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Public Debates in Social Media :
A Virtue-Epistemological Analysis

Abstract: Does social media influence our ability to extract valuable knowledge from public debates? This is the question that I address in my current research. The architecture of social media platforms offers the possibility to get instant replies that challenge the point of view advanced by an user, thus encouraging awareness of one's own fallibility. It also allows for deliberative groups to be created with the purpose of discussing a specific topic, which means that an user can easily find multiple perspectives on an issue *in one place.* Yet, by taking all participants *on stage* and explicitly counting the number of visualizations, appreciations, and distributions of their contributions, social media affordances encourage an exaggerated quest for getting attention and saving one's *face* in confrontation with possible counterarguments. In addition, by capitalizing on our natural curiosity and lack-of-thoroughness in inquiry, social media affordances tend to encourage our engagement in debates that belong to domains in which we lack basic knowledge, which makes us easy targets of distorted, decontextualized or outright false information. Moreover, even when the data presented by participants to an online debate is truthful, our mode of engagement with it in social media tends to decrease our chance to transform that data into personal knowledge, since we seldom have the patience to analyse and fully grasp its context, activities that would be necessary for its successful integration in our web of meanings. I identify one epistemic vice that underlies most of these problems and discuss a set of actions that would help users overcome its consequences, in order to make social media debates more cognitively fruitful.

Keywords: public debates, social media affordances, epistemic vices, epistemic virtues