

Book Review

# Fakers, Tricksters and Lurkers: Review of Karen Frost-Arnold's *Who Should We Be Online?*

*Who Should We Be Online: A Social Epistemology for the Internet*, by Karen Frost-Arnold, Oxford University Press (2023)  
ISBN: 9780190089184

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**Keywords:** epistemic injustice; epistemology; feminism; internet epistemology; objectivity; social epistemology; virtue epistemology

In *The Internet of Us*, Michael Lynch describes Google and similar online sources as a 'giant knowledge-through-testimony machine' (2016: 24). The image is apt because behind the information we access on the Internet are the voices of real people. They speak to us, report, opine, inform, misinform, persuade, and speculate; they tell jokes, stories, secrets, and lies. With online testimony mediated by technology and design decisions, as well as by the business logic of digital and platform capitalism, the Internet constitutes a complex socio-political, ethical, and epistemic web of knowledge, misinformation, reportage, and deceit. Against this background, Karen Frost-Arnold's *Who Should We Be Online: A Social Epistemology for the Internet* stands out as a timely contribution.

Frost-Arnold takes very seriously the idea that our online epistemic practices are shaped by the behaviors, intentions and, crucially, the virtues and vices of the people, corporations, and technologies behind the content we consume and create. She introduces the reader to some of the Internet's central characters: moderators, imposters, tricksters, fakers, and lurkers. In setting out their roles, motives, and the injustices that they suffer or perpetrate, she provides an accessible, interdisciplinary, social epistemology of the Internet. This is applied in careful analyses of online content moderation, online self-presentation, fake news, and 'lurking' (the practice of loitering in, but not contributing to, online public spaces). Chapter 1 introduces the feminist social epistemological framework employed throughout; chapters 2-5 present the main analyses; chapter 6 concludes. An appendix devoted to internet research ethics is a valuable addition. Below I give a very brief overview of some points of interest from each main chapter.

**The Framework.** There are six pillars of Frost-Arnold's framework. The *situated knowledge thesis* maintains that knowledge is shaped by the social location of knowers (6). Frost-Arnold rejects traditional "S-knows-that-p" epistemologies, which conceal communal aspects of knowledge production and exchange, in favour of a social epistemology. Yet following Charles Mills (2007) she holds that social epistemology too often ignores issues of race, gender, socio-economic status, history, and the like. Frost-Arnold's *feminist account of objectivity*, grounded in feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory, calls on a discursive, critical approach incorporating the standpoints of oppressed and marginalised groups. She adopts a *veritistic systems-oriented social*

**Citation:** Rebera, Andrew P., 2023.

Fakers, Tricksters and Lurkers:  
Review of Karen Frost-Arnold's *Who  
Should We Be Online?* *Journal of Ethics  
and Emerging Technologies* 33: 1.  
<https://doi.org/10.55613/4p0txk45>

Received: 01/11/2023

Accepted: 01/11/2023

Published: 02/11/2023

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*epistemology* on which ‘the fundamental epistemic good is true belief’ (12). The role of epistemic systems in the creation and distribution of true beliefs in a community is recognised to be ‘deeply political’ (14). But if knowledge is deeply political then no less is its absence. Accordingly, Frost-Arnold draws on *epistemologies of ignorance* to demonstrate ‘the role of power and privilege in shaping ignorance at the individual and social level’ (16). *Virtue epistemology* is a natural fit with Frost-Arnold’s social epistemology. She appeals frequently to the potential role of the epistemic virtues in reforming online epistemic practices and, particularly, in responding to the various forms of online *epistemic injustice*.

**Moderators.** Chapter two addresses the role of social media moderators. The social media posts of members of marginalised groups are disproportionately flagged as problematic when they are mistakenly judged to constitute racist, sexist, or otherwise objectionable speech (38). Frost-Arnold argues that greater sensitivity to the position of such users—a little more testimonial and hermeneutical justice (Fricker 2007)—would go some way toward remedying these injustices (36-37). Fundamentally, however, it is the labour model under which moderators are engaged that most thoroughly undermines their ability to enact the epistemic virtues. They often ‘work under low-wage, subcontracted, fast-paced, assembly-line conditions that expose them to extremely disturbing and potentially traumatizing content’ (30). Hermeneutical failures are thus not due solely to moderators but to the ‘flawed interpretive culture’ (47) in which they operate.

Frost-Arnold argues that moderators are subject to a novel form of epistemic injustice, “epistemic dumping”, which occurs when a group is ‘disproportionately charged with the handling of the toxic trash of epistemic communities’ (64). “Epistemic trash” is the unwanted epistemic products of a community (false beliefs, misinterpretations, etc.); “toxic epistemic trash” is trash that tends to cause practical or moral harm (e.g. racist beliefs). Moderators are subject to epistemic dumping, according to Frost-Arnold, because they are disproportionately charged with handling toxic epistemic trash. However, it cannot be that the group “online content moderators” is disproportionately called upon to handle toxic epistemic trash: handling toxic epistemic trash is precisely their role. But if we highlight a subgroup of moderators, such as “socio-economically disadvantaged residents of the global South”, then the analysis is incomplete: epistemic dumping captures the harm done to members of the subgroup, but not the harm done to other moderators.<sup>1</sup>

**Imposters and Tricksters.** In 2011, the blog *A Gay Girl in Damascus* gained much attention reporting the life of Amina, an openly lesbian Syrian-American in Damascus during the Syrian uprising. It later emerged that the blog was not written by Amina but by Tom MacMaster, a white American man. *Imposters* such as MacMaster exploit an inconsistency between their offline and online personas (83). Their deception is *epistemically vicious* because it ‘entrenches or promotes oppressive, exclusionary networks of trust’ (99). MacMaster undermined trust by ‘taking space away from marginalized voices’, ‘promoting stereotypes that decrease trust in the oppressed’, and ‘undermin[ing] confidence in the social practices that generate objectivity and truth’ (77).

