EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND THE INTERNET: TESTIMONY AND THE DYNAMICS OF ONLINE KNOWLEDGE

By
FOLORUNSO, Paul Olorunsola PhD
Department of Philosophy,
Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti
paul.folorunso@eksu.edu.ng

Abstract
This treatise focuses on an issue in social epistemology-epistemic injustice. There is no gainsaying in asserting the fact that the internet, as a global platform for information exchange, has transformed the landscape of knowledge sharing. However, while it promises inclusivity and access, it often deepens epistemic disparities. This paper examines how epistemic injustice manifests in online environments, especially through the suppression of marginalized testimonies, the reinforcement of credibility biases by algorithms, and the uneven distribution of collective epistemic resources. Leveraging theories by Fricker, Medina, Dotson, and others, the study interrogates how testimonial and hermeneutical injustices persist or evolve in digital settings. It further analyzes the social politics of credibility in algorithmic systems, the construction of online collective knowledge, and the possibility of epistemic solidarity. Epistemic solidarity implies the collective practice of standing with and supporting others in their struggles against epistemic injustice. This is achieved through actively validating, amplifying and sharing their knowledge and experiences. The paper concludes with practical and philosophical recommendations for building a more epistemically just internet. The latter is digital spaces where knowledge construction, access and sharing are organized to minimize bias, recognize diverse voices and equitably distribute integrity to enable all users participate without facing epistemic exclusion or marginalization.

Keywords Algorithm Systems, Epistemic Injustice, Internet, Marginalized Testimonies, and Online Knowledge

Introduction

The digital revolution has redefined how knowledge is produced, circulated, and contested. Through unprecedented access to information and real-time communication, the internet has transformed the traditional roles of speaker and hearer, expert and layperson, knower and known. Yet, amid the promises of democratization and decentralization of knowledge, the online sphere has also intensified long-standing epistemic inequalities. Disparities in who is believed, who is heard, and who has the power to define the terms of understanding remain deeply embedded in digital epistemic life.

Epistemology is classified as one among the four main branches of philosophy. It could be genuinely defined as the scientific discernment of good knowledge or wisdom. It is a rational discernment of the fundamentals of true episteme or wisdom (Folorunso and Uzomah 5). It enquires about what quality(s) must any claim to knowledge have for it to pass as incorrigible and indubitable knowledge? Furthermore, it discusses issues relating to objectivity and relativity as they relate to the nature of truth (Uzomah and Isanbor 15-19). Epistemology is Relevant for the Acquisition of Epistemic Literacy Skills. In the history of human existence, epistemic literacy has not been more expedient as it is in the prevailing epoch designated by many scholars as "super information age". The social media and even the international and local broadcast media are densely stuffed with what Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of the great renaissance men of Western thought, would refer to as 'cognitively meaningless

nonsense". This cognitively meaningless nonsense regrettably in our day to day social intercourse, is ironically construed as genuine knowledge-claims. The goal epistemology is to establish rational measuring principles for identifying the essential properties of true episteme; and equipping people with epistemic literacy skills (Uzomah and Yakunant 18).

Consequently, social epistemologists must now contend with new actors-algorithms, social media platforms, digital communities, and new challenges, such as disinformation, echo chambers, and content moderation. More critically, the internet brings into sharp focus the problem of epistemic injustice, a term popularized by Miranda Fricker to denote "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Epistemic Injustice 1). Two key forms are central to this inquiry: testimonial injustice, where a speaker's credibility is deflated due to identity-based prejudice; and hermeneutical injustice, where someone's experience is rendered unintelligible due to a gap in collective interpretive resources (Fricker 1–7).

Online environments, especially those shaped by opaque algorithms and platform-specific norms, both replicate and exacerbate these injustices. For example, while social media theoretically allows anyone to speak, not everyone's speech is treated equally. Marginalized users often face harassment, invisibilization, or algorithmic de-ranking, even when presenting truth-claims rooted in lived experience (Dotson 242; Noble 85-92). These digital injustices are not anomalies rather they reflect entrenched patterns of epistemic exclusion.

