrates, being ignorant is not equivalent to holding a false belief; one may be wise just by knowing that one does not know. A voter who is consciously ignorant of the two presidential candidates’ views on foreign policy may deliberately refrain from making her choice on that basis and rely instead on knowledge she does possess. By way of contrast, a voter who cares greatly about foreign policy but has been misinformed – that is, holds false beliefs – about the candidates’ positions on that matter is more likely to make a poorly justified choice. Falsely believing that x is not that case is an epistemic state distinct from not knowing whether x is the case, and one that is more dangerous from a normative point of view. To illustrate, consider the following example:

 Paul and Mary, two American citizens who believe that it is their duty to go vote and help elect the next President. Paul and Mary both care greatly about immigration, but Mary knows little about the concrete effects of immigration on the economy and crime rates, so she decides to base her vote on other considerations, that is, to support the candidate who is most committed to fight the effects of climate change on the environment, an issue about which she also greatly cares. Paul also cares greatly about immigration, but unfortunately, he has been misinformed. He has read fake news online that led him to believe that migrants committed crimes that were in fact fabricated by individuals seeking to make financial or political gains by diffusing alluring falsehoods. As a result, Paul has come to believe that a majority of immigrants who come to the United States commit crimes, and he therefore decides to vote for the candidate who proposes to close borders.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Mary is in a state of Socratic ignorance. She knows that she does not know a lot about immigration, so she can base her vote on other considerations. Unfortunately, Paul is not in an epistemic state which allows him to do so, as he considers that the unsubstantiated beliefs he holds regarding immigration and crime amount to knowledge. As Kuklinski and his associates point out (2000, 799) “although factual inaccuracy is troublesome, it is the ‘I know I’m right’ syndrome that poses the potentially formidable problems.” Individuals are not merely in the dark, they are often wrong-headed, and yet confident that they are not.

To temper the claim that false beliefs impair political decision-making, a common strategy is to dissociate political competence from factual knowledge and argue that knowledge of objective facts might well be both an elitist measure of political knowledge and potentially irrelevant to the ability to pass a politically competent vote (Landemore 2013, 201). There is undoubtedly some truth to this, as many surveys used to measure the political knowledge of citizens focus on facts that are irrelevant when the task at hand is to elect a new president, such as how many senators each state has or what the names of Supreme Court Justices are. Yet, there are limits to this response. Although political knowledge surveys areoften elitist, some factual knowledge is required for one to form sound political judgments. Falsely believing that the most migrants and refugees who arrive in our country commit crimes will hamper our reasoning if the task at hand is to determine if we should vote for the candidate who wants to close borders or for the candidate who argues that we ought to accept more refugees.[[20]](#footnote-20) In other words, epistemic democrats may be right that Caplan, Somin and Brennan overestimate the amount of knowledge necessary to make sound political judgments, but they themselves underestimate how false beliefs lead individuals to make ill-advised political decisions. The coupling of justified normative statements and true factual beliefs yield good political judgment, but misinformation increases the chances that such judgments will rely on falsehoods.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In a democracy, ill-formed judgments can have harmful consequences, but philosophers interested in the non-ideal theory of epistemic democracy have not yet proposed measures to limit the nocuous effects of misinformation. In the remaining sections of this article, I initiate such a discussion by focusing on two kinds of policy responses with the potential to do so.

1. **Corrective strategies against misinformation**

If the main worry about misinformation is that it facilitates the formation of false beliefs, why not fight its negative effects on democratic life by using democracy itself? Isn’t democratic deliberation likely to weed out the true beliefs from the false ones? Some data gathered by political scientists who study deliberative mini-publics is encouraging. For instance, James Fishkin and Robert Luskin found that participants in deliberative polling experiments gain significant knowledge after spending a weekend discussing a preselected political issue with other citizens and consulting with experts on that matter. In the 1999 deliberative poll on whether Australia should become a republic, “the percentage knowing that ‘under the referendum proposal” the prime minister “could remove the president at any time but must later obtain approval from the house of representative” rose from 16 to 73 %’ (Fishkin and Luskin 2005, 291). There is therefore evidence that democratic deliberation can lead mini-publics to acquire politically significant factual knowledge.

