Fallacy as Foundation of Post-Truth Knowledge and Knowing in LIS

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ABSTRACT

How can library and information science (LIS) better promote epistemic vigilance and critical ethics toward post-truth (i.e., harmful; false; mis/dis/mal) information? This preliminary critical philosophical investigation argues LIS must go beyond considering mis/dis/mal information, and instead examine how post-truth shapes the process of producing mis/dis/mal epistemology through *fallacies*. Drawing from insights related to epistemicide and epistemic injustice in LIS, we reconsider post-truth and the modes of justification validating false beliefs as knowledge. We operationalize Fallacy 1 ("deceptively bad arguments") and Fallacy 2 ("false popular belief") to consider post-truth knowledge production. LIS faces an immediate pedagogical imperative of preparing information professionals to equitably mitigate fallacious harms inflicted by fake news proliferation, wavering information literacy, and the largely uncritical popularization of AI systems and tools which forcefully facilitate knower interactions with post-truth information. The evolving notions of post-truth information requires a critical ethical revolution for LIS.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Critical Librarianship; Information Ethics; Political Economy of the Information Society; Social Justice; Sociology of Information.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Epistemicide; Epistemology; Fallacy; Philosophy of Information; Post-Truth

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INTRODUCTION

In *Posttruth, Truthiness, and Alternative Facts*, Nicole Cooke (2017) explores how metaliteracy promotes a critical engagement with information sources: "knowledge of information behavior and critical information evaluation skills can aid in combating the effects of fake news and promote more savvy information consumption" (Cooke, 2017, p. 211). Indeed, epistemic vigilance is necessary at a time when mis/dis/mal information consumption "prohibits collective knowledge and understanding" while enabling "harm by prioritizing and promoting biased, misleading, or false agendas and opinions (i.e., propaganda)" (Cooke, 2017, p. 214). Mitigation is a core dilemma of post-truth proliferation: "audiences are more likely to believe information that appeals to emotions or existing personal beliefs, as opposed to seeking and readily accepting information regarded as factual or objective" (Cooke, 2017, p. 212). Without epistemic vigilance toward information sources, such interactions may risk the infliction of epistemic injustice, being the "wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2007, p.1).

Therefore, we wonder: How can LIS better promote epistemic vigilance and critical ethics toward post-truth (harmful; false; mis/dis/mal) information? Accordingly, we argue LIS must *evolve* to consider the epistemological dimensions of post-truth. By describing the process of post-truth knowledge production—as mis/dis/mal epistemology—LIS can better understand the potential consequences of post-truth and subsequently advocate for more effective institutional, technical, and pedagogical interventions to support knowledge justice (Leung and López-McKnight, 2021). This revolutionary approach toward post-truth information is well underway in studies on epistemicide, defined as the systematic destruction of knowledge or knowledge systems enacted through the accumulation of epistemic injustices (Patin et al., 2021; Burgess and Fowler, 2022; El Hadi et al., 2023).

Patin and Youngman (2022) demonstrate this approach by articulating a *cycle of interrupted knowledge development*, whereby acts of parasitic omission and beneficent gatekeeping inflict epistemic injustice upon knowers who themselves then receive, integrate, and subsequently share false knowledge *believed to be true*. However, our investigation did not consider post-truth or the modes of justification validating *false* beliefs as *knowledge*. Addressing this gap is imperative at a time when the uncritical popular adoption of emerging technologies and algorithmic systems unethically and forcefully facilitate our interactions with post-truth information (Youngman et al., 2023; Stahl and Eke, 2024). Therefore, our critical philosophical investigation argues post-truth information shapes the processes of mis/dis/mal knowing through *fallacies*. Further, examining post-truth information in knowledge production illuminates divergences in accounts of social reality and contradictions in epistemological criteria, which together enable us to mitigate the latent harms of *fallacies*.