At the same time, new forms of collective knowledge are emerging through digital platforms. Wikipedia, online forums, open-source communities, and networked protest movements showcase knowledge as co-produced, negotiated, and communal. However, these spaces are not inherently egalitarian. They often privilege dominant voices and reproduce existing hierarchies unless actively contested (Ford and Wajcman 513-16). According to José Medina, our epistemic communities are shaped by "credibility economies," where access to belief and attention is unevenly distributed (67–68).

This paper therefore takes up the task of examining the epistemic structure of the internet through the lens of injustice and resistance. It explores five key themes:

1. the dynamics of testimonial injustice in online discourse;
2. the epistemic effects of algorithmic mediation;
3. the construction and contestation of collective knowledge in digital spaces;
4. the role of epistemic solidarity and friction; and
5. the philosophical and practical pathways toward a more just internet.

Through a dialogue between classical epistemology, feminist theory, and applied digital ethics, the goal is not merely to diagnose online epistemic injustices, but to reimagine the normative commitments of knowledge in the twenty-first century.

Testimonial Injustice in Online Communication

In online environments, testimonial injustice emerges as both widespread and deeply structural. While the internet was initially hailed as a "level playing field" for information exchange, experience has shown that not all voices are equally heard, trusted, or believed. The phenomenon of testimonial injustice, as articulated by Miranda Fricker, occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly deflated due to prejudice rooted in their social identity (28). In digital spaces, such injustice is magnified by anonymity, algorithmic bias, and the transnational reach of networked platforms, allowing the reproduction of epistemic marginalization on a vast scale.

One common manifestation of testimonial injustice in digital communication is the systemic silencing or discrediting of marginalized voices, particularly those of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and citizens of the Global South. Online platforms often operate as spaces where dominant identities are normalized, while others are marked as peripheral or suspect. The credibility deficit assigned to marginalized speakers is not accidental but is embedded in platform design, moderation norms, and user behaviour.

For instance, women reporting harassment on Twitter frequently find their claims dismissed, ignored, or doubted, especially if they challenge powerful figures or dominant social narratives (Mantilla 571). Similarly, Indigenous activists sharing traditional ecological knowledge on platforms like Facebook often face both ridicule and censorship under content moderation algorithms that misidentify culturally specific language as hate speech or misinformation (Noble 103-06). These interactions are instances of testimonial quieting, a concept Kristie Dotson defines as the practice of refusing to hear someone as a knower (242).

Moreover, algorithmic systems play an instrumental role in determining whose testimony is seen and by whom. Social media feeds are not neutral streams of information; they are curated by engagement-based algorithms that prioritize viral content over epistemic value. As a result, marginalized testimonies often struggle to gain traction, while disinformation and dominant group narratives proliferate. Research shows that racial and gender biases in content-sharing behaviors and machine learning training data reinforce the tendency to believe and circulate testimonies from already privileged sources (Buolamwini and Gebru 1–2).

This injustice is not merely a matter of individual bias; it reflects a systemic erosion of epistemic agency. Fricker warns that repeated experiences of not being believed can lead individuals to internalize doubt about their own credibility, a phenomenon she calls "testimonial smothering" (55). In digital contexts, this is exacerbated by harassment, doxxing, and trolling, which can deter individuals from speaking at all. The cumulative effect is an epistemic environment where marginalized knowers are effectively disciplined into silence, not by law, but by the epistemic norms of the crowd and code.

The consequences of testimonial injustice online are far-reaching. Not only do they exclude valuable perspectives and undermine social trust, but they also shape public discourse by determining which experiences are publicly validated and which are erased. In a world increasingly governed by data and perception, who gets believed online can determine who gets protected, who gets targeted, and who gets remembered.

Addressing these injustices requires both cultural transformation and technical innovation. Culturally, internet users must be encouraged to adopt epistemic virtues such as charity, attentiveness, and openness to difference. Platforms can support this by highlighting diverse sources, offering credibility signals for marginalized content, and facilitating counterspeech initiatives. Technologically, companies must audit their systems for bias, implement inclusive design principles, and ensure that community moderation does not replicate existing social prejudices.

Moreover, it is vital to center the agency of marginalized epistemic agents. As Dotson argues, resisting testimonial injustice is not just about gaining a voice, but about having one's voice recognized and respected in epistemic exchanges (244). This recognition must be built into the architecture of our digital commons if we are to realize an internet where knowledge is truly democratized.

