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TRUST AND TESTIMONIAL ARROGANCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

ABSTRACT

The contemporary era of continuous online communication and informational availability on the Internet – on websites, social networks, forums, blogs, podcasts, and like – has transformed how we produce, distribute and disseminate knowledge. These communicational circumstances are often described as "hostile epistemic circumstances" due to widespread epistemic pollution with content that endeavours to bias beliefs instead of providing accurate information. As digital communication is both a situation of increased epistemic dependence and a source of heightened risk of being deceived or forming an unjustified belief, the evidential standards for ascribing trust accordingly become more challenging. The circumstances of digital communication thus require us to reconsider the traditional discussion on reductionism and anti-reductionism within the epistemology of testimony. The evidential basis for ascribing trust in the digital era must include assessments of the absence of reasonable doubt about being misinformed and higher-order evidence about the reliability of our own credibility capacities in virtual communication. These epistemically responsible testimonial practices of gathering evidence are hampered by testimonial arrogance, an epistemically corruptive overconfidence in one's own epistemic capacities encouraged and cultivated within online communication.

KEYWORDS

trust, testimonial agency, online communication, testimonial arrogance, epistemic responsibility, evidence

Online Communication and Expanded Testimonial Agency

The maturing digital era has significantly transformed communication. Incessant streams of communication online and information available on the Internet – on websites, online media platforms, social networks, forums, blogs, podcasts – have inescapably affected, changed, and shaped epistemic testimonial practices. Trusting or testimonial epistemic activities that include assessing, acquiring, forming, suspending, retaining, circulating and dismissing beliefs based on other people or other resources now occur in transformed



settings. On the one hand, expanded epistemic resources for communication and progressively more complex communicational technologies have yielded the epistemic benefit of “democratizing” the acquisition of knowledge (Gunn and Lynch 2021). This argument refers to increasingly available and easily reached information that everyone can access under the same conditions, as well as to the availability of comprehensive and diverse perspectives on a chosen subject. In addition, this democratization of communication encourages epistemic agents to partake in disseminating information and creating content. On the other hand, these novel communicational conditions generate various challenges for testimonial agency. They are frequently characterized as “hostile epistemic circumstances” due to pervasive epistemic pollution with content that strives to shape the recipient’s beliefs in a certain way rather than provide accurate information. Widely recorded and debated phenomena such as fake news, alternative facts, algorithmic boosting, chatbots, troll farms, fully automated social media bots and other forms of latent misinformation or propaganda now influence everyday communication (Novaes and de Ridder 2021, Sunstein 2022, Wikforss 2023, Mitra et al. 2024). The information we can encounter online is now personalized, structured and filtered inside echo chambers or filter bubbles by applying untransparent algorithms (Nguyen 2020, Samaržija 2023). This mass production of persuasive disinformation has flooded the digital landscape with misleading content, fostering the illusion of being backed by a silent majority or of adopting a mainstream perspective (Pan et al. 2023, Zhuo et al. 2023). This carefully curated misperception about the objectivity of content found online has, alongside constant exposure and our dependence on the Internet as a source of information, downgraded critical thinking, generated an over-reliance on immediately accessible content, and caused a distinctive excess of trust that perpetuates our likelihood to adopt further misinformation. The era of digital communication has indisputably amplified epistemic opportunities and complicated concerns about responsible belief-formation based on the testimony of others.

It should be noted that the epistemic practices of controlling or “seducing” the audience through propaganda, censorship, and public disinformation that influences and manipulates beliefs are not new (Novaes and de Ridder 2021). However, communication on the Internet – including on social media – has tailored these practices to their new medium. While everyone continuously confronts an exponentially increasing amount of (dis)information, the sources of information are in different ways unknowable, anonymous, non-transparent, and undetectable. The recent prominence of fact-checking services – managed by individuals, the community, or AI – further reinforces our awareness that the available content is often unreliable. With the escalating and increasingly opaque risks of being incorrectly or only partially informed, consciously or unconsciously deceived, and of making a wrong epistemic decision, we must reconsider the epistemic criteria required for a responsible trust.

Alongside Gunn and Lynch, we can conclude that “(...) there is no doubt that the Internet has changed how we distribute, produce, and reveal knowledge,

and as a result, expanded our epistemic agency” (Gunn and Lynch 2021: 395). However, the epistemic features of communication have changed so profoundly that we cannot be certain what “expanded epistemic agency” now exactly means, nor what it implies. For instance, as the escalating usage of AI and language processing tools has coincided with novel approaches to big data, we are obliged to reconsider complex dilemmas about the epistemic identity of our informants and the question of whether we should trust machines. More precisely, we are bound to inquire whom we are really trusting when accepting the information delivered by ChatGPT or Google Translate.¹ Although the issues of the epistemic identity and the responsibility of our informants in the digital era are both intriguing and relevant, this article will narrow its scope to the testimonial agency of the hearer, viewer, or reader who form a testimonial belief. In other words, I will focus on the extended capacities for epistemically responsible trust in the context of online communication. I will open this discussion with the incontrovertible argument that more complex epistemic circumstances require appropriate and *extended capacities for epistemically responsible trust*. Although the credulity capacities for assessing and acquiring beliefs through online communication might not be fundamentally novel or different, digital conversational practices multiply the *risks* of making the epistemic decision to trust or not to trust, rising the *epistemic standards* of responsible trust.