EVOLVING NOTIONS OF INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND (POST-)TRUTH

Conceptualizations of truth trace back to the beginnings of philosophy (Budd, 2011). Tarski (1944) offers a salient definition of truth: "a sentence is true if it designates an existing state of affairs" (p. 343). Critical scholars frame truth as a subjective and affective account of reality shaped by our contextual standpoint (See: Haraway, 1988; Hill Collins, 2000; Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2014). For Frege (1975), truth is a desirable outcome of science: "the word "true"

indicates the aim of logic as does “beautiful" that of aesthetics or “good” that of ethics” (p. 289). Truth is constructed through the interplay between information and knowledge: knowledge may be a higher form of information (Ackoff, 1991) or the value derived by knowers resulting from the process of becoming informed (Buckland, 1991). Truth reflects “trustworthy information that people use to make important decisions about their lives” (Ranalli, 2022, para. 1). Budd (2004) defines knowledge as “justified true belief” (p. 362). We justify our beliefs as true through knowledge claims, being “an utterance that is intended to propose or argue in favour of a position” (Budd, 1999, p. 268), from which we make assertions about the world based on some kind of information (i.e., I have information about something, therefore: I *know* something; something *I know* is *true*). The “quality” and “value” of information shapes our knowledge claims, particularly when assessing relevance (see: de Fremery and Buckland, 2022, p. 1273). Expressions of information affirm our assertions: “Discourses and speech acts can be differentiated by whether language is being used essentially to communicate or to represent” (Habermas, 2003, p. 13). Yet, assertions may be false: “Error and superstition have causes just as much as genuine knowledge.” (Frege, 1975, p.290). Hence, the falsity of information negates the truthfulness of knowledge claims.

Like information, *post-truth* is philosophically amorphous: “The troubling label ‘post-truth’ is often invoked as a journalistic neologism rather than a coherent intellectual concept. Scholarly discussions usually consider ‘post-truth’ as a shorthand for summarising the symptoms of our social ills” (Kwok et al., 2023, p. 107). Post-truth is an established concept (Schindler, 2020; Bufacchi, 2021) discussed in relation to misinformation (e.g., Burnett and Williams, 2024; McDowell, 2024), fake news (e.g., Cooke, 2021; Banerjee and Chua, 2021; Revez & Corujo, 2022; Mirhoseini et al., 2023), and information literacy and librarianship (e.g., Oliphant, 2019; De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Lewandowsky, 2020). Despite the relevance of conceptual debates on post-truth, LIS largely attends to mis/dis/mal information. Inattention to the interrelationships between post-truth and information has consequences for how we understand *epistemology* (recalling applied *information* as knowledge, and knowledge as justified *true* belief).

Where *truth* reflects factual accounts of reality, *post-truth* reflects a *process* of disputing and contesting between *facts* and *opinions* (i.e., non-facts; alternative facts) resulting in false *products*. Consider, then, a *post-truth knowledge claim* as disregarding an *undesirable fact* in favor of an *preferential opinion* asserted as *THE fact* of the matter. Post-truth facts are *false* to the extent a prior more authentic factual account exists. Adjacent debates frame post-truth as “a historically particular public anxiety about public truth claims and authority to be a legitimate public truth-teller” (Harsin, 2018, p. 2), and represents a “breakdown of social trust” against dominant “discoverers, producers, and gatekeepers of truth” (Harsin, 2018, p. 1). Lor et al. (2021) agree: “Because various institutions have laid claim to being bearers of the truth—truth as determined in terms of religious, political, and ideological dogma—claims to truth are often looked at with suspicion” (p. 11). Indeed, decaying trust negatively impacts knowledge production: “We are living [...] in an age where politics no longer functions through rational discourse. The facts of the matter are of secondary importance to free-floating opinion. Instead, truth is replaced by demonstrative arguments that appeal to the electorate on a more visceral and emotional level” (Laybats and Tredinnick, 2016, p. 1). We understand “demonstrative arguments” resulting from a “breakdown of social trust” as *fallacies*.

Harsin (2018) demonstrates three problems with post-truth: "epistemic (false knowledge, competing truth claims); fiduciary (distrust of society-wide authoritative truth-tellers, trust in micro truth-tellers); and ethicomoral (conscious disregard for factual evidence—bullshitting—or intentional, strategic falsehoods/lying—dishonesty)" (p. 5). We emphasize epistemic components of post-truth to contextualize fiduciary and ethicomoral consequences. Algorithmic interactions further complicate the epistemic realm: "truth criteria have been designed out of technologically mediated social networks, to be replaced by content that appeals on a more emotional level." (Laybats and Tredinnick, 2016, p. 1). We argue *fallacies* exploit the erosion of truth-criteria to forward post-truth knowledge claims justifying false beliefs: "What is accepted as popular truth is really a weak form of knowledge, opinion based on trust in those who supposedly know" (Harsin, 2018, p. 1).