Algorithmic Epistemologies and the Politics of Credibility

The governance of online information has shifted decisively from human editors and moderators to algorithmic systems that determine what knowledge is seen, prioritized, or dismissed. These algorithmic agents have become key arbiters of credibility in the digital sphere, yet their operations are opaque, their biases often undetected, and their effects epistemologically profound. This section explores how algorithmic architectures structure the visibility and legitimacy of testimony, thereby constituting a new epistemological regime that reconfigures authority and trust.

An algorithmic epistemology is an epistemology shaped and mediated by machine-based decision systems, especially those designed to rank, recommend, or suppress information. Unlike traditional epistemic practices, which are grounded in reasoned evaluation and dialogical exchange, algorithmic credibility assessments are based on statistical patterns, engagement metrics, and predictive modeling. These systems do not discern truth in the normative sense but instead prioritize what is likely to be clicked, shared, or monetized (Pasquale 55-58).

As a result, algorithms have become credibility gatekeepers, and their judgments often align with existing social hierarchies. For instance, platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok amplify content based on popularity metrics that often correlate with dominant cultural narratives. This leads to epistemic stratification, where mainstream perspectives are overrepresented, while minority or dissenting viewpoints are buried (Noble 117-20; Eubanks 46). Marginalized groups that are already vulnerable to testimonial injustice now face algorithmic invisibility. This is a situation where their knowledge claims are never given the chance to be believed because they are never encountered. This has a fundamental implication to society's knowledge claims.

Moreover, the politics of credibility in digital platforms is shaped not only by bias in data and design but by structural opacity. Users are rarely aware of how algorithms rank content, and most platforms do not disclose the variables influencing visibility. This information asymmetry generates epistemic opacity, where the logic of credibility allocation is inaccessible to those being governed by it (O'Neil 66-70). Consequently, individuals cannot contest or correct credibility losses inflicted by code, creating a form of automated epistemic injustice.

Algorithmic decision-making is not just accidental in its effects, because it encodes and perpetuates ideological assumptions. Take for instance, content moderation algorithms may suppress activist narratives, particularly those involving race, gender, or police brutality, because such topics are flagged as "sensitive" or "controversial" (Gillespie 193). At the same time, disinformation that supports dominant or populist ideologies may be algorithmically promoted because it yields higher engagement. This selective amplification reinforces credibility economies in which truth becomes subordinated to attention.

These developments challenge core tenets of liberal epistemology, particularly the assumption of the rational, autonomous knower. In algorithmic systems, users are neither fully informed nor autonomous. Instead, they are nudged, sorted, and profiled by systems they do not understand. The digital subject becomes not a free knower but a target of probabilistic influence, designed to behave in ways that maximize platform objectives (Zuboff 94-97). This erodes the very foundations of democratic knowledge exchange.

Consequently, Binns is of the view that "Addressing these issues requires epistemic interventions at both design and policy levels. From the perspective of design, there is growing advocacy for explainable AI that may possibly enable users to understand and interrogate

algorithmic decisions" (1). Ethical audits, transparency requirements, and participatory machine learning models are crucial to reasserting human oversight. From a normative standpoint, algorithms must be reoriented to prioritize epistemic justice over engagement metrics. This may involve embedding values such as inclusion, epistemic humility, and resistance to domination into the architecture of digital systems.

Finally, an algorithmically just epistemology demands interdisciplinary collaboration. Philosophers, computer scientists, sociologists, and activists must work together to reimagine the future of knowledge in digital spaces. This includes questioning not only how we know online but also who gets to shape the terms of knowing, and to whose benefit or detriment such shaping occurs.

Collective Knowledge, Online Communities and Epistemic Solidarity

The internet has enabled the emergence of large-scale, decentralized communities whose members engage in shared knowledge creation. From open-access encyclopedias like Wikipedia to activist networks and support forums, the web has fostered what some describe as collective intelligence or networked knowledge. These formations challenge the traditional image of the solitary knower and underscore the social dimension of epistemology. Yet, while collective knowledge appears to democratize epistemic authority, digital communities are often shaped by the same dynamics of exclusion and inequality found offline. This section explores how collective knowledge is formed online, the limits imposed by epistemic injustice, and the role of epistemic solidarity in resisting such limits.