It seems uncontroversial that epistemically responsible trust in the era of online communication requires more demanding epistemic agency. This is precisely why we must reconsider traditional approaches to responsible trust. In other words, the increased epistemic risks present in everyday communication seem to readdress the discussion between reductionism and anti-reductionism to reductionism or *evidentialism*. As digital communication signifies a situation of higher epistemic risk of being deceived or forming an unjustified belief, the evidential criteria for ascribing trustworthiness become more challenging and complex. This means that the *evidence* for appraising our informants in the digital era as credible is not limited to assessments of their reliability, the conversational context, and the particular epistemic situation. We will require demanding evaluations of the absence of causes for reasonable doubt that we are being disinformed, as well as *higher-order evidence* about the reliability of our own credibility capacities in virtual communication. The fundamental threat to epistemically responsible trust in gathering such evidence is *epistemic or testimonial arrogance* – an epistemic vice encouraged and intrinsically cultivated by digital communication. In the following sections of the article, I will endeavour to elucidate these concerns.

1 These expanded epistemic circumstances also require us to reconsider the *Turing test* and the notion that a machine can think. Digital platforms have created an epistemic environment where it is challenging or impossible to differentiate content produced by sophisticated AI from content generated by the human intellect. This fact appears to set a precedent for authorizing us to ascribe AI with the ability to think. If responses derived from generative AI agents prove superior in g content and providing information than the average person, we must pose questions about trusting machines.

Traditional Debates About Testimonial Agency Reconsidered

David Hume and Thomas Reid's disagreement in the discussion about the justified acceptance of testimony, better known as the dilemma between reductionism and anti-reductionism, confronts different challenges and in the era of digital communication. While Reid's anti-reductionism endorsed our entitlement to accept other people's testimonies without the obligation to critically assess them (Reid, 1785/1983), Hume's reductionism related epistemically responsible trust with adequate evidence for accepting a particular testimony (Hume 1739/1978).

Anti-reductionism was built upon the thesis that testimony is a primary source of information and knowledge, like perception. Our cognitive constitution compels us to accept other people's testimonies – like the testimonies of our senses – without any additional evaluation. Reid believed that the principles of veracity and credulity are constitutive for our epistemic life, and that people are naturally predisposed to be sincere and credible. Moreover, this entitlement to trust others without evidence rested upon (i) our inevitable dependence on other people's testimonies, and (ii) the impossibility of acquiring conclusive and non-circular evidence about other people's testimonies, as our informant's intentions will remain inaccessible, and any available evidence will often include previously accepted testimonies. Reductionism, on the other hand, rested on the premise that the solitary cure for our constitutional propensity for gullibility and unjustified trust is empirical verification or an evidence-based assessment of the available testimony. In other words, Hume encouraged us to reduce our appraisal to more reliable sources of information or our extant beliefs derived from perception or inference. Hume believed that verification at least somewhat counteracts our unjustifiable inclination to accept testimonies without any evidential grounds. Even incomplete evidence will thus reduce the risks of making a mistake or forming a false belief.

Reid was correct to claim that losing other people's testimonies would profoundly deplete our knowledge and our intellectual capacities. The digital era has further exaggerated this *epistemic dependence*, as we are living in a time of mass-scale, globalized, and incessant exchanges of information. Much of what we know – or think we know – we now “Google-know,” as we acquire our information from search engines, websites, and social media (Lynch 2016; 2019). We could not communicate, acquire fundamental everyday information, or conduct exhaustive research such as scientific inquiry without relying on digital sources. Moreover, the project of open science promotes epistemically and ethically fair research that everyone can access using open-source, open-access, or research-sharing digital repositories. Digital servers contain massive amounts of immediately accessible data incomparable to past repositories, such as libraries or similar date basis. Curated digital encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia, scientific databases, websites, and amenities such as search engines that lead us to any requested content have made our epistemic lives dependent on the Internet. However, this expanded epistemic dependence

entails equally expanded epistemic risks and expanded epistemic risks require more demanding epistemic standards for responsible trust. The epistemic context of increased risks and heightened epistemic standards seems to require evidence-based epistemic agency.

New communication trends have rendered the epistemic assessments of the reliability of our sources significantly more demanding. I will proceed to elaborate several of these challenges.