However, studies of deliberative mini-publics focus on knowledge gains, not on the correction of false beliefs, and there is evidence that convincing individuals to correct their erroneous beliefs is significantly more difficult than teaching them facts that do not contradict the beliefs they already hold. As Levy (2017, 27) notes, “the phenomenon of belief perseverance has long been known to psychologists” and “corrections rarely if ever eliminate reliance on misinformation.” For instance, Ross, Lepper and Hubbard (1975) found that when people are asked to perform a task and given positive feedback on their performance, they do not stop believing that they are better than average at the task when told afterwards that the given feedback was unrelated to their performance. If told beforehand that the feedback will not be based on their performance, they still form beliefs which reflects its content. De Keersmaecker and Roets (2017, 107) applied these insights to the study of fake news and consistently found that the false beliefs they cause prove especially hard to correct for people with low cognitive abilities, even when the false information is “explicitly and unambiguously disconfirmed.”

Given that Landemore’s argument is comparative, it is also interesting to ask if these experimental results strengthen the epistocrat’s case in favor of non-democratic decision procedures. My answer to this question is cautious. Epistocrats can rejoice in De Keersmaecker and Roets’s (2017) finding that false beliefs prove especially hard to correct for people with low cognitive abilities, as it suggests that experts – who are typically individuals with high cognitive abilities – are more likely than lay citizens to be receptive to corrections when their beliefs are contradicted by evidence. Let me nonetheless add two caveats. The first is that there is no reason to believe that experts are immune to misinformation: even if they accept corrections more easily, they may form false beliefs to the same extent as people with low-cognitive abilities, for instance by reclassifying fantasies and fictions as beliefs. The second is that De Keersmaecker and Roets’s study focuses on individuals with high and low cognitive abilities as opposed to groups composed of such individuals, and more work is needed to verify or disprove the claim that a council of experts outperforms diverse democratic assemblies at the correction of false beliefs.

In fact, while it is true that misperceptions are difficult to correct, we should not conclude that all kinds of democratic deliberation are powerless against misinformation. Instead, studies more moderately suggest that certain types of deliberation will more effectively favor the correction of false beliefs than others. When citizens are exposed to information from an individual they do not perceive as ideologically opposed to their world-view, they may engage in epistemic deference, that is, accept this person’s speech as authoritative. Unsurprisingly, individuals tend to trust and respect sources with whom they share an ideological affiliation. Thus, Maoz etal.’s (2002, 515) study on reactive devaluation by Middle Eastern partisans found that “Israeli Jews evaluated an actual Israeli-authored peace plan less favorably when it was attributed to the Palestinians than when it was attributed to their own government.” Similarly, Cohen (2003) found that Democrats and Republicans assigned greater value to proposals for welfare policies when they were presented as initiatives from their own party. More surprisingly, a recent study found that “statements from an unlikely source – a person who makes proclamations that run contrary to their personal and political interests” – can increase citizens’ willingness to correct misperceptions “regardless of their own political predilections” (Berinsky 2017, 241). When presented with false claims about President Obama’s health reforms (i.e. that such reforms would include procedures to withhold care from certain citizens) and subsequent corrections of these claims, Republicans accepted corrections from other Republicans at a higher rate than any other types of corrections, but corrections from nonpartisan sources (in this case, from the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Association of Retired Persons) were also effective.

This suggests that collective deliberation in the presence of experts who are perceived to be unbiased can lead to the successful correction of false beliefs. Deliberative democracy does appear to be a powerful tool against misinformation, especially if this impartiality condition is met. Of course, a recurring critique of measures involving deliberating mini-publics is that they are costly and impractical: the average citizen may have neither the time nor the desire to put herself in a situation which favors the correction of her political misperceptions. Furthermore, states may not have the financial resources to implement deliberative democracy experiments on a sufficiently large scale to yield substantive epistemic benefits. Interestingly, Berinsky’s study suggests that written corrections can be effective, and one solution to this impracticability problem would be to promote online discussion in place of physical deliberation. Indeed, denouncing fake news stories on social media may be effective if the informer is perceived as unbiased.

