

Platform Injustice: Material Imbalances and Epistemic Injustice on Digital Discursive Platforms

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Abstract - In this paper, I argue that the existence of material power imbalances in systems of discourse represents a novel concern in the literature on epistemic injustice. This epistemic injustice, which I call *Platform Injustice*, arises from the undue assertion of agency over the background features of a system of discourse, in order to manipulate, diminish, or magnify the vocalization and reception of speech-acts. First, I demonstrate the unprecedented nature of platform control as an epistemic wrong. Next, I identify case studies of platform injustice in modern social media. Then, I situate platform injustice within Dotson's typology of epistemic injustices; so, I can finally, identify paths to achieving platform justice and an epistemology of liberation.

Keywords – Epistemic Injustice, Science & Technology Studies, Tech Ethics

Background: The Hand Behind the System

In his fortuitous 1997 article, the *Twelve Principles of the Network Economy*, futurist Kevin Kelly¹ argued that the emerging world of technological connectivity was a “tectonic upheaval ... that [would] reorder our lives more than mere hardware and software ever could.” The new media landscape has deeply embedded itself in our collective experiences, leaving us at the beck and call of new unregulatable regimes of control. Digital superpowers like Meta, Google, and Twitter have become monarchs of their own private kingdoms, with unprecedented access and sway over their millions of eager users. In this section, I argue that the *material* control over a system

¹ Kevin Kelly, “New Rules for the New Economy,” *Wired* (Conde Nast, September 1, 1997), <https://www.wired.com/1997/09/newrules/>.

of discourse is a uniquely important factor to analyze when considering questions about the meaning of epistemic agency.

The interactions between the material and epistemic world are essential to understanding this phenomenon. I introduce the concept of *background features* to define the material features that provide structure to the epistemic world. *Background features* are any underlying non-epistemic structures that define the platform in which discursive communication occurs. These features can work to magnify or diminish the verbalization and reception of information. In interpersonal communication, *background features* describe the auditory volume and location under which a speech-act takes shape or the context in which a speech-act physically exists in relation to other speech-acts. On a social epistemic level, *background features* are the material structures that affect the free flow of content and the context in which individuals perceive social information. Altering these features can change the communication and reception of speech-acts as intended.

The random and unintentional manipulation of these background features is a well-examined phenomenon. Epistemic noise² — or error, disorder, and disorganization introduced to our epistemic resources — is an unavoidable reality that flows from the entropic nature of our physical world. Everything from static on a radio to a quick gust of wind can pose a natural disruption to our discursive systems. Considering the imperfect nature of our human sensory faculties coupled with the pervasiveness of epistemic noise in our material world, it is natural to expect some degree of volatility in a discursive system's background features.³

This paper is interested in the *intentional* manipulation of background features. Epistemic agents only have the capacity to manipulate background features when their material agency gives them some control over those features. Material capabilities are thus the primary constraint to this channel of epistemic control. These manipulations can magnify, diminish, or even alter the vocalization and reception of speech-acts. I call to mind an obnoxious crowd who only yells when they see a woman talking or a news reporter who only gives the microphone to a white person.⁴

² Cecile Malaspina, "An Epistemology of Noise," *Bloomsbury Academic*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350011816>.

³ Andrew Peet, "Epistemic Injustice in Utterance Interpretation," *Synthese* 194, no. 9 (2015): pp. 3421-3443, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-015-0942-7>.

⁴ Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): pp. 236-257, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x>.

Intentional manipulation of background features isn't motivated by objectivity or randomness; rather, it points to the will of an epistemic agent who has a deeper degree of material control.

Throughout history, leaders and technocrats have recognized that influencing information access and availability in a society is essential to its governance.⁵ From Nazi Propaganda in World War II to anti-communist censorship during the era of McCarthyism, political powers have always sought to curate social narratives that match state interests. Yet even paradigm cases like media control in Soviet Russia, fail to fully realize the extent to which the intentional manipulation of background features can be damaging. These regimes of epistemic control did not have the material capabilities to exercise their intentions to the fullest degree.

With the advent of the digital economy, the capability to control the shape of a society's background features was dramatically heightened. While before, regimes relied on delayed and often inaccurate intelligence reports to learn second-hand information about what people were talking about; now, big tech firms can track and parse discourse as it unfolds. Before, programs of censorship and propaganda were unable to infiltrate informal mediums of discourse; now, streams of content can be blocked and promoted with just a few lines of code. For the first time in history, there is an entity with *material* control over an entire system of discourse.