1. **MISINFORMATION:** With an amplified number of potential informants or resources, and less control over the published content,² we face an increased risk of attaining incomplete information, information that our source does not entirely understand, and incorrect information derived from incompetence, biases or deliberate disinformation. Research has shown that human users spread misinformation faster than bots programmed to disseminate falsities, and that misinformation is more easily remembered and more extensively distributed than correct information (Vosoughi et al. 2018). The fact that we are so zealous to internalize and proliferate falsities on social networks seems compatible with Reid’s claims about our constitutive cognitive inclination for credulity.

2. **SOURCE ANONYMITY.** Our digital informants or sources are often anonymous. In most online communities, we do not understand the algorithmic logic that generates information and know nothing about the epistemic or moral character of our informant. Deliberately opaque algorithms that curate and dispense personalised content make it even more challenging to establish whether our newfound information or their source are reliable (Lynch and Junyeol 2025). We might inquire whether we derive our trust in automatic information – GPS navigation and “talking machines” are used by numerous services – or responses provided by AI from such systems’ regular self-assessments of their functioning, or from trusting the humans behind their codes. Can machines be our sources of information, or is that status constrained to engineers who design autonomously generated information? However, both cases require more complex epistemic assessments, and the evidence that we now need should be different and more demanding than the evidence gathered in non-digital testimonial situations.

3. **BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN INFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA.** In contemporary digital communication, it is difficult to differentiate informative content from sponsored or political content. Content formatted and presented as neutral information is designed to convert users to customers or voters. Although the boundaries between informative content and

2 Some social media CEOs, such as Elon Musk, openly advocate for “the absolutism of free speech” and deny the need to maintain any level of epistemic quality, truth-conduciveness, adequacy, or objectivity. In the spirit of epistemic nihilism and the post-truth paradigm of “the death of epistemology,” they assert that no content can ever be epistemically more valuable than another. See Timm (2024) and Paris (2025).

propaganda have been obscured before communication on social networks, the intensity of digital communication with unclear notions about the character and intentions of our sources generate the imperative of heightened caution.

4. FLOODING THE ZONE. Online content is often deliberately polluted to create epistemic chaos and obscure the boundaries between correct and incorrect information, purporting that incorrect information amounts to mere “alternative facts.” The circumstances of epistemic chaos allow for no epistemic norms of discussion. Regardless of the topic, epistemic agents engaged in a debate attack dissenters merely because they are ‘on the other side’. Participants question the credibility of their opponents using radically disqualifying tools such as the logical fallacies of ad hominem or post hoc ergo propter hoc as their central arguments.³ Adversaries often fabricate information as needed, exaggerate errors on the other side, and unjustifiably trivialize the subject to be effective. The political and military strategies of generating confusion as a fertile ground for of manipulation and indoctrination that laypeople cannot understand are established epistemic tactics.⁴ Since a source of information calculatingly creates informational chaos to achieve clandestine objectives, such situations require appropriate epistemic attention.

5. TESTIMONIAL PATHOLOGIES. Communication on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, X, Reddit and TikTok is customarily not intended to disseminate correct information but to curate a personal identity and communicate social status. Although some posts assume the form of testimonies, the primary communicational intention is not to deliver true or correct information. Researchers have since dubbed such phenomena “pathologies of testimony” (Coady 2006). Similarly, most communication on social networks has the form of a testimonial delivery, but such communication does not strive to convey truths. Instead, the aim is to publicly present an intended identity as means of attaining a desired social attention. In other words, social networks feature idiosyncratic rules of communication that do not function as digital counterparts of non-virtual communication, and that require further recognition and understanding.

As epistemic dependence and the risks concerning ascriptions of trust increase within digital communication, the entitlement endorsed by Reid’s anti-reductionists surfaces as a recipe for gullible epistemic irresponsibility.

3 To quote Isa Blagden’s “The Crown of Life” from 1869: “If a lie is only printed often enough, it becomes a quasi-truth, and if such a truth is repeated often enough, it becomes an article of belief, a dogma, and men will die for it.” This mantra of radical propaganda can be found in agents who generate epistemic chaos.

4 Steve Bannon overtly invited supporters to “flood the zone” or generate a chaotic virtual context where manipulating laypeople becomes easier. Although his role as the vice-president of Cambridge Analytica during the informational manipulation of a public election is well known, he has since become synonymous with using online communication as an effective weapon of cultural warfare. See Mayer (2018) and Illing (2020)

However, we must note that anti-reductionists did not consider all epistemic situations identical. Anti-reductionists distinguish paradigmatical (ordinary) and parasitical (non-ordinary) circumstances. While ordinary situations entitle us to accept a testimony as true without any assessment, parasitical situations involve doubt and require us to increase our threshold for accepting testimonies and justify the acceptance with evidence in favour of the testimony. Although anti-reductionists and reductionists disagreed about justified acceptations of testimony in everyday or paradigmatical situations, they concurred that circumstances of increased epistemic risk require evidence. As testimonies found online comprise situations of increased epistemic risk that necessitate doubt or caution, they assume the character of a parasitical situation, where the traditionally opposing standpoints of anti-reductionism and reductionism converge to evidentialism. In addition, online communication had changed the ratio between paradigmatic and parasitic situations. Whereas parasitic situations which require caution and evidential verification were considered extraordinary in the non-digital era, they have now become the epistemic norm. Reductionism or evidentialism thus seems to have become the default stance.