TOWARD POST-TRUTH KNOWLEDGE

Fallacies as Foundation of Post-Truth Knowledge

Fallacies impede reliable knowledge: "Being able to detect and avoid fallacies has been viewed as a supplement to criteria of good reasoning" (Hansen, 2020, para. 2). Hansen (2020) offers two competing definitions of fallacies: 1) "deceptively bad arguments", and 2) "false but popular beliefs" (para. 1). Rather, we believe these framings are complementary and respectively operationalize them as **Fallacy 1** and **Fallacy 2**. Adopting Schwitzgebel's (2023) framing of belief as "propositional attitude" (para. 2) alongside Dutilh Novaes' (2022) framing of arguments as a "complex symbolic structure where some parts, known as the premises, offer support to another part, the conclusion" (para. 2), we interpret beliefs as *assumptive interpersonal arguments* using *preferential reasoning* to support *predetermined conclusions*. Seemingly, only changes to an argument's *structure* (set of reasons; reasoning process) or *substance* (knowledge sources; reasons) effectively alters individual belief and subsequent knowledge claims. Fallacies form when an argument, we argue, lacks "quality" or "value" in its structure (*Fallacy 1*) or substance (*Fallacy 2*). Informationally, we often denote lackluster structure or substance through the mis/dis/mal prefixes, which generally signal a "bad" association, or varying degrees of intentional wrongfulness. Considering fallacies resolves the interpretive conceptual ambiguity between these prefixes by offering two succinct frames for understanding post-truth knowledge production.

Fallacies and/as Information

Fallacies flourish when arguments are immutable, whereby beliefs are (re-)asserted through intentional deception (Fallacy 1) or widespread agreement (Fallacy 2), regardless of truthfulness. Knowers enact *labor* to construct fallacious arguments using facts or opinions assessed as *relevant* for asserting a desirable belief as truthful within a given *context* (de Fremery and Buckland, 2022). For LIS, fallacies manifest in recorded or enacted sources [information-as-thing; documents; discourse], are distributed through communicative processes [information-as-process], and influence the development of underlying beliefs [information-as-knowledge] (Buckland, 1991). Considering fallacies positions LIS to account for the epistemological components of argument structure and substance, shaping both the use and distribution of information sources, the resulting beliefs they generate, and the worlds they maintain. Hence, we posit Fallacy 1 as a deceptively bad process of structuring, creating, or sustaining false sources

[information-as-thing], and Fallacy 2 as a process of sharing bad sources [information-as-process, or communication], both of which can affirm or alter existing beliefs grounding knowledge production [information-as-knowledge].

Fallacy 1 (First Fallacies)

Fallacy 1 encompasses "deceptively bad arguments": false beliefs assembled through *weak reasoning* resulting in *harmful arguments,* potentially resulting from malicious intention. Fallacy 1 is recognizable through knower interactions under systems of oppression or in knowledge-claims about groups (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) or historical events (e.g. eurocentrist accounts, white-washing), resulting in unsubstantiated truths posited as facts. The harmful assumptions enabled by or actions enacted through Fallacy 1 may result in epistemic injustice (e.g. stereotypes; gaslighting; lookism). We suggest Fallacy 1 is intended to be persuasive, declarative, and affirmative to existing beliefs, regardless of truth-value. The making of Fallacy 1 is an exercise of power enabling authoritative meaning making. Consider the statement from South Carolina Governor Nicki Haley, who when asked about the cause of the U.S. Civil War, responded: "how government was going to run — the freedoms and what people could and couldn't do" (Hyatt and Concepcion, 2024, para. 4). Despite the state's declaration of secession (South Carolina Convention, 1860) explicitly pointing to slavery as a motivating factor for leaving the union, the former governor's answer is a *deceptively bad argument* intended to persuade an electorate. Despite historical evidence to the contrary, this instance of Fallacy 1 disinforms and gaslights citizens into a *false sense of knowing* what is true about the U.S. Civil War.

