What about my true beliefs? On the construction of our collective memory online

¿Y mis creencias verdaderas? Sobre la construcción de nuestra memoria colectiva en línea

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Abstract: By applying Mills' notion of 'collective memory', Frost-Arnold argues that an *excessive* number of *false* beliefs online (fake news) can condition the memory that we share as a collective. Here I suggest, following Mills' original characterization of 'ignorance', that the construction and maintenance of our collective memory is also vulnerable to a partial *lack* of or total *absence* of *true* beliefs online. I suggest we must investigate these beliefs attending to two issues: firstly, instances of knowledge that are underrepresented, and secondly, non-propositional forms of knowledge. The first problem is addressed in section 1, where I explore different ways in which some beliefs might not reach the online sphere, due to their minoritarian status. The second problem is the focus of section 2, which entails the consideration of non-dominant forms of knowledge: knowledge-how and knowledge by acquaintance.

Keywords: collective memory, fake news, knowledge-how, knowledge by acquaintance, epistemology of internet.

Resumen: Aplicando la noción de 'memoria colectiva' de Mills, Frost-Arnold argumenta que un *exceso* de creencias *falsas* en línea (fake news) puede condicionar la memoria que compartimos como colectivo. Aquí sugiero, siguiendo la caracterización original de 'ignorancia' de Mills, que la construcción y mantenimiento de nuestra memoria colectiva también es vulnerable a cierta *falta* o *ausencia* total de creencias *verdaderas* en línea. Propongo que debemos investigar estas creencias atendiendo a dos cuestiones: en primer lugar, a instancias de conocimiento que están subrepresentadas y, en segundo lugar, a formas no proposicionales de conocimiento. El primer problema se aborda en la sección 1, donde exploro diferentes formas en las que algunas creencias pueden no alcanzar el ámbito digital debido a su estatus minoritario. El segundo problema es el foco de atención en la sección 2, donde se consideran formas no dominantes de conocimiento: el saber-cómo y el conocimiento por familiaridad.

Palabras clave: Memoria colectiva, fake news, saber-cómo, conocimiento por familiaridad, epistemología de internet.

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Who should we be online? (2023) is an exciting and normative proposal about our roles and duties as epistemic agents in an environment that is no longer new: the Internet. One of the most original contributions of the book is the update of Charles Mills' epistemology to the digital environment (section 4.4. Fake News and White Ignorance) and, specifically, Frost-Arnold's use of Mills' notion of 'collective memory' to analyze the phenomenon of fake news. Along this section, Frost-Arnold convincingly defends that to understand the creation and spreading of fake news in our epistemic environments we must comprehend the implications of white racism and white domination in our daily epistemic practices. In order to defend this claim, she aligns herself with two crucial notions. Firstly, what we are is collectively construed and collected. This means that our collective memory is a social effort to maintain and produce our group identity and history. Secondly, racist beliefs and practices (what Mills labels as white ignorance) greatly determine what or who we remember, appreciate, celebrate, or recognize socially. It follows from this that the construction and maintenance of our collective memory would be shaped and influenced by white ignorance as long as our beliefs and collective resources are shaped and affected by racist commitments. The content available online and the ways we access it (both actively and passively) are crucial ways in which our collective memory and practices are molded and kept alive. Search engines, social media content, and the lack of active exercise of moderation online are some ways in which prejudicial beliefs spread and settle. Fake news, along these lines, may be understood as an online manifestation of white ignorance that determines our collective memory and testimonial practices online.

Frost-Arnold's analysis thus targets a particular kind of false beliefs: those that generate a type of miscognition that distorts our collective memory. Her rationale crucially focuses, then, on how these false beliefs are easily replicated and how the exposure to this online content effortlessly expands, not only in cases with spurious intentions but even when the intention of the content is to debunk the original false belief (125). Hers is, in other words, a concern about how an *excessive* number of false beliefs can condition the memory that we share as a collective.

In this comment, I would like to emphasize that Frost-Arnold pays less attention to the *second* way in which Charles Mills characterizes white ignorance, as the possibility of a miscognition derived from the *absence* of true beliefs, instead of merely originating from the presence of false beliefs (Mills, 2007, 16). My aim, following Mills' original characterization of ignorance, is to put some pressure on Frost-Arnold innovative proposal by suggesting that the construction and maintenance of our collective memory is also vulnerable to a partial lack of or total absence of true beliefs online. Therefore, I want to claim that, together with the worry about the spread of falsehoods online (such as fake news and other misrepresentations), we should also pay due attention to those lacunae, namely: beliefs that, even if they constitute common knowledge in the offline world, are underrepresented online, or only shared by a minority of users[1].