Epistemic Standards for Increased Risk

Epistemic decisions and ascriptions of trust in the digital era do not require only the regular processes of accumulating evidence in favour of a given testimony. We must increase the evidential standards for epistemically responsible trust. Since the epistemic standards have increased along with the epistemic risks of making an erroneous decision or accepting an unjustified belief, we must determine *which* evidential basis now guarantees responsible trust. In other words, we must determine whether this expanded evidential basis consists of regular assessments combined with solid evidence, or whether virtual communication requires an entirely separate type of evidence. I would like to argue that responsible trust now requires a quantitatively and qualitatively more comprehensive body of evidence, as the current epistemic situation has significantly increased epistemic criteria.

Evidence of the informant's credibility and the conversational context does not pertain only to online communication but to all kinds of communication. These types of evidence must disregard increased caution or reasonable doubt regarding the source's reliability in the particular context of disseminating information online. In other words, we must contextually attune the body of evidence to the anticipated severity of the risk. Moreover, proficiency at communication in the digital era involves additional higher-order evidence about our own capacity to assess the risk at hand and the contextual adjustment of epistemic standards.⁵ We will proceed to elucidate what I am referring to when distinguishing more demanding but "ordinary" evidence and higher-order evidence.

5 R. Feldman and E. Conee were the most prominent proponents of evidentialism at the end of the last and the beginning of this century. Their work has introduced the

Evidence about the informant and the conversational context applies to all kinds of communication, both virtual and non-virtual. Research commonly assumes that evidence of the informant's reliability – of their epistemic and moral character – is phenomenologically and psychologically natural, and epistemologically essential to responsible trust. Epistemic character pertains to the source's competencies and familiarity with the subject, which guarantee that they are disseminating accurate information. Similarly, moral character refers to their intentions and our appraisal of their honesty in providing information. Additional or alternative evidence at our disposal addresses the epistemic properties of the communicational context or the conversational situation. It provides valuable information about the conversational circumstances. For instance, we learn whether this specific conversational constellation makes it beneficial for the informant to lie. We learn whether the local circumstances imply that the informant's incompetence or covert interests are likely to interfere with the truth of their report. We might also unearth whether the informant will be sanctioned for providing incorrect information and whether they know we can separately check the veracity of their testimony (Prijic-Samaržija 2011). Although such evidence is relevant in all types of communication, digital communication renders it much more challenging to obtain. The above-mentioned anonymity of sources in online communication makes it impossible to determine the (individual or collective) epistemic and moral character of our informants. Likewise, the exact features of our conversational context the communicational intentions of our sources often remain untransparent. Accordingly, an evidential basis that could uphold responsible acceptances or non-acceptances of information within digital communication must be sufficiently sophisticated to eliminate reasonable doubt or define the grounds for a reasonable acceptance.

The Internet genuinely provides immediately available and diverse options for verifying information, as the user has access to a diversity of distinctive sources. Numerous diverse sources enable us to research the available information, and the capacity to compare several testimonies remains a significant tool in creating a satisfactory pool of evidence. However, users often lack the motivation, free time, or maturity for such comparative analyses. Online platforms discourage pursuits for objective facts and invalidate the available diversity of sources through algorithmic adjustments of top search results (Samaržija and Cerovac 2021). Furthermore, online sources can be highly persuasive and embrace political language to boost this perception of reliability (Sunstein 2022, Mitra et al. 2024). These assessments of information require expanded epistemic agency or further efforts on compiling evidence by comparing different sources, consulting authorized fact-checking websites, or seeking digital

thesis about eliminating reasonable doubt as a criterion for adequate evidential records, as well as the distinction between ordinary evidence and higher order evidence – which is about the existence of ordinary evidence. See Conee and Feldman (2004) and Feldman (2009).

nudging services. Online communication burdens the recipient with numerous concerns, meaning that a conscientious epistemic agent needs to mobilise additional credulity capacities. For instance, epistemically responsible trust might require digital literacy, the maturity to recognise the features of online communication, motivation to compile further evidence, informed assessments of different sources, and an understanding of the consumed content.