Fallacy 2 (Second Fallacies)

Fallacy 2 encompasses "false but popular beliefs." Distribution shapes the popularization of belief amongst agents, often enacted through virality (e.g., Nahon and Hemsley, 2013). The uninterrupted adoption of Fallacy 1 by collectives results in Fallacy 2 as *false knowledge*. Applying formulations of knowledge as "justified true beliefs" (pre-Gettier) and Fallacy 2 as "[popular] [false] beliefs", we note two conceptual paradoxical overlaps: 1) *popularity* is a mode of *epistemic justification*, whereby collectives validate 'likable' or 'admired' beliefs as *knowledge* regardless of truthfulness; and 2) *falsification* grounds a *truth-claim,* whereby distinctions between opinion and fact dissolve in assessments of any given belief as a viable basis for reliable *knowledge*. Here, we argue bad-faith arguments (Fallacy 1) resulting in popular false beliefs (Fallacy 2) enable larger social control, an observation prevalent historically (e.g., Salem Witch Trials; 1950's McCarthyism; 1980's Satanic Panic) and contemporarily (e.g. conspiracy theorists; flat-earthers; anti-vax movement). Indeed, Fallacy 2 grounds the worldview of alternative social groups, as Burnett and Williams (2024) similarly demonstrate by studying misinformation worlds of QAnon. In *Art, Argument, and Advocacy: Mastering Parliamentary Debate*, Meany and Shuster (2002) offer another example of Fallacy 2, explaining "Think of the children" in debate as a type of logical fallacy and an appeal to emotion because this phrase may emotionally sway members. Helen Lovejoy, wife of the minister in *The Simpsons*, agrees: "won't somebody please think of the children?"

Toward Mis/Dis/Mal Epistemology (Post-Truth Knowledge)

From our investigations of fallacy, we reapply the mis/dis/mal prefixes to propose three novel forms of post-truth knowledge: 1) ***Dis-Epistemology*****,** as the result of deductive (top-down) knowledge production driven by influencers using Fallacy 1 (deceptively bad arguments) *to shape* collectives of knowers. Knowledge-claims asserted through individual knowers in positions of power; 2) ***Mis-Epistemology,*** as the result of an inductive (bottom-up) knowledge production *shaped by* collectives of knowers exposed to Fallacy 2 (false popular beliefs). Knowledge-claims are distributed, constructed, and deliberated amongst knowers; and 3) ***Mal-Epistemology,*** reflecting a cognitive state grounded in the irreconcilable disagreements between internal propositional attitudes (belief) and external expressions of reality.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF POST-TRUTH KNOWING IN LIS

While underlying beliefs may be difficult to sway, LIS professionals are especially proficient in providing information resources and tools necessary for dismantling bad arguments and debunking popular falsehoods through critical and historical inquiry. Increased attention to the interventionist potential of LIS is imperative, for a lack of *care* to argumentation enables the loss of *accurate knowledge.* Indeed, LIS professionals must learn to recognize and dismantle fallacies in pursuit of epistemic justice given our roles as stewards of knowledge: "We deem how information is findable, what words and structures should be used to organize knowledge, and in fact, determine what information is worth preserving or sharing at all" (Patin and Youngman, 2022, p. 7). The most daunting challenge concerns rebuilding trust and prioritizing truthfulness while information interactions become increasingly automated. Fallacies enabled by emerging AI systems shape our knowledge-claims and exacerbate post-truth realities. Here, AI Fallacies obfuscate functionality (Raji et al., 2022, p. 959), supports inscrutability (Kroll, 2018, p. 2), and problematically promotes anthropomorphism, absolving creators of responsibility (Placani, 2024, p. 691). Faced with these realities, future revelations in LIS must consider the consequences of treating fallacies as reliable knowledge, alongside who is empowered in the process. LIS professionals remain on the frontlines of the information literacy revolution sparked by the evolution of post-truth discourse: "The proliferation of information emphasizes the importance of critical evaluation tools […]. Information professionals […] have a central role in developing the information literacy skills of the future through sharing their professional expertise about source evaluation" (Laybats and Tredinnick, 2016, p. 2). Pursuing epistemic justice against fallacies requires each of us to be accountable to vigilance through *scholarship*, in delivering *instruction*, and in *practices* of sharing and redistributing information with our fellow knowers: "In support of a right to the truth, [...] social justice should be a normative instrument for librarians in the evaluation of the truthfulness of a society. [...], justice sets out important principles for the protection and promotion of truth " (Lor et al., 2021, p. 11). The evolution of post-truth information requires an ethical revolution for LIS.

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