Does fact-checking represent a second, less costly, corrective strategies against online misinformation? When our epistemic peers publicly endorse a false claim on social media, we may be tempted to post links to articles that debunk them hoping that such articles will incite them to correct their false beliefs, and there are indeed reasons to do so. As Friggieri (2016: 105) suggests, fact-checks generally increase the likelihood that the ‘reshare’ of a false rumor will be deleted given that individuals who unintentionally propagate them “often attempt to disrupt their role in propagation or disassociate themselves from the rumor if they learn that it is false.” Yet, fact-checks have their own problems. First, large misinformation cascades can accumulate hundreds of fact-checking comments while continuing to propagate (Friggieri et al. 2016, 101). Second, the consumption of fact-checks is concentrated among non-fake news consumers so they often do not reach their intended audience (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2018). Third – and perhaps most importantly – not all misleading statements can simply be fact-checked.

To see this, consider first news claims that are the most likely to be verified. In many instances, fake news articles contain simple factual assertions that can be shown to be false – or at least unsubstantiated – by journalists. After investigation, there is no evidence that sexual crimes were being committed in the basement of Comet Ping Pong in Washington, D.C. by members of the Democratic Party; in fact, the restaurant had no basement. Yet, many cases of misinformation contain complex statements that are much harder to verify, either because this would require prolonged scientific inquiry or because the truth value of such statements is a matter of interpretation. As Walter Lippmann argued in *Public Opinion* (2012, 158), we are frequently exposed to “forms of persuasion that we cannot verify.” Consider predictive statements. NASA currently estimates that sea level will rise 26 inches by 2100 as a result of climate change. Could we fact-check a fabricated news story that claims that it will not, or that it will only rise by 13 inches? What could be fact-checked is whether such a claim can be attributed to NASA, but not the prediction itself, as only time will tell whether NASA’s prediction or the fabricated one is the most accurate. Second, claims that contain ambiguous terms are often difficult to assess as judgments regarding their accuracy depend on subjective interpretations. Is it true, for instance, that Donald Trump “encouraged” his supporters to commit violent actions against protestors in the context of political rallies?[[22]](#footnote-22) This depends on what counts as encouraging, and what counts as encouraging is a matter for debate. Third, misleading news stories often combine unsubstantiated statements with claims that the available evidence supports as true (Uscinski and Butler 2013).[[23]](#footnote-23) In such cases, categorizing an entire news article as “true” or “false” is itself misleading.

What conclusions can be drawn from these considerations? First, some claims are more easily verifiable than others. Indeed, the number of claims that journalists will be able to investigate is considerably limited as the truth value of causal claims, predictive statements and claims that contain vague terms is hard to establish. Second, fact-checking organizations should themselves acknowledge the difficulty of assessing the veracity of entire news stories and, as Amazeen (2015) suggests, avoid relying on binary categorizations. To say that an article “contains unsubstantiated claims,” for instance, is often more accurate than to claim that this article is false. Third, the main epistemic benefit of fact-checks might not be the one we intuitively attribute to them. Indeed, empirical evidence does not strongly support the claim that fact-checks successfully lead misinformed individuals to correct their false beliefs, but it does indicate that they hinder the spread of false rumors on social media. All things considered, reshares of false rumors are 4.4 times as likely to be deleted when debunked than when not (Friggieri 2016, 106). As it turns out, fact-checking is better conceived of as one of many *preventive* measures against misinformation available to us, to which I now turn.