Responsible trust is not only predicated on compiling a more extensive evidential basis but on the capacities to reflect upon our own agency, assess our sensitivity to epistemic dissonance (which will stop us from appraising content we agree with as accurate), distinguish relevant evidence from materials that only appear as such, and remain conscious of the import of such verifications. Thus, the more demanding yet “ordinary” evidence in favour of or against a testimony must be accompanied by higher-order evidence about our capacities to critically evaluate the reliability of a testimony in a digital environment. The era of digital communication also marks the normative beginning of heightened testimonial agency and responsibility. As communication in digital environments customarily entails the properties of a “parasitical” epistemic situation that involves increased epistemic risks, responsible trust in digital settings eliminates our entitlement to trust without prior epistemic appraisals. The newfound evidential standard of eliminating reasonable doubt before any reasonable acceptance of testimony requires the testimonial agent to (i) compile a more comprehensive evidential basis, (ii) develop more demanding credulity capacities and (iii) cultivate the capacity for self-knowledge. Being epistemically responsible in a digital environment requires us to confront a hazard that obstructs us in fulfilling all of these three conditions: epistemic or, more precisely, testimonial arrogance.

Epistemic and Testimonial Arrogance

The issue of epistemic arrogance, following Lynch and Gunn’s lucid introduction, pertains to numerous epistemic phenomena described within the culture of ignorance and the crisis of epistemic authority (Zagzebski 2012, DeNicola, 2018). Alongside debates about the nature of disagreement and the epistemic justification of democratic decision-making, works on epistemic arrogance cast light on a pervasive disregard for informed and rational deliberation, expertise, and any objective criteria of epistemic quality in favour of endorsing the universal legitimacy of one’s own stance about any topic. “By epistemic arrogance, we mean an unwillingness to update one’s belief system in the face of evidence and experience supplied by others (...) epistemic arrogance can undermine responsible epistemic agency” (Gunn and Lynch 2021: 396).

It should be noted that epistemic arrogance is both a self-regarding and an other-regarding attitude (Priest 2017, Lynch 2018a, 2018b). As commonly defined, epistemic arrogance is an unjustified overconfidence in one’s own epistemic capacities and an equally unjustified distrust in other people’s credibility. It manifests as a failure to recognize our own fallibility, as grandiose delusions

about our expertise and capacities, and as repeated miscalibrations of our epistemic capacities in comparison with those of others. Epistemic arrogance is an epistemic vice and the negative counterpart to the virtues of epistemic humility and open-mindedness, which teach us to approach any epistemic task with caution, an awareness of our fallibility, and an understanding that we might not be conscious of our shortcomings (Tanesini 2016, Lynch 2018a, 2018b, Prichard 2021). With its absence of epistemic conscientiousness essential for a rational attitude towards our capacities and those of others, epistemic arrogance is a display of epistemic egoism and an irrational refusal to objectively evaluate our epistemic capacities.

I will proceed to call manifestations of epistemic arrogance within the specific context of testimonial exchanges “testimonial arrogance.” Testimonial arrogance is a vice that deters us from collecting the evidence required for responsible trust in online communication due to an inflated estimate of our extant knowledge. It urges us to underestimate the testimonial situation as a potential source of knowledge, but also as a precarious context that might lead to false beliefs. In other words, testimonial arrogance is an epistemically egoistic overestimate of our own credulity capacities, informed by a robust conviction that the epistemic appraisal of a testimony can be done without any reflection about the grounds for its acceptance.

For the clearer image of such epistemically vicious agency in testimonial contexts, we must distinguish overt testimonial arrogance from seemingly similar epistemic phenomena. First, we must discriminate testimonial arrogance from mere ignorance resulting from a lack of information. Although ignorance is an epistemic deficit that leads to epistemically irresponsibly trust, it does not automatically entail the unconscientiousness and egoism of testimonial arrogance. While mere ignorance labels the fact that someone does not possess adequate information about the subject or an appropriate evidential basis, testimonial arrogance presupposes an abject *refusal* to attain the required evidence due to an overconfidence in our abilities or the illusion that we already possess an adequate evidential basis. Testimonial arrogance does not fall into category of factual ignorance commonly identified with the concept of “ignorance” and functions as a *normative ignorance* (Peels and Blaauw, 2016). Know-it-alls are epistemically arrogant people. That is a motivational state of mind that encourages you to cease raising doubts and, at its worst, to not be concerned by those who disagree with your points of view. In the traditional sense of the word, epistemic arrogance indicates a dogmatic person (Lynch 2019). Unlike factual ignorance, testimonial arrogance manifests as an insensitivity to higher-order evidence or as an absence of self-knowledge. Second, we should differentiate testimonial arrogance from rational ignorance (Downs 1957, Somin 2015, 2023). Although rational ignorance is also characterized by a reluctance to acquire knowledge or evidence, it presupposes the “rationality” of its calculation that the cost of acquiring evidence outweighs the benefits of possessing further information. Being “economical” with our time and energy as regards certain information can be a rational decision in non-ideal epistemic

circumstances. While rational ignorance encompasses priorities in acquiring information and evidence, testimonial arrogance replaces rational calculations with a blatant refusal to acquire evidence due to an irrational overestimate of our knowledge and informational coverage.