Collective knowledge refers to knowledge that is generated and sustained by groups rather than individuals. In digital contexts, this includes Wikipedia entries, open-source coding repositories, collaborative research projects, and community-based health or legal information networks. These knowledge ecosystems rely on distributed participation, asynchronous contribution, and communal verification (Lévy 20). In principle, the internet allows for a plurality of knowers to contribute to the epistemic commons, fostering inclusivity and diversity. However, participation is often mediated by power.

Using Wikipedia as a case study, one sees a platform usually celebrated as a paradigmatic case of collective knowledge production. Despite its openness, research shows that the majority of its contributors are white, male, and located in the Global North (Ford and Wajcman 513-14). Topics concerning marginalized identities, particularly those related to Black, Indigenous, and non-Western epistemologies, are underrepresented, poorly sourced, or frequently contested. This uneven representation constitutes a form of structural hermeneutical injustice, wherein the collective interpretive resources fail to reflect the experiences and perspectives of all community members (Fricker 147-49).

Moreover, the norms governing online communities can reinforce epistemic exclusion. Rules about notability, reliability, and neutrality; while designed to preserve quality, often align with dominant Western academic standards, marginalizing alternative ways of knowing. As feminist epistemologists argue, such standards may silence lived experience, oral traditions, and embodied knowledge that do not fit neatly into institutional citation frameworks (Harding 127-30). In digital spaces, these exclusions are magnified by the sheer speed and scale of content production.

The result is what Kristie Dotson terms contributory injustice: when a speaker has the epistemic resources to express their experience, but those resources are unintelligible or devalued by the dominant interpretive community (238). Many digital communities, despite being formally open, practice this form of injustice when they reject or delete content that does not align with

prevailing epistemic norms. As a consequence, entire knowledge worlds, particularly those of Indigenous, queer, and neurodivergent communities struggle to gain recognition in the digital epistemic commons.

To counter these injustices, scholars like José Medina advocate for the cultivation of epistemic solidarity. This is a commitment to standing with others in their epistemic struggles (Medina 91-92). In online contexts, epistemic solidarity can take the form of amplifying marginalized voices, engaging respectfully with unfamiliar epistemologies, and resisting exclusionary discursive practices. It also involves epistemic friction, the productive tension that arises from encountering different ways of knowing, which challenges our assumptions and broadens our understanding (Medina 110).

Examples of epistemic solidarity abound in digital activism. Hashtags like #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter have created collective knowledge about violence, injustice, and resistance that traditional institutions failed to acknowledge. These movements demonstrate that epistemic communities can form around shared testimony, affective resonance, and political urgency, rather than institutional sanction. They also show how knowledge practices can be co-created and defended by participants who recognize one another as legitimate knowers.

However, epistemic solidarity is not automatic; it requires active cultivation and institutional support. Platforms must move beyond neutrality and design for inclusivity. This would enable safer spaces, participatory governance, and equitable representation. Developers and moderators must be trained in epistemic ethics, while educational institutions must teach digital citizenship as an epistemic responsibility, not merely a civic one. Ultimately, the future of collective knowledge on the internet depends not only on access or participation, but on how epistemic relationships are formed, maintained, and transformed. If solidarity, rather than hierarchy, becomes the organizing principle of digital epistemology, we may yet achieve a more just and generative online commons.

Toward an Epistemically Just Internet

The internet, though ubiquitous with epistemic inequalities, remains a site of possibility (a space where knowledge systems can be restructured and epistemic justice advanced). To move toward an epistemically just internet is to reimagine digital infrastructures, platform governance, and knowledge ethics through the lens of equity, recognition, and inclusivity. This section outlines key principles and proposals for cultivating such a just epistemic environment in the digital age.

At the heart of epistemic justice is the moral and political imperative to treat others as knowers worthy of trust and engagement. Miranda Fricker defines epistemic justice not merely as the absence of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice but as the positive cultivation of epistemic virtues, such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and respect for difference (126). Translated into digital contexts, these virtues require radical rethinking of how platforms, users, and institutions interact with knowledge and with one another.

