

Frameless Folk Psychology: Social Cognition and How Online Context Collapse Nudges Hostility and Epistemic Injustice

Aggression, hostility, polarisation and interpersonal injustice are widespread concerns when it comes to mainstream social media and their impact on individuals and society. However, little research has been dedicated specifically to how online hostility and various forms of everyday online aggression arise in the first place. I will propose that some design choices of mainstream social media distort some basic capacities for understanding other people, and encourage their users to downplay and discredit the moral and epistemic competence of others.

I will firstly analyse one design feature of mainstream social media that distorts the experience and understanding of other people's opinions. Specifically, in online environments, the audience (and possible consumers) of user-generated information is undetermined: the content producer does not know who is going to consume their content. When what you post can be seen by different social groups, each with different expectations, your generated content can be interpreted in an imprecise or distorted way. This is because the different consumers of information have different expectations of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. This design choice is known as *context collapse*. Importantly, context collapse can be seen as an intentional design feature of mainstream social media platforms that is instrumental for profiling and data gathering practices, i.e. the primary source of income for the service provider.

I will, secondly, refer to the theory of social cognition known as *mindshaping*, or regulative view of folk psychology: this theory sees the understanding of other people's minds as intrinsically reliant on context-dependent norms. While these norms underlie different instances and circumstances of social interaction, they additionally support the understanding of other people's mental states and behaviour. Furthermore, the sensitivity to the situated social context and the perception of other people as embodied agents are essential for everyday face-to-face interaction and mutual understanding. Conformity to these situated and contextual norms also supports the perception of other people as interpretable, as well as epistemically and morally competent agents.

Finally, I will point out that mainstream social media, due to context collapse, lack shared and mutually recognisable norms of interaction and communication, which characterise face-to-face interaction. I argue that, for this reason and for the hyper-individualised focus of these platforms' interface, social media users are encouraged to enforce their own standards for (in)appropriate, (im)moral and (ir)rational behaviour, and to frame others' behaviour through their own normative frame. On the one hand, I will argue that aggression and hostility online arise due to the lack of communal grounds for functional interaction and mutual understanding. On the other hand, I will argue that the choice architecture of mainstream social media systematically nudges epistemic injustice. Due to context collapse and the platform's emphasis on the user's own values and beliefs, its design choices encourage the over-imposition of one's own normative expectations and standards, and the ignorance or discredit of other people's backgrounds and reasons.

I will conclude by arguing for the need for a normative framework shared by social media users to avoid epistemic injustice and minimise the risks of ungrounded aggression, and reflect not only on what kinds of implementations could be helpful in this regard, but also in what manners they can be somewhat reconciled with the platform's designers interests.