It might seem that testimonial arrogance involves non-culpable self-reliance or commendable epistemic autonomy concerning information received from others or epistemic authorities. Indeed, many justify their testimonial arrogance by claiming that everyone has an epistemic right to their position and that epistemic self-sufficiency is the key to critical thinking. On the one hand, a critical stance towards a testimony could be perceived as arrogant as it might resemble insistence on our own evidence regardless of what other people or the epistemic authorities might think. However, genuine testimonial arrogance involves no self-reliance or critical reflection about the testimonial exchange at hand. Testimonial arrogance is nothing more than an egoistic refusal to recognise expertise, an unwillingness to approach testimonies with respect, openness, and responsibility, and a reluctance to acknowledge our fallibility although we lack necessary background knowledge. Finally, we must not confuse testimonial arrogance with steadfastness, an insistence on our own opinion justified within the highly specific circumstances of peer disagreement. In other words, testimonial arrogance might seem as a mere “egocentric epistemic bias” towards our own beliefs that can be permitted even though it is not required (Wedgwood 2010). It is hypothetically possible to possess enough knowledge about a subject for additional verification to no longer be necessary. However, unlike steadfastness, testimonial arrogance is a hypertrophic self-reliance or dogmatism that does not involve a peer disagreement or a relative appraisal of the evidence on both sides of the discussion. Testimonial arrogance is the stance that any epistemic effort to verify information is superfluous as everyone is entitled to their own opinion, no matter how arbitrary or voluntary it can be. Testimonially arrogant agents fail to recognize their own stances as arbitrary as long as they signal their epistemic self-sufficiency.

Testimonial arrogance is even more challenging within the epistemically more hazardous context of digital communication. Due to the agent’s refusal to reasonably assess the risks of digital communication, testimonial arrogance yields either a gullible credibility excess or a credibility deficit upheld by ungrounded distrust. In online communication, testimonial arrogance is more epistemically – as well as ethically and politically – dangerous than ignorance. Although ignorance can be coupled with testimonial arrogance, these epistemic vices are not normatively interconnected. Being ignorant about novel communicational technologies and their epistemic hazards leaves room for learning and changing one’s attitude. In opposition, the irrational egoism and dogmatism of pure testimonial arrogance cause epistemic radicalisation in echo chambers and filter bubbles (Samaržija 2023). As abovementioned, testimonial arrogance has the disquieting tendency to portray itself as a critical, self-reliant, and autonomous attitude that commands respect. Digital conflicts during the pandemic aptly illustrated the consequences of testimonial arrogance within the

anti-vaxxer community, who refused to evidentially corroborate their stances with the explanation that they represent autonomous and critical thinking against the experts' establishment. The vice of testimonial arrogance can be found in most pseudo-scientific movements, science scepticism, political polarisation, and extreme stances formed on forums and social networks. It is a necessary ingredient of hate speech and online harassment.

Finally, we must recognize that testimonial arrogance poses a severe epistemic threat in digital communication. By deliberately blurring the difference between malign self-reliance and its mimicry of critical thinking on the one side, and authentic critical reflection based on a rational awareness of our own epistemic limitation or biases, testimonial arrogance pollutes the epistemic environment with its open disregard for epistemic virtue.⁶ The distortion that has occurred within the system when it stopped applying the epistemic standards of gathering evidence and ensuring reliability, when its practice openly discredited mindful evaluations of reasons and critically assessing information, and when it began encouraging various forms of epistemic self-deception in the place of self-knowledge amounts to a state of utter epistemic corruption (Lynch 2019).

Affective and Factual Testimonial Arrogance

Epistemic arrogance and its derived form of testimonial arrogance are epistemic vices because they impede the development of the epistemic capacities required for understanding digital communication. Testimonial arrogance inhibits epistemically responsible trust. In other words, our arrogant behaviour prevents us from assessing the reliability of our sources, forming an adequate evidential basis, or exercising critical self-reflection. Following this discussion, we can now distinguish two kinds of testimonial arrogance that impede responsible trust: affective testimonial arrogance and factual epistemic arrogance.