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1   Some might raise doubts about the mere possibility of a collective memory online given the existence of extreme personalization techniques. For my purposes it would be enough to state that I find Frost-Arnold's considerations in this regard persuasive (Frost-Arnold, 2022, 145). Therefore, if the reader is not convinced by the possibility of a collective memory online there are still good arguments to, at least, grant the idea of a 'perceived collective memory'.

To argue for the impact that the absence of true beliefs has on collective memory, I suggest we must investigate these beliefs attending to two issues: firstly, instances of knowledge that are underrepresented, and secondly, non-propositional forms of knowledge. The first problem is addressed in section 1, where I explore different ways in which some beliefs might not reach the online sphere, due to their minoritarian status. The second problem is my focus on section 2, which entails the consideration of non-dominant forms of knowledge: knowledge-how and knowledge by acquaintance.

1. Minorities and their beliefs

It is clear, from Frost-Arnold's analysis, that excessive speakers sharing and disseminating racist, sexist, ableist, or any kind of false beliefs in the online environment affect the construction and maintenance of our collective memory. Here I would argue that it is also relevant to pay attention to how such memory is construed when some realities or voices have little to no presence in the online environment.

To be fair, Frost-Arnold's analysis does not ignore the dangers entailed by the scarcer contributions of certain communities to the Internet. On the contrary, she convincingly deals with these affairs. I would press her analysis because she is foremost concerned (and rightly so) about communities that are excluded from the digital space *due to* epistemic or social injustices. In this way, she makes the case for the objective difficulties that certain communities or agents can suffer online when trying to equally participate or gain due credibility in the production and dissemination of knowledge. My worry is that she does not engage with the possibility of a *defective* presence of true beliefs in the online sphere *for other reasons* than unjust marginalization or injustices more generally. The lower presence in the online sphere of some instances of knowledge about certain issues might be the result of communities that simply comprehend fewer speakers or scarcer members[2]. This means that true beliefs of minoritarian groups, by the simple fact of them being a minority, either offline or online, might be at risk of not reaching the online sphere and consequently, not participating in the configuration of the collective memory.

A first consideration here is that there are several ways in which it is possible to refer to a minoritarian presence of certain groups (and/or their beliefs) in the online sphere. Consider the following possibilities:

- The community's online presence and their beliefs, knowledge, and understandings are *accurately represented* in the digital environment regarding the existing number of members. In this case, the community has few members, given the amount of people that qualify to be a part of it. Think, for example, about beliefs shared by communities of patients of rare diseases, societies that share a language that has very few speakers, or social groups that are really reduced in numbers, such as some indigenous populations. For such cases, an accurate representation of the members of these groups online, considering the true-life members, could result in a low quantity of online content from this group more generally.

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2 This minoritarian status might derive from a quantitative reality (few members) or from qualitative circumstances (lack of resources, interest, political commitments…). More on this below.

- The community is not necessarily composed of a reduced number of members, but *their online presence* is substantially smaller, specifically due to limited access to the resources that enable participation in the online dimension. It is barely controversial that, to access the Internet, it is necessary to enjoy certain material and non-material resources (privileges?) such as electronic devices, Internet bandwidth, digital literacy…[3] Lacking any of these resources may result in a significant reduction of the participation of members of some communities in the online sphere, which are nonetheless significant in number in offline spaces. A simple example of this common scenario is the disproportionately low presence of the elderly population in some social media contexts compared to the increasing numbers of aging populations in Western societies. Rural or impoverished areas, where the population has little access to internet coverage or public resources for internet usage are scarce, could also confront similar disproportion in the presence of their members online. Or, in a more controversial picture, young people and infants have limited access to several online spaces where their beliefs and knowledge could be relevant (discussion of children's rights, city management, educational content…).
- Communities that might not be reduced in factual numbers but *do not wish to engage* with the digital environments for various reasons. In this case, the absence of possible true beliefs from some online communities would not have originated from a low number of participants, but from a decision not to be part of the digital sphere. In different ways, concerns about the hypervigilance of digital devices or data transfer online could motivate such a refrain from the digital world[4]. For instance, activist groups that are committed to protecting the privacy of individuals by not using certain capitalized online spaces or that aspire to reduce their ecological impact by choosing to disengage as much as possible from specific domains or from the Internet altogether. Somewhat more problematic motivations to disengage from the digital could also originate in commitments to conspiracy theories or cults that choose to avoid digital environments.[5]

Regardless of which of these reasons are grounds for lower participation of certain communities in the digital environment, there is a risk that some true beliefs or knowledge possessed by these minoritarian communities is being neglected online. Following Mills and Frost-Arnold, this could impact the construction and maintenance of collective memory, since there would be a deficit of certain voices online, that could differently shape this memory.