First, digital platforms must embed justice into design. This involves implementing systems that recognize and amplify marginalized voices rather than invisibilizing them. Algorithms should not only prioritize popularity but account for historical marginalization, topic sensitivity, and contextual nuance. This is the goal of algorithmic fairness and explainability, which advocates that machine-learning models be transparent, auditable, and responsive to critique (Binns 152). Platforms like Twitter and Reddit could, for example, highlight first-person accounts from vulnerable groups, tag authoritative counter-narratives to misinformation, or allow users to trace how content reaches them.

Second, participatory governance must be normalized. Rather than relying solely on top-down content moderation or opaque rule enforcement, epistemic justice calls for community co-governance. This means giving users not just engineers or executives a role in shaping moderation policies, flagging epistemic harms, and adjudicating contested claims. Wikimedia's community voting system and Reddit's subreddit moderators offer models, though they require greater equity training and oversight to prevent reproducing majority-rule epistemic injustices (Tkacz 89-91).

Third, education must be reconceived as epistemic empowerment. As Michael Lynch argues, internet users are now "epistemic agents" whose decisions affect not only themselves but the broader knowledge ecosystem (104). Therefore, digital literacy must go beyond technical proficiency. It should train users in epistemic reflexivity, an awareness of how one's positionality, biases, and consumption habits shape their epistemic practices. Schools, libraries, and community organizations must integrate curricula that teach critical evaluation, fact-checking, and engagement with marginalized perspectives.

Fourth, policy intervention is essential. Governments and regulators must ensure that tech companies are held accountable for epistemic harms. Laws that enforce data transparency, penalize algorithmic discrimination, and support public-interest technology development are crucial. However, policy must be crafted with input from affected communities to avoid reinforcing colonial or neoliberal epistemic structures. Global coalitions especially in the Global South are pushing back against epistemic colonialism by advocating for digital sovereignty, language inclusion, and support for indigenous knowledge systems (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda 18–22).

Fifth, epistemic solidarity must be a guiding principle. As José Medina asserts, solidarity is not just a feeling but a commitment to collective resistance against epistemic oppression (94). Online, this means amplifying marginalized testimonies, refusing to normalize epistemic exclusion, and engaging in what Medina calls "epistemic activism." This activism may be small-scale like crediting original voices or systemic like designing alternative platforms rooted in social justice (e.g., Black-owned platforms or feminist digital archives).

Concrete examples of epistemically just digital initiatives already exist. The Decolonial Atlas, for instance, maps Indigenous geographies erased by colonial cartography. Projects like FemTechNet or Digital Blackness create spaces for counter-knowledge and community-led scholarship. These efforts model what an internet built on recognition, redistribution, and relationality might look like.

Still, challenges remain. Surveillance capitalism, state censorship, and platform monopolies pose formidable barriers. But the pursuit of an epistemically just internet is not utopian, it is urgent and ongoing. It requires collective will, ethical imagination, and sustained praxis.

Conclusion

Drawing from social epistemology and feminist theory, this paper has examined how testimonial injustice persists in online discourse, disproportionately affecting marginalized individuals whose credibility is routinely discounted. We have seen how algorithmic systems, far from being neutral, actively shape the politics of credibility by amplifying dominant narratives and obscuring subaltern voices. Even in seemingly participatory digital communities, collective knowledge is produced within frames that often exclude non-dominant epistemologies, thereby reinforcing hermeneutical and contributory injustices.

Yet, amidst these concerns, the internet also provides the groundwork for epistemic solidarity. Through counter-publics, alternative digital platforms, and ethical design practices, new spaces of recognition and resistance are emerging. As José Medina and others argue, solidarity must be central to any effort to reconstruct our epistemic order. Such solidarity is not passive agreement but a reflexive, critical commitment to the equal dignity of all knowers and the pluralism of knowledge itself.

Going forward, the pursuit of an epistemically just internet must become both a moral imperative and a political project. It will require the collaboration of philosophers, technologists, educators, activists, and policy-makers. The internet must not merely be a repository of information but a relational space. It must be one that affirms the right of every person not only to speak but to be heard, understood, and believed. This vision, though aspirational, is not unreachable. It begins wherever we choose to listen differently, design more ethically, and imagine more inclusively.

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