First, affective testimonial arrogance is an overestimate of our own credibility capacities based on biases and prejudices. For instance, identity-based credibility deficits or excesses based on gender, race, ethnicity, and political stances pervade digital communication. Affective testimonial arrogance is the epistemic vice that generates different modes of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007). To use a familiar example, affective testimonial arrogance is essential

⁶ While it sometimes might be difficult to differentiate critical thinking and testimonial arrogance, it is of the utmost importance to insist on this distinction. People who exercise epistemic rigor or disagree with mainstream views based on solid evidential grounds are sometimes considered arrogant. They may also seem to disregard the opinions of others while overestimating their own. It is crucial to comprehend that the necessary conditions for qualifying someone's behaviour as testimonial arrogance are a biased attitude based on an ungrounded resistance to expertise, objective epistemic authorities, and rationality, as well as the baseless belief that epistemic autonomy boils down to expressing one's position with disregard for its evidential grounds or its correspondence to one's biases. See Prijic-Samaržija (2023).

to the “manosphere:” an assortment of social media communities, websites, blogs, and forums promoting masculinity, misogyny and the reversal of any gender equality. Based on explicit prejudices and an aggressive narrative about male and female traits, the manosphere is an excellent example of the legitimisation and normalisation of affective testimonial arrogance. Second, factual testimonial arrogance is a less heated overestimate of our credibility capacities based on the misconception of being a thoroughly informed, “know-it-all” agent. For instance, the cult of amateurism and the culture of ignorance exhibit routine distrust of experts and science, who are treated with abject credibility deficits. Factually testimonially arrogant agents simultaneously endorse credibility excesses towards conspiracy theories and pseudo-science movements such as antivaxxers and climate deniers (DeNicola 2018, Nogrady 2021). It is no longer controversial to claim that affective and factual testimonial arrogance cause epistemically irresponsible credibility deficits and excesses, leading to epistemically irresponsible trust. Due to hindered self-reflection upon our own testimonial capacities, both forms of testimonial arrogance provoke groundless avoidances of epistemically dissonant content, informants, or sources unaligned with our beliefs, biases, and values, as well as blind submission within their echo chambers or epistemic bubbles.

Although epistemic and testimonial arrogance impede epistemically responsible trust in both digital and non-digital communication, it is vital to acknowledge two points about testimonial arrogance and digital communication. First, as digital communication is more epistemically hazardous and demanding, it enables arrogance to cause more epistemic damage. Second, digital communication is fertile soil for testimonial arrogance. Due to the availability of information, epistemic agents experience increased confidence that they are accurately and thoroughly informed about the topic at hand. The possibility of enjoying immediate access to information obscures the way agents acquire beliefs and the genuine scope of their capacities. Additionally, agents internalize the impression that the expert knowledge they read online is their own, leading to the delusion that our epistemic capacities are far greater than they genuinely are: “Externally accessible information is conflated with knowledge ‘in the head’” (Fisher et al. 2015: 682). Digital communication convinces us that we are in the right even when we are objectively not, as well as that we know far more than we can genuinely prove (Sloman and Fernbach 2017). As it turns us into dogmatic know-it-alls, digital communication can demotivate us from responsibly exercising our testimonial agency (Lynch 2019, Gunn and Lynch 2021).

Echoing the abovementioned arguments, we can speak of a vicious circle or a vicious interaction between online communication and testimonial arrogance. The more an epistemic agent participates in online communication, they will become proportionately more likely to become arrogant. The more arrogant the epistemic agents online are, online communication will become proportionately more likely to depict testimonial arrogance as epistemically acceptable behaviour. Nonetheless, correlating online communication with the strengthening epistemic vices such as testimonial arrogance would be an

inappropriate overstatement. Namely, a sophisticated interplay between numerous social factors in post-truth world that has aggressively relativised traditional epistemic values change the landscape of epistemic virtue. The goal of this article was to stress that serious hazards to testimonial agency in digital communication stem from testimonial arrogance.

Instead of a Conclusion: Digital Literacy and Self-knowledge

The era of digital communication has tackled responsible trust with numerous challenges and threats. Some experts have expressed pessimism or fear that we are becoming alienated from epistemic virtues.⁷ Rapid developments to AI technologies and the frequency of their usage (LLM products like ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini or other) have reinforced and expanded the questions of the new epistemic capacities required for responsible trust (Gillespie et al. 2025).

Advanced AI does not only communicate, as it can also fabricate convincing alternative facts and disinformation, as well as hyper-realistic deepfake videos that blur the lines between fact and fiction (Xu et al. 2022). Even if epistemic agents are aware that AI can generate fallacious content, research has shown that such information still impacts their perception and interpretation (Menczer and Hills 2020, Cerovac and Drmić 2023). Furthermore, recent research has reported that an overreliance on AI technologies reduces cognitive and epistemic capacities by diminishing our memory, creativity, and critical thinking (McGee 2023, Kosmyna et al. 2025). In short, the development of novel digital communication technologies and AI further contributes to the challenge of differentiating true and false content. The epistemic properties of online communication are placing increasing demands on epistemic agents, with the further risk that such communication will become increasingly profit-driven or politically contaminated and decreasingly focused on the epistemic quality of its content. The urgent question at hand is how we can cope with the challenges of communication in the digital era.