*Tricksters* also exploit expectations around authenticity in self-presentation but, unlike fakers, they pursue virtuous goals. In 2004 a group called the *Yes Men* posed as representatives of Dow Chemical, which now owns the company responsible for the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster. Securing an interview on the BBC, they “announced” that Dow would spend 12 billion dollars compensating victims. In Frost-Arnold’s assessment, the *Yes Men*’s deception highlighted Dow’s failure to take responsibility for their actions

<sup>1</sup> Epistemic dumping is a better fit for another of Frost-Arnold’s examples, namely marginalised members of academic faculties who are disproportionately called upon to deal with the fallout from problematic speech on campus (61).

despite there being obvious and viable means of so doing (103). Deception of this kind is *epistemically virtuous* because it ‘undermines exclusionary practices and/or expands trust networks to involve the oppressed’ (99).

Frost-Arnold distinguishes imposters and tricksters primarily in terms of the impacts of their deception. But imagine a scenario in which someone—call him SchmacMaster—develops a blog which shines a light on the plight of LGBTQ people in the Middle East, inspires them to tell their stories in empowering and safe ways, and alerts the world to their situation; imagine, further, that the deception is never revealed. SchmacMaster seems to count as a trickster rather than an imposter on Frost-Arnold’s view as stated. And this suggests that, had MacMaster’s deception been undetected, perhaps he too could have been counted a trickster. But what MacMaster did was epistemically and ethically problematic regardless of whether his deception was uncovered. This suggests that Frost-Arnold’s account is, to some degree, incomplete. There is no doubt that the Yes Men highlight important issues, nor that MacMaster’s ‘arrogant act of privilege’ (111) did serious harm. But I wonder whether Frost-Arnold’s account, for all its other virtues, captures precisely what was wrong in the actions of MacMaster or right in those of the Yes Men.

**Fakers and Fake News.** The literature on fake news is considerable, yet Frost-Arnold covers a lot of ground in an illuminating manner. The chapter begins with a discussion of the definition of “fake news” and the reasons people are susceptible to it. Drawing again on Mills, Frost-Arnold argues convincingly that many insights about fake news are inaccessible to the kind of “*S*-knows-that-*p*” epistemology that ‘abstracts away from the race of the various *S*’s ... and the often-racist content of the *p*’s’ (146). She denounces mis-readings of feminist epistemology which have, on her view, held back a productive understanding of the problem, sidelining accounts of objectivity which could have enabled better understandings of bias and how to manage it (147). The prospects of Frost-Arnold’s preferred approach are illustrated through consideration of how Facebook might have better managed the curation of news stories pushed on their “Trending topics” tool. There is scope for picking over the details of the case but, stepping back only a little, Frost-Arnold’s central claim, that ‘social epistemology has much to contribute to the ongoing analysis of the fake news problem’ (162), is highly credible.

**Lurkers.** Lurking involves ‘regularly reading online communications of an online community without participating in the conversations oneself’ (166). Frost-Arnold maintains that it is ‘a complex epistemic activity’ (165) in that how, when, and why one goes about lurking bears on its epistemic impact and value, while also being shaped by technology design choices and corporate logic (198-199).

Lurking is loaded with questions of power and privilege in which questions of race, gender, and the like are ever-present. It offers ‘a powerful opportunity for privileged people to unlearn their ignorance’ (165) in ways that place as little epistemic burden on the minorities from whom they learn as possible (170-171); it can counter the effects of echo chambers and polarisation (167); it can enable observation of groups it would be dangerous to openly join (e.g. white supremacists). But lurking can also be oppressive, voyeuristic, and invasive; a means by which the privileged insulate themselves from criticism and critical engagement (177-178) and, albeit unintentionally, by which they may end up treating those they observe as (mere) objects for study or tools for learning (174-175).

Not all ignorance can be unlearned through lurking: sometimes engagement is indispensable (177). This must be done sensitively to avoid “ontological expansiveness” (Sullivan 2006), a privileged expectation of access to public spaces, of the right to participate freely and focus on one’s own interests (166). Even epistemic allies—well-intentioned members of a privileged group actively seeking to overcome their privilege—can cause harm by speaking in the place of the oppressed or by falsely supposing that

imaginative engagement with what it must (they suppose) be like to live the life of the oppressed group is an accurate alternative to authentic testimony (172-174). In response Frost-Arnold proposes a virtue epistemology of lurking. Virtuous lurkers look out for signs that they are not welcome, or that the space is otherwise not for them (175). They will be trustworthy, intellectually courageous, open-minded, curious, inquisitive but humble (184-188).

Frost-Arnold's overall goal is, in one sense, rather modest. She aims to show that her framework sheds valuable light on practices of online knowledge production and exchange. This goal is, in my view, convincingly achieved. The book functions successfully as both an introduction to—and demonstration of—her feminist social epistemology and as an insightful analysis of the key issues that are addressed. From another perspective, the book is rather ambitious, aiming to 'broaden the scope of social epistemology' (3) by bringing it into dialogue with disciplines dealing with race, gender, politics, media, technology, and capitalism. Success in this goal is more difficult to judge. But Frost-Arnold does indeed draw illuminatingly on work from several fields and does, in my view, demonstrate that 'broad, socially engaged interdisciplinary scholarship in social epistemology of the internet' (119) has a lot to offer. Indeed, the book as a whole has a lot to offer to a lot of audiences from epistemologists and philosophers of technology to scholars of the Internet more generally.

**Author Contributions:** n/a

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** n/a

**Informed Consent Statement:** n/a

**Data Availability Statement:** n/a

**Acknowledgments:** n/a

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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