Digital media companies like Meta, Twitter, and Google (from here on referred to as DMCs), differ from a rowdy crowd in their *precise* and *pervasive* control over the system of discourse. They don't just have the agency to manipulate the background features of certain individuals. Rather, they can instantaneously manipulate these features for an entire system, while also contextualizing the degree of their manipulation to the identity of each user. On these DMC platforms, there is no ability to predict or control who your content is exposed to, what of your content is exposed, and in what context it is perceived. These factors are controlled by DMCs who constantly shift the background features of the system of discourse to enable the success and failure of certain forms of content. I argue that the introduction of a deeper epistemic agency that undergirds a system of discourse — a substratum agency that has never before existed in any previous discursive system — creates susceptibility to a novel form of epistemic wronging that I call *Platform Epistemic Injustice*.

⁵ "Connecting Historians, Policymakers and the Media Time to Talk," accessed March 9, 2022, https://www.historyandpolicy.org/docs/time_to_talk.pdf.

Motivating Cases for Platform Injustice

While the phenomenon of *platform epistemic injustice* exists in a myriad of economic and political systems, this paper focuses on DMC platforms as its paradigm case. In this section, we proceed with two case studies of DMCs manipulating their platforms. By examining the theoretical overlaps between each case study, an intuition for the “hand behind the system” harm will be built.

A. DMC Content Moderation

“Black activists say hate speech policies and content moderation systems formulated by a company built by and dominated by white men fail the very people Facebook claims it's trying to protect. Not only are the voices of marginalized groups disproportionately stifled, Facebook rarely takes action on repeated reports of racial slurs, violent threats and harassment campaigns targeting black users, they say. Many of these users now think twice before posting updates on Facebook or they limit how widely their posts are shared. Yet few can afford to leave the single-largest and most powerful social media platform for sharing information and creating community.”

~ [USA Today](#), 2019

The above USA Today excerpt details the tribulations that a community of activists faces because of Facebook’s moderation policies. I note three distinct forms of platform epistemic injustice present in this article:

- (I) Outright censorship is the manipulation of background features to preclude any discourse on a certain topic or to block content coming from a certain source. Importantly, censorship blocks the relationship between locution and reception; it attacks discourse itself, rather than just the vocalization or uptake of speech-acts.
- (II) Locutionary modification is the manipulation of a users’ speech-acts as a result of content moderation on a certain platform. This modification can occur with or without the awareness of the speaker. A speech-act could be displayed with certain content warnings or in the context of other messages, thus transforming the

locutionary intent of the speaker. A speech-act could also be formed differently from a speaker's initial intentions because they consciously or subconsciously try to avoid censorship and conform to the platform's regulations.

(III) Filtered reception is the manipulation of a users' viewing of speech-acts as a result of platform moderation. Whether aware or unaware of their predicament, users are trapped in filter bubbles of the DMCs' creation.⁶

Fakebook's achievement of totalized control over the system of discourse through its "content moderation systems" is more sinister, because they've made themselves one of the few forums for social discourse on anti-blackness by acting as the "single-largest and most important social media platform for sharing information." The substratum regulatory agency of the "company built and dominated by white men" ensures the "disproportionate stifling" of speech-acts from marginalized communities. The firm's pervasive and customized manipulation of the *background features* that structure how speech-acts are voiced and perceived, make it an ideal-type of *platform epistemic injustice*.

B. Non-DMC Content Moderation

"Twitter on Monday temporarily blocked dozens of accounts and tweets in India at the Hindu nationalist government's request, including those of a prominent news magazine and farmers staging mass protests in the capital. An Information Technology ministry source told the AFP news agency the government had directed the social media giant to act against about 250 Twitter accounts and tweets that posed a "grave threat to public order"."

-[Al Jazeera](#), 2021

The above Al-Jazeera excerpt consists of an instance in which content modification occurred, but the DMC wasn't explicitly responsible for *willing* its enforcement. Even though Twitter didn't explicitly seek to conduct content moderation on the accounts of Indian anti-government protestors, they were ultimately compelled to leverage their substratum agency on behalf of the ruling BJP

⁶ James Williams, *Stand out of Our Light Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

government. This conceptual nuance allows us to develop our most generalized **definition** for *platform epistemic injustice*.