One line of thinking about possible solutions tackles content producers and invokes structural (international, national, or corporate) regulation of online sources of information. It calls for a somewhat paternalistic practice that would respond to our ethical and epistemic rights to accurate information, and the obligation of political authorities to protect citizens from false and inaccurate content (Grill and Hanna 2018). On the one side, extant fact-checking and digital nudging function as the “soft” form of this approach. While fact-checking usually entails a verification process in which professionals remove disinformation,

⁷ The Pew Research Center and Elon University conducted a study on 1,537 experts in IT, academia, business, and governance. 42% subjects believed and predicted that “public discourse online [would] become more or less shaped by bad actors, harassment, trolls, and an overall tone of griping, distrust, and disgust;” and 39% predicted that digital interactions would further degenerate under negative pressures, expressing pessimism regarding the quality of future digital communication. See Rainie et al. (2017) and Gunn and Lynch (2021).

unverified information, and dangerous content, digital nudging involves verification by impartial public institutions or communities that report a piece of information as potentially unreliable. Furthermore, structural approaches to protecting epistemic rights demand the legal regulation of Internet intermediaries and a reconceptualization of media freedoms (Finocchiaro 2024). Although these debates are extremely significant and merit further research, they touch upon complex issues such as the free flow of information and the freedom of speech, interventions and regulations in a profit-driven free market, and the questions of personal autonomy (Kelsall 2021).

An alternative structural approach involves the recipients of digital content and the timeless role of education in the domains of digital-literacy and digital citizenship,⁸ including education about the epistemic and psychological mechanisms that enable the spread of misinformation (Maertens et al. 2020). Although the effectiveness of these educational efforts will be determined after a longer period of time, education remains our most precious structural and social resource. Regardless of the potential starkness of this point about education, we have reasons to believe that we could improve epistemic practices by means of systemic education about the properties and threats of digital communication. Education is also a crucial tool for cultivating epistemic conscientiousness and encouraging reflexive knowledge of the self. Limitations and hazards in the form of biases or insufficiencies in acquiring knowledge are not new. Francis Bacon wrote about the “idols of the mind,” René Descartes opposed “pre-conceived opinions,” and David Hume discussed “general rules” at the base of unreflective mis-categorization. However, they also posited self-knowledge as a possible solution. Despite the omnipresence of communication and the increasingly complex epistemic circumstances of digital communication, the recipe remains the same: self-reflection and rational self-assessments are essential to responsible human agency, including testimonial agency (Frankfurt 1971, Taylor 1985, Bilgrami 2006). Our epistemic agency mandates an awareness of our epistemic agency, as well as the goals and reasoning behind such agency. “Our rational beliefs and intentions are not mere mental attitudes, but active states of normative commitment” (Korsgaard 2009). Our capacities for self-knowledge and for becoming epistemically conscientious testimonial agents stem from an underlying rationality, or our ability to attune our attitudes to our reasons (Gertler 2011).

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⁸ Digital citizenship is the capacity to participate actively, continuously and responsibly in communities online and offline, through competent and positive engagement with digital technologies (by creating, working, sharing, socialising, investigating, playing, communicating and learning).

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Snježana Prijic-Samaržija

Poverenje i arogancija u svedočenju u digitalnoj epohi

Apstrakt

Savremena epoha neprekidne onlajn komunikacije i dostupnosti informacija na internetu – na veb-sajtovima, društvenim mrežama, forumima, blogovima, podkastima i sličnim platformama – transformisala je način na koji proizvodimo, distribuiramo i širimo znanje. Ove komunikacione okolnosti često se opisuju kao „neprijateljske epistemološke okolnosti“ zbog raširene epistemološke kontaminacije sadržajima koji teže da pristrasno oblikuju uverenja umesto da pruže tačne informacije. Budući da je digitalna komunikacija istovremeno situacija pojačane epistemološke zavisnosti i izvor povećanog rizika od obmane ili formiranja neosnovanih uverenja, dokazni standardi za pripisivanje poverenja postaju sve zahtevniji. Okolnosti digitalne komunikacije stoga nas navode da preispitamo tradicionalnu raspravu o redukcionizmu i antiredukcionizmu unutar epistemologije svedočenja. Dokazna osnova za pripisivanje poverenja u digitalnoj eri mora obuhvatiti procene odsustva razumnog razloga za sumnju u pogrešno informisanje, kao i dokaze višeg reda o pouzdanosti naših sopstvenih kapaciteta kredibiliteta u virtuelnoj komunikaciji. Ove epistemološki odgovorne svedočačke prakse prikupljanja dokaza potkopava svedočačka arogancija – epistemološki koruptivno preuverenje u sopstvene spoznajne sposobnosti koje se podstiče i neguje u onlajn komunikaciji.

Ključne reči: poverenje, sposobnost svedočenja, onlajn komunikacija, arogancija u svedočenju, epistemološka odgovornost, dokaz