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3   Some may worry that these are precisely the circumstances that ground the epistemic injustices and forms of oppression that Frost-Arnold worries about, and that, therefore, the minoritarian communities referenced here are the very ones targeted by her book. Settling the question about which digital resources should be granted in a just society clearly exceeds the scope of this comment. For the present discussion, it is enough to state that I believe in the possibility of a lack of resources or capacities for participation in the online sphere that is not grounded in unjust circumstances. For example, lacking the digital literacy that digital natives possess can result from a disinterest in new technologies.

4   It could be argued that completely refraining from the digital environment is impossible since there is no longer such a division between online and offline spaces. A more fruitful way to engage in this debate could be to explore if this disengagement from the digital sphere is *de facto* a possibility or if the capacity to disengage from it actually resides in some kind of privilege or advantage that just some people enjoy. I suspect the latter.

5   In this case it is certainly more difficult to analyze the real possibility that this communities could contribute with true beliefs or knowledge to the shared pool of knowledge.

At this point, a second consideration is in order. Some might worry that there are no *epistemic* reasons to argue for such a presence of minority groups in the online sphere. Although several *political* or *moral* considerations could clearly legitimize a vindication of their presence online, it might not be straightforward *why* these minority groups should be equally present online, in terms of epistemic reasons. However, these concerns should disappear when we consider how the contribution of these minoritarian groups entails potential *epistemic* benefits (or even privileges). In fact, there are good reasons to think that individuals belonging to minoritarian communities might enjoy better epistemic locations regarding certain realities (Du Bois, 1897; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992; Medina, 2013). To use some of the aforementioned examples, consider how people living with rare diseases are in better positions than those who don't suffer from any severe condition to know general and specific claims about the health system, due to their need to understand it and their acquaintance with it. In the same way, older people are potentially epistemically better suited to understand the revolution of technologies for day-to-day activities, precisely because they have first-hand knowledge of a time when digital technologies did not exist.

Once one agrees with the potential epistemic benefit of minority groups contributing to the general pool of knowledge, it becomes also relevant that communities that are not unjustly marginalized (at least explicitly) can fail to contribute to the online domain with their true beliefs. In the first place, because potentially relevant true beliefs can be collectively neglected. Added to that, the inquiries from majoritarian groups about issues they ignore would be hard to settle. This could be the case if we consider how lower online participation of minoritarian groups amounts to a deficit in the quantity of available content on topics that only they could produce online. Consequently, breaking through issues that majoritarian communities ignore (and minority communities might shed light on) would entail high epistemic labor and cost for those who are concerned about settling questions about said issues. Put simply, digital technologies such as search engines would be able to easily provide multiple sources and content for topics that are widely shared (the results of the US elections in 2020, for example) but few results for themes for which little content is created and shared (what are the common symptoms of menopause, for instance). As a result, there could be a deficit in the collective memory since relevant contributions from minoritarian groups would not get to model it.

2. Non-propositional knowledge

The same way the collective memory could be affected by the absence of true beliefs due to minorities not contributing in equal numbers to the shared pool of knowledge, this collective memory might be impacted if we dismiss some types of knowledge, such as know-how or acquaintance, in favor of others, such as propositional knowledge (see Shotwell, 2017). Of course, there is still space for controversy regarding the possibility of irreducibly non-propositional modes of knowledge[6]. But even if some reductions were manageable, non-propositional forms of knowledge would still instantiate peculiarities that we may want to

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6   The debate on the possibility of non-propositional forms of knowledge is still open. A good revision of the state of the art for 'knowledge-how' can be found in Navarro (2021). A thoughtful revision of 'Contemporary Views on Acquaintance' and their criticisms can be found in Hasan & Fumerton (2020) and in Ducan (2021).

preserve and promote. Consequently, a misrepresentation of these non-propositional forms of knowledge may affect the creation and maintenance of the collective memory online. My aim in this section is to motivate these considerations.

A fruitful way for many philosophers to argue for the possibility of non-propositional forms of knowledge has been to defend some distinctive features in these that are not present for knowledge-that (Navarro, 2021). I want to suggest that these unique features that tell knowledge-how and knowledge by acquaintance apart from knowledge-that might affect how beliefs are shared, produced, and questioned online. Furthermore, I claim that only attending to or prioritizing propositional knowledge over other forms of knowledge shapes our collective memory in defective ways.