Platform Epistemic Injustice arises from an inequity in epistemic agents' level of agency within a platform of discourse. This inequity in agency flows from the fact that some agents have greater material control over the *background features* of a system of discourse. Through the manipulation, diminishment, and magnification of the vocalization and reception of speech-acts, the substratum agent structures a system that forces users into non-ideal discursive and epistemic relations. We focus on digital media because digital networks uniquely display this epistemic inequality that arises from material inequality.

Importantly, the unique identity and awareness of the dominant (platform moderators) and subordinate (platform users) epistemic agents aren't explicitly important to the existence of platform epistemic injustice. The injustice arises from the generalized existence of a power imbalance between these two (or potentially more) tiers of epistemic agents. This imbalance may have been created by the DMCs who own the platform of discourse, but they don't have sole control of their dominant agency. Non-DMC actors often find ways to tap into the dominant side of these systemic power imbalances — like governments who legislatively compel DMCs to install specific content-moderation, or troll farms who take advantage of filtration algorithms to hijack the system with their own agenda. The identity of the agent responsible for exerting undue control over the system of discourse does not change whether a platform epistemic injustice occurred. Simultaneously, a users' awareness of the degree of background feature manipulation also does not change whether they've experienced a platform epistemic injustice.

Thus, platform epistemic injustice is a depersonalized manifestation of material power imbalances in the epistemic world, facilitated by unequal control of *background features* in the system of discourse. If specific instances of *background feature* manipulation are due to a negative identity prejudice, then the platform injustice may be magnified through its intersection with other injustices. However, platform injustice does not need to be based on a negative identity prejudice to be considered injustice. Its unjustness flows from the curtailment of users' epistemic agency through relations of material and epistemic domination.

Situating Platform Injustice Among Other Epistemic Injustices

Thus far, our analysis of Platform Injustice has uniquely positioned it in relation to other epistemic injustices. It has conceptual overlaps with forms of injustice characterized by authors like Miranda Fricker⁷, Jose Medina⁸, and Elizabeth Anderson⁹. However, through identifying how platform injustice uniquely interacts with other epistemic injustices, we move toward an account of its distinct nature. Through its conceptual separation, we also begin to see the seeds of how platform *justice* might be inculcated. Kristie Dotson's order-of-change typology of epistemic injustices¹⁰ will serve as a useful scaffolding on which we can graft platform injustice. Additionally, her eye toward repairing, rather than simply identifying, these injustices allows us to adopt a similar ethos in this section.

The first level in Dotson's typology is covered by testimonial injustice. Testimonial Injustices are a negative identity prejudice that involves the undue inflation and deflation of a speaker's credibility in interpersonal discourse. The process of manipulating the background features of a platform to shift the locution or reception of a speech-act could entail a shift in the credibility of a speaker. On the interpersonal level, platform injustice is thus at least conceptually similar to testimonial injustice because they both refer to prediscursive phenomena that shape the course of some instance of interpersonal discourse. They differ, however, because the prediscursive process in platform injustice is specifically defined as the manipulation of material background features, while the prediscursive process of testimonial injustice is any negative epistemic identity prejudice.

The second level in Dotson's typology is covered by hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical Injustice discusses the injustice formed by not having access to the requisite epistemic resources required to describe one's own experience. A lacuna in social knowledge can occur because of censorship or suppression of content arising from platform injustice. At the social epistemic level, platform injustice's effects on the *reception* of speech-acts are thus conceptually linked to hermeneutical injustice.

⁷ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Medina José, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice and Resistant Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

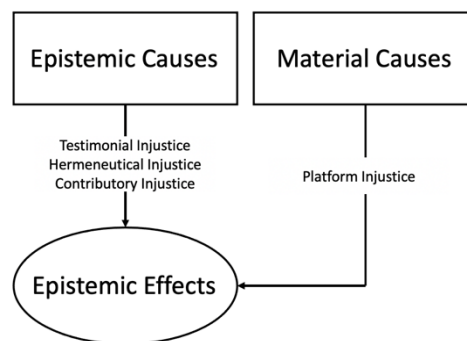
⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions," *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): pp. 163-173, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2011.652211>.

¹⁰ Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012): p. 24, <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.1.0024>.

Hermeneutical injustice is one of many epistemic harms that can arise from the material limitations that platform injustice can impose on a system of discourse.

The third level in Dotson's typology is covered by contributory injustice. Contributory injustice discusses the inability of an individual or community to properly contribute to the epistemic resources available within a society. At the social epistemic level, this process is conceptually similar to platform injustice's effects on the *locution* of speech-acts. Contributory injustice easily flows from platform injustice, but as a downstream effect of the material manipulation of *background features* in a system of discourse.

