Homo Sapiens in the Digital Information Jungle:
Epistemic Pornography and Our Intellectual Duties to Self and Others in the Age of the Internet and Social Media

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Abstract

The Internet and social media, paradoxically, enable significant access to credible information, criticism, and alternative points of view *while also* enabling and encouraging the most epistemically pernicious of cognitive biases such as avoiding or ignoring criticism, uncritically seeking and favoring confirming evidence for one's own view, forming bluntly partisan epistemic allegiances, and vilifying intellectual opponents as dogmatic or ideologically deranged. This latter epistemically pernicious effect is significantly and troublingly more frequent, forceful, and pervasive than is the former epistemically beneficial one (McIntyre 2015). Recent social and evolutionary psychology can help explain this phenomenon by means of its image of human cognition as pre-loaded with a suite of biases, irrationalities, and predispositions whose connection to objectivity and truth are tenuous at best (Nisbett & Wilson 1977; Nickerson 1998; Jost et al. 2009; Kahneman 2011; Mercier & Sperber 2011; Solomon et al 2015). Digital discourse environments naturally exploit, encourage, and enable these biases and thus *amplify* them (Polage 2012; McIntyre 2015). While the Internet and social media did not make us prone to intellectual blindness, self-serving rationalization, or dogmatic partisanship, if we do not take proper precautions it seems clear they will keep us this way—and make us even worse.

One response would be to seek to intentionally restructure digital discourse environments in order to "nudge" users in the direction of better discursive practices, or at least away from bad information and epistemically closed practices or spaces (e.g. partisan "echo chambers") (Thaler & Sunstein 2008; McIntyre 2015, ch. 7). However, this both raises concerns about intellectual freedom (Mill 1859/1961), and also largely ignores individual autonomy and responsibility. Susceptible to bias and contextual influences though they may be, Internet and social media users remain agents (and citizens) with cognitive capacities they are responsible for exercising and epistemic duties they ought to fulfil. Merely manipulating them to be epistemically "better" not only ignores but may undermine these capacities. The approach I develop here, while not incompatible with some nudging, takes individuals' epistemic agency and responsibilities as primary and seeks to formulate a response to the epistemic ills of digital discourse in terms of them.

In brief, I argue individuals *can* and *should* avoid consuming or sharing what I call *epistemic pornography*, a particularly pernicious unit of digital discourse engineered to enhance credence in particular beliefs – and partisanship generally – by activating human cognitive biases and vulnerabilities. Further, understanding and deploying the concept of epistemic pornography may itself function heuristically to assist agents in fulfilling their epistemic obligations in digital environments.

I first outline a set of epistemic virtues possession of which would increase agent-objectivity and respect for truth as a primary goal of discourse (Aristotle 1984; Zagzebski 1996; DePaul & Zagzebski 2003; Fricker 2007). I argue these virtues are not the subject matter of, but rather underpin and adjudicate, specific scientific, political, and cultural disagreements, and are thus plausibly seen as non-partisan constituents of Rawlsian public reason (Rawls 1993, Lecture VI; Wenar 2017, 3.1 – 3.6). I then introduce the results of current work in social and evolutionary psychology (Nisbett & Wilson 1977; Nickerson 1998; Jost et al. 2009; Kahneman 2011; Mercier & Sperber 2011; Solomon et al 2015). The image of human cognition they paint challenges the idea of virtue-epistemic-agency, but also helps explain *why* the Internet and social media are so epistemically pernicious (McIntyre 2015). I introduce the concept of "epistemic pornography" to identify a particularly problematic unit of on-line discourse, one that is Janis-faced in having both genuinely epistemic and also cognitive-bias and group-identity affirming features. By "epistemic pornography", I mean a presentation of information, usually in the form of a meme, video, short post or clip, but also compatible with an essay or article format, which (a) presents its main claims as unconditionally true on the basis of (b) evidence of some sort presented as definitive and argument-ending, where the claims being made are (c) deeply compatible with a particular partisan view of the issue and (d) presented in a self-congratulatory way that explicitly validates those who believe the claims being made. For these reasons, epistemic pornography plays on and encourages epistemically pernicious tendencies of human psychology in a particularly distressing way.

I develop an analogy between epistemic pornography and traditional pornography. Traditional pornography addresses itself to and to some extent gratifies human beings *as* sexual beings. Because sexuality is a basic feature of human experience that expresses itself in predictable desires and associated saliencies, it is easy for pornography to get and keep our attention. It latches on to a deep, fundamental, and relatively unalterable feature of human nature. Focusing specifically on the consumer of pornography, I take the liberal position that there may be nothing wrong with casually enjoying pornography *per se*, but that an individual who comes to see human sexual and romantic relations as exclusively defined in terms of the simplified gratifications made available in pornography is making a profound mistake.

Epistemic pornography is similar to traditional pornography in that it latches on to deep, fundamental, and relatively unnalterable features of humans as believing beings, namely our desire to have our beliefs and commitments validated, congratulated, and also affirmed by others. Just as an individual's first reaction when presented with traditional pornography will be to notice and take interest, so an individual's first reaction when presented with epistemic pornography suited to his worldview will be to notice and take interest, typically quite intense interest. Traditional pornography appeals to physical desires and epistemic pornography appeals to cognitive desires, but the mechanisms and power by which they work are otherwise quite similar. The crucial difference, however, is that whereas it may be possible to casually consume traditional pornography *without* thereby being deceived about the broader possibilities of human sexual and romantic relationships, it is far less clear that someone could be a casual consumer of epistemic pornography without at the same time *actually believing* that his beliefs are validated and correct full stop as a result. Epistemic pornography is thus *more pernicious* than traditional pornography in terms of its typical negative effects on consumers.

I offer a two-part argument concerning our epistemic duties. First, according to all three major ethical theories (virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism) we have a strong *prima facie* moral obligation not to *consume* or *share* epistemic pornography. Second, while the image of human cognition offered up by recent psychology shows it will be difficult to live up to these obligations, other literature suggests that cognitive biases *can* be resisted and diminished through increased awareness, intentional effort, and training (Kennett & Fine 2009; Sullivan-Bissett 2015; Poos et al. 2017). Thus, we both *should* and *can* avoid consuming or sharing epistemic pornography. Finally, I suggest the concept of "epistemic pornography" may itself offer a useful heuristic for overcoming cognitive limitations and living up to epistemic duties. It condenses in a single concept the idea of gross indulgence in "lower" or "more base" aspects of our humanity to the exclusion of "higher" and "more elevated" aspects of ourselves (objectivity, reason, and virtue), and is thus a morally and intellectually useful concept, a kind of negative *moral exemplar* (Zagzebski 2017), for subjects to deploy as they attempt to modify their discursive behavior and live up to their epistemic obligations in on-line environments.

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