To make the case for such a claim, consider some of the unique characteristics attributed to knowledge-how. Contrary to knowledge-that, it is persuasively argued (Hawley, 2010; Poston, 2016) that knowledge-how is resistant to testimonial transmission. This implies, for example, that it is not possible to convey how to pilot a plane just by communicating some propositional truths about the practice of flying an aircraft, instead, to know how to pilot, these truths must be connected to the action of flying. In the same way, knowledge-that is widely considered to be an all-or-nothing state (Drestke, 1981)[7]. Either you know that today is Monday, or you don't. This is arguably not the case for knowing-how (Bengson and Moffett, 2011; Sgaravatti & Zardini, 2008; Pavese, 2017). It is possible to know, for instance, how to play football in various degrees; as an amateur player that meets their friends on the weekends, or as a devoted professional. Similar arguments are also in place for the specific features of knowledge by acquaintance.

In the case of acquaintance, these unique features are even clearer since to be acquainted with anything is to have direct awareness of it (Russell, 1911, 1912). Some understand this direct awareness narrowly, namely, as a completely unmediated relation (Fumerton, 1995; BonJour, 2001). Thus, there is just the possibility of being acquainted with one's states of mind (phenomenal properties such as colors, smells, pain, itchiness…). Others, however, understand this directness in broader terms and argue that one can be acquainted with physical objects or people, and to know them (Brewer, 2011; Tye, 2009). For what is worth here, to be acquainted with something, someone, or somewhere (a color, a relative, a city…) one does not need to hold true propositions about them, but just enjoy a direct awareness of them, in either of the preferred senses. Additionally, this direct awareness ensures that knowledge by acquaintance comprehends distinctive attributes. For instance, it has been argued that this type of knowledge is, first, especially complete and, secondly, distinctively secure (Russell, 1912). In this way by being acquainted with pain, for instance, one does not only know about the pain completely but also has some knowledge that is indubitable.

Considerations as the ones highlighted about the unique features[8] of non-propositional forms of knowledge are crucial to understanding how some types of knowledge are present in the online environment or not, and if they are, how they differently shape which modes

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7 Sosa's notion of 'knowing full well' is an exception to this consideration (Sosa, 2011).

8 Several other distinctive features have been discussed in the literature on know-how (resistance to veritic intervening luck (Potson, 2009), resistance to environmental epistemic luck (Carter & Pritchard, 2015), resistance to epistemic defeaters, (Carter & Navarro, 2017). It remains debatable whether they could be relevant to the arguments defended here.

we share and treasure as a collective. Remarkably, paying attention to these specific issues about non-propositional knowledge unveils at least two concerns about them and the Internet. First, non-propositional modes of knowledge may face difficulties in entering the digital space due to their unique features. It is possible to make the case for an absence of certain kinds of knowledge that, due to their unique characteristics, would not enter the online domain. There is a risk, for instance, of losing knowledge about how to produce textiles in artisanal ways or how to cure some diseases with ancestral techniques precisely because the digital sphere is not a good candidate for the preservation of modes of knowledge that are resistant to propositional ways of conservation and transmission. There are also strong difficulties in arguing for the acquisition of any knowledge by acquaintance in the online dimension, besides knowledge about the digital environment itself (the online features, the technological affordances, the dynamics of social media…). But even if agreed that this kind of knowledge can be accommodated in the online sphere (think about tutorials, simulators to teach professionals, augmented reality, media archives…), which is a claim that is subject to dispute, there is a second worry that we should account for. This is that propositional accounts of knowledge might be prioritized over non-propositional ones because they are a better candidate for a canonical mode of transmission online: testimonial transmission. Think, for example, how easier it is to acquire some propositional truths about Athens online (e.g. it is the capital of Greece, the Parthenon is there…) compared to the acquisition of any acquaintance with the classical beauty of their monuments or with the high temperatures endured during summers.

Therefore, there are good reasons to attend to non-propositional forms of knowledge in the online sphere, since there is a risk of losing or neglecting certain kinds of knowledge online that could enrich the shared pool of knowledge. Consequently, there is a risk that our collective memory might become defectively construed and maintained, due to an absence of non-propositional forms of knowledge.

3. Conclusion

The described ways in which the absence of true beliefs online might impact our collective memory are theoretically differentiated here to better understand how lacking true beliefs online could affect our collective memory. Nevertheless, these descriptions are not sealed from each other in the online space. On the contrary, the issues outlined (minority condition and non-propositional kinds of knowledge) can condition particular realities at the same time. This can be the case, for example, of minorities that cannot significantly contribute with their knowledge-how to the internet. The loss or absence of their relevant true beliefs in the online space would surely affect our collective memory.

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