It is thus clear that platform injustice's material orientation constitutes it as a unique form of epistemic injustice, even if it has familiar epistemic injustices as downstream effects. At this juncture, it might be tempting to say that this clear material distinction actually excludes platform injustice from the category of epistemic injustice. I have some sympathy for this view. Dotson's three levels of injustice all have clearly delineated epistemic causes and effects, while platform injustice has a material cause and an epistemic effect. However, I posit that this form of injustice must be considered as, at least, epistemically relevant, because it involves harms primarily inflicted against an agent qua their status as a 'knower.'



Characterizing an individual as a knower involves a recognition of their normative status and agency to participate in epistemic relationships. Alongside this normativity, concomitantly arises a degree of responsibility and expectations in how the individual undertakes epistemic relationships. We would be within our rights to ask *why* they've chosen to believe or disbelieve something because their agency implies the faculty of constructing their thoughts around rational processes. These processes require each individual to actualize themselves as full epistemic agents by executing their epistemic *will*.¹¹ Platform Injustice's manipulation of the speaker's locution and the listener's reception warps the nature of an agent's speech-act and thus subverts their epistemic *will*. The

¹¹ Onora O'Neill, "Vindicating Reason," *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, 1992, pp. 280-308, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521365872.010>.

speech-act loses its locutionary power and becomes swept up in the epistemic *will* of the agent that controls the system in which the discourse is occurring.¹²

Platform injustice wasn't analyzed in Dotson's typology because it refers to a more deeply-embedded and not purely epistemic kind of injustice. The material capability to shape and influence a system of discourse has only existed to a relevant degree for a decade. As more and more discourse shifts online, the implications of epistemic injustices being rooted in material power imbalances will become more and more important.

Conclusion: The Disposition of Platform Justice

The material roots of this form of injustice provide a launching point for a discussion of what *platform justice* in the face of *platform injustice* might look like. Dotson's order-of-change model advocates for a third-order response, which entails "an awareness of a range of differing sets of hermeneutical resources in order to be capable of shifting resources appropriately."¹³ The inculcation of this virtue will allow an epistemic agent to *see* contributory injustices in real-time and deploy the correct epistemic resources to solve the problem. These virtues are powerful tools for addressing epistemic injustice. But they're epistemic solutions for epistemic problems.

While the epistemic dimension is essential to understanding its harm, *Platform Injustice* is as much a material injustice as it is an epistemic one. Our discussion of platform injustice brought a cognizance of the underlying material structure that defines discursive and epistemic relations. Addressing platform injustice will require a similar recognition of the underlying material structures that enable platform injustice.

The injustice propagated through platform injustice is rooted in power imbalances that are embedded in the network architecture and regulatory structure of a platform. DMCs build platforms that are fundamentally hierarchical, where the agent in control of the platform acts with the trappings of government but forgoes the burdens that come with that power.¹⁴ In the last five years, these authoritarian models for platform management have been challenged by the decentralized

¹² Matthew Congdon, "'Knower' as an Ethical Concept: From Epistemic Agency to Mutual Recognition," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2018.4.6228>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brian Leiter, "The Epistemology of the Internet and the Regulation of Speech in America," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3939948>.

revolution. Companies like Mastodon, Minds, and Aether have sought to build fully decentralized digital media networks that remove the possibility of any centralized regulatory power.¹⁵ However, these firms carry a radical, 17th-century libertarian ethos that's prevented them from engaging with a four-hundred-year history of governance and free-speech scholarship. Their myopic protection of free-speech has turned their platforms into refuges for toxic discourse and political radicals who've been banned from other platforms.

Devising a new model for digital media governance will require both the liberal tradition of protecting individual rights to speech and action, while *also* remaining attentive to the democratic tradition of striving for the collective good and protecting marginalized voices. Only the development of a political philosophy of social media can solve these injustices. Not stopgap legislation that swings too far in either direction, but an ongoing and iterative internal code of political and epistemic ethics that guides the platform's structure away from injustice.

In our rapidly changing digital world, tomorrow's philosophers and computer scientists will face their biggest challenge in keeping the balance — between material and epistemic interests; between platform makers and platform users; between authoritarian and libertarian regulatory ideologies; and between profit and justice.

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¹⁵ SOPA, "What You Need to Know about Decentralized Social Networks," Decentralized Social Networks: What You Need to Know., accessed March 9, 2022, <https://sopa.tulane.edu/blog/decentralized-social-networks>.

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