

## The Internet as an epistemic agent (EA)

The Internet is a pro-active, dynamic epistemic agent. The term epistemic agency (EA) is most commonly used to denote an ability to choose, reflect on, and freely form beliefs (e.g., Elgin 2013, Olson 2015, Puzzo 2015). Epistemic agency may also refer to a passive or active capacity (of a system, organization, artifact, or person) to impact or influence someone else's doxastic position (see e.g., Schlosser 2019). The Internet therefore has epistemic agency in the sense of influencing our beliefs, views, and choices (e.g., Wylie 2019, Zuboff 2019).

Our own epistemic agency is founded on free access to information and a set of critical reasoning skills, namely our reasoning and judgment faculties. While the existence of our epistemic agency is often denied and trivialized (e.g., Kornblith 2012, Ahlstrom-Vij 2013, Puzzo 2015), it serves a critical function for us as the foundation for our knowledge about the world. Poor knowledge leads to poor decisions and life choices. While it is true that our beliefs are to a large degree shaped by our schools, parents, society, culture, the media, and churches and their ministers, we have developed critical faculties to evaluate these agencies and gained some understanding of their role and *modus operandi* as epistemic agents. Indeed, the precise function of epistemic agency is to reflectively engage with the world. The extent to which we care to do it, rather than just passively internalize external messages, is a separate question.

The Internet can be understood as a technological complex for transferring, harvesting, analyzing, and manipulating data and users' experiences, and this is a new epistemic agency. With it permeating even the most intimate aspects of our lives (e.g., Wylie 2019, Zuboff 2019), we urgently need to affirm its epistemic role. Indeed, the Internet's epistemic purpose is not to foster our wellbeing but rather to instill in us someone else's values and beliefs (e.g., Kaiser 2019, Wylie 2019), all with the sole purpose of making us less critical, more obedient, less reflective, and more susceptible to external persuasion. In fact, the Internet as an epistemic agent attempts to dissolve our doxastic attitudes and substitute them with artificially created ones. Once we are deprived of our own epistemic capacities, the Internet can control our choices, decisions, views, and beliefs in ways we do not realize. There are ample examples of this (e.g., Mineo 2017, Kaiser 2019, Wylie 2019, Zuboff 2019). The mechanisms the Internet uses for its epistemic agency are nothing short of brainwashing, with devices like perspecticide, echo chambers, filtering, personalization, astroturfing, fake news, deep fakes, and cognitive hacking, to name but a few. The scale of these activities and their destructive effects on society are difficult to fathom for a non-technical person (e.g., Gibbs 2014, King et al. 2017, Kaiser 2019, Wylie 2019), which includes most of the public. So, here are a few takeaways from this discussion: (a) Large-scale mind control is nothing new, but the Internet has upped the ante to an unprecedented degree. (b) Our epistemic agency is at the foundation of our autonomy and freedom, and we cannot afford to lose it. (c) Protecting our epistemic agency should be guaranteed in law, as it is the *sine qua non* for preserving democratic societies.

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