**Acknowledgements**

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1. *Protagoras* (317 a-b). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Politics* (1304 b 20-25) (1310 a 1-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is worth noting that my argument does not in any way rely on the claim that ideal political theorizing is not a worthwhile philosophical project. I thank (suppressed for blind review) for drawing my attention to this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Technically speaking, misinformation can happen on a small scale. For instance, I may misinform my wife regarding the hour at which our friend’s dinner party will start. In the rest of the discussion, however, my focus is on cases of misinformation directed at a large audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One way to accommodate the distinction between deliberate and accidental cases of misinformation would be to distinguish between “disinformation” (intentional cases) and “misinformation” (accidental cases), as it is sometimes done in communication studies. I have no objection against this terminology, but I do not find it intuitive and I struggle to see what advantage it has over continuing to use qualifiers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. More precisely, between March and September 2003, the percentage of interviewed subjects who believed that evidence of weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq varied between 21 and 35 percent. It may be possible to explain the widespread belief that Hussein was working with al-Qaeda by the public’s unfamiliarity with Middle Eastern politics, but it is likely that Americans who believed that WMD had been found in Iraq were influenced by the Bush administration’s claims. As they Kull, Lewis and Ramsay note, “people do not form misperceptions in a vacuum” (2003, 570). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I return to the question of the impact of misinformation on political preferences in section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Rathi 2018 for a treatment of Paul Romer’s criticism of pessimistic perspectives on the fight against climate change. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One methodological concern over studies which associate conservative media use and belief in anthropogenic global warming is that we have evidence that people seek out sources that confirm their opinions (selective exposure). *Prima facie*,it is therefore possible that lack of belief in global warming could have caused people to use conservative media, not *vice-versa*. Yet, one reason to think that media has a substantive impact on belief is that we have evidence that modifying the media content to which a group of randomly selected individuals is exposed also modifies their beliefs. Thus, when Corbett and Durfee (2004) exposed a group of subjects to different versions of a story about a scientific study reporting that the Antarctic Ice Sheet is melting, they found that subjects exposed to the story to which controversy was deliberately added reported a lower level of certainty in global warming than subjects placed in the control condition. This suggests that by repeatedly insisting on the so-called lack of consensus on anthropogenic climate change in the scientific community, conservative broadcasters really are merchants of doubts. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This point is important, for a philosopher committed to a definition of propaganda according to which such a phenomenon is necessarily intentional could object that the two cases of misinformation considered at the beginning of this section – Iraq and climate change – should not be categorized as propaganda, or at least that such cases are ambiguous. I can concede this point while insisting that even on such a philosopher’s definition of propaganda, there are many cases of misinformation that do qualify as cognitive propaganda and, as we will see below, that these increasingly widespread cases influence our beliefs by exploiting some of our documented psychological biases. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Is it not possible to conceive of cases in which individuals sincerely believe even the most far-fetched claims to be true, and then choose to present them as news in an attempt to inform the public? It is not impossible, and it is important to acknowledge that intentions are notoriously difficult to track. Yet, when a fake news article can be traced back to an organization that repeatedly diffuses unsubstantiated claims and that has a commercial or political interest in doing so – think for instance of the Russia-based Internet Research Agency – a reasonable conclusion to draw is that such an organization is knowingly deceiving the public. I thank Jeffrey Friedman for pressing me on this point, and more generally for inciting me to draw the distinction between intentional and unintentional cases of misinformation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This estimate is conservative because the study only tracked 156 fake news stories (Lazer et. al. 2018). It also did not measure exposure to misinformation on mobile devices or cases in which individuals were exposed to misinformation on their newsfeed without visiting the fake news website (i.e. without clicking on the link). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Interestingly, the *Denver Guardian* is an unambiguous case of deliberate misinformation. Indeed, the man behind the website – Jestin Coler – publicly admitted that he created and diffused fake news article both for profit and for his own amusement (Sydell 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a review, see Dechêne, Stahl, Hansen and Wänke (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note, however, that this fifth finding supports the narrower claim that *sensationalistic* misinformation (rather than misinformation as such) is effective. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Primary bads include “war, famine, economic collapse, political collapse, epidemic, and genocide.” See Estlund (2008, 163). Epistemic democrats thus make the moral assumption that some outcomes can be deemed good or bad according to a normative criterion that is independent from the collective will of the people. I share this assumption. For instance, we can say that genocide is bad for a society even if a large majority of voters support it. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Although my argument focuses on the non-ideal theory of democracy, it is worth noting that the central idealizing assumptions made by epistemic democrats may not immunize their theory against the problem posed by misinformation. For instance, Landemore (2013, 11;197) assumes that citizens and rulers are motivated by a concern for the public good and actively seek to promote what they conceive of as the interests of “the entire community, as opposed to the interests of the rulers themselves or a subgroup within society.” A second idealizing assumption central to her theory is that democratic deliberation only has epistemic merits when individuals “properly deliberate,” that is, when all deliberating parties engage in “genuine consideration of arguments for and against something” (2013, 138). This may seem to preclude people from misinforming each other. Yet, not all individuals who engage in misinformation are motivated by a concern for the interests of a subgroup within society. When conservative pundits unapologetically lie on social media during presidential campaigns, they may be motivated by the consequentialist reasoning that this will ultimately serve the common good. For instance, it may help the political party they consider to be truly promoting their country’s interest win the election. As for the assumption that deliberation only yields epistemic benefits when people properly deliberate, it certainly precludes us from conceiving of deliberative processes *during which* individuals misinform each other. Yet, misinformation not only affects cognition during deliberation, but also *before* individuals begin to deliberate. Indeed, a deliberative assembly may be composed of well-intentioned individuals who properly deliberate, but who have been misinformed in the past. When this is the case, they risk making political decisions based on false beliefs and misinforming others unwittingly. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Other studies which suggest that holding false beliefs influences political and voting preferences include Hochschild and Einstein 2014, and Reedy et. al. 2014. As it is often the case when considering empirical evidence, it remains difficult to draw definitive conclusions from such studies. For this reason, my suggestion in this section and the previous one is not that we should draw such conclusions, but more moderately that findings in social and political psychology give us reasons to believe that misinformation will be an obstacle to the translation of the ideal theory of democracy to the real world. At the very least, it is a problem that should be discussed by epistemic democrats interested in non-ideal theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. It is possible that in certain cases, political judgments will be overdetermined. For instance, an individual x may support an increased flux of migrants to her country because (a) she believes that migrants have a positive impact on her country and (b) she believes that migrants have a moral right to emigrate to her country. In this case, coming to falsely believe that that migrants committed crimes that were in fact fabricated will not modify her overall judgment on immigration if she considers the reasons that stem from (b) as overriding the ones that stem from her newly form false belief. Yet, false beliefs often give rise to (internal) reasons that are sufficiently strong to modify an individual’s overall judgment. As we have seen, Kull, Ramsay and Lewis’s study suggest that the false belief that the U.S. had found evidence of W.M.D. in Iraq boosted support for the war. A study by Gunter, Beck and Nisbet that is still in its initial stages also suggest that Obama voters who held negative false beliefs about Hilary Clinton were 3.9 times more likely to vote for Trump that those who did not. This is hardly surprising: falsely believing that a presidential candidate committed immoral actions provides one with strong reasons to vote for her opponent. I thank (suppressed for blind review) for drawing my attention to this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Incidentally, the pernicious effects of misinformation extend beyond the decision to vote for candidate x. Given the importance of surveys for the political process of western democracies, the prevalence of a widely held false beliefs may influence the very political options that are available to citizens. If a large segment of the population has a negative view of migrants because of false rumors that portray them in an unflattering manner, all political parties are likely to take a tougher stance on immigration to cater to a wide range of voters, at least in countries with majoritarian electoral systems. I owe this point to (suppressed for blind review). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In this paper, I limit myself to an assessment of the badness of false beliefs in terms of their political consequences. More precisely, my suggestion is that false beliefs lead to poorly justified political decisions, and that poorly justified political decisions risk producing bad normative outcomes. I share this assumption with political scientists concerned about the problem of political ignorance, who also suppose that it is better for a political society to be composed of citizens who make adequately justified decisions than to be composed of citizens who do not. That said, one could extend the analysis of the badness of false beliefs to the individual (rather than purely societal) level by arguing that it is generally bad, for an individual, to hold false beliefs. From an instrumental point of view, people need to construct a reliable picture of the world in order to effectively further their interests. From a perfectionist point of view, one could also argue that knowledge and truth are essential components of a good human life. Although I find these two assumptions plausible, the present argument does not rely on them being true. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I thank Jeffrey Friedman for providing me with this example. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In fact, combining falsehoods with a kernel of truth to make the former appear more convincing is a propaganda technique that was widely used by misinformation officers during the Cold War. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)