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Postdigital Dupery and Its Epistemic Vices

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Introduction

Alison MacKenzie is a Reader in the School of Social Sciences Education and Social Work at Queen's University, Belfast. Her background is in philosophy of education and her research interests include how injustice and inequality are reproduced through and sustained by forms of ignorance, testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, lack of access to important capitals such as linguistic capital, and by the ways in which ordinary vices are often overlooked as important sources of injustice: close mindedness, cruelty, misogyny, and hypocrisy.

Jennifer Rose completed her PhD in philosophy of education. She is the author of the book, *Unjust Epistemological Structures in Testimony: Voice, Higher Education, & the Decolonization of Epistemic Injustice* (Rose 2022), and the article, 'To Believe or Not to Believe: an Epistemic Exploration of Fake News, Truth, and the Limits of Knowing' (Rose 2020). Her research lies at the intersections of epistemology and psychology, including how structural and lay epistemologies and vices/virtues (epistemic-psychology) impact on social understanding, social inequalities, and mental wellbeing.

Ibrar Bhatt is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences Education and Social Work at Queen's University, Belfast. His research is at the intersection of applied linguistics and higher education. He has active interests in the study of writing and literacy as a social practice, and contemporary digital literacy and epistemology. Together with Alison, Ibrar wrote an article called: 'Just Google it! Digital literacy and the epistemology of ignorance' (Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019).

Sarah Hayes is Professor in Higher Education Policy within the Education Observatory at University of Wolverhampton. Sarah's research spans sociology, education, policy, technological and social change. Her recent books include *The Labour of Words in Higher Education: Is it Time to Reoccupy Policy?* (2019) and *Postdigital Positionality: Developing Powerful Inclusive Narratives for Learning, Teaching, Research and Policy in Higher Education* (2021). Sarah is an Associate Editor for *Postdigital Science and Education*.

About the Conversation

In early 2020 Alison MacKenzie and Ibrar Bhatt guest edited the Special Issue of *Postdigital Science and Education*, 'Lies, Bullshit and Fake News Online: Should We Be Worried?' (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2020), and in early 2021, Alison MacKenzie, Jennifer Rose, and Ibrar Bhatt published their edited book, *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b), in *Postdigital Science and Education* book series¹. To continue this important work, Sarah Hayes emailed Alison, Jennifer, and Ibrar

¹ See <https://www.springer.com/series/16439>. Accessed 20 July 2022.

to arrange this conversation. Alison and Ibrar met with Sarah online in May 2021 and talked for two hours, with Jennifer providing her insights via email, to be blended into the dialogue.

From Special Issue to Edited Collection

Sarah Hayes (SH): Thank you for inviting me to read *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b). Can you tell me a little about the inspiration behind the book, how you came to edit it together, and share a little background on its very interesting title?

Alison MacKenzie (AM): Ibrar and I had worked together on the first collaboration, ‘Just Google it! Digital literacy and the epistemology of ignorance’ (Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019). Ibrar had some money for doing this wee project, so he collected the data and I threw some theory at it. We were presenting the paper in Edinburgh (2018) and that’s when we met Petar Jandrić, who encouraged us to co-edit the Special Issue in *Postdigital Science and Education*, ‘Lies, Bullshit and Fake News Online: Should We Be Worried’ (MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020). After completing the Special Issue, we decided to continue our work with an edited book. Jennifer was my PhD student, so I invited her to be a co-editor to give her some experience in this area.

Jennifer Rose (JR): Deception was the topic of choice because it was broader than issues of lying, bullshit, and fake news, though it encompasses them. Deception is pertinent to my own research because if someone does not tell the truth, the hearers do not acquire knowledge, a true belief, or understanding. Deception is common throughout online environments or even generally in our human condition, so explicating deception is important. The idea did not stop at deception. It also included the idea of the postdigital and explored deception as it relates to technology and the blurred disciplinary lines that are usually demarcated in research.

After some thinking about what deception is, which includes intimate relations with truth as we cannot deceive unless there is a perception of and certainty about belief in a truth by which to deceive hearers, and its relation to technology (a constructed material artefact), the relationships between deception and the postdigital were conceptualized. But there is still another dimension, the epistemic dimension that relates to truth, belief, and justification for one’s belief.

An epistemology of deceit in a postdigital era then encompasses the relations between beliefs, truth, justification, and technology, the culturally designed and constructed material artefacts. After I reviewed existing texts about deception in online environments, it was clear that this is an emerging and a very important area of research as it relates to populations’ beliefs.

Duping people in online environments and through technology is not just about mere epistemic description of the toxicity that occurs. Why do we tend to believe certain texts over others? Or certain people over others? Or sources of information? How do our worldwide, national, or regional structures manifest in the design of technology that aids believability so that deception is achieved? The ‘dupery by design’ captures the nature of how technology is designed to aid deception, while the epistemic dimension captures the truth, belief, and justification. From this process, the title emerged.

SH: How did you come across the concept of postdigital (Jandrić et al. 2018)? Had you been working with that idea, or was this something that you and Petar had begun to talk about in that first encounter?

Ibrar Bhatt (IB): Jeremy Knox asked me to join the editorial board of *Postdigital Science and Education*, so I was aware of the concept, but I hadn’t engaged with it properly. I liked the idea of going beyond the ‘digital’ both conceptually and practically. My background is in literacy. I felt that a postdigital view of linguistics has a lot of potential because practices of language and literacy are neither always digital or analog; they transcend that dichotomy.

My first monograph, *Assignments as controversies: A study of digital literacy and writing in classroom practice* (Bhatt 2017), was on how students write their assignments aided by digital and non-digital practices of literacy. The book has a chapter called 'Curation' (see also Khan and Bhatt 2019), where I talk about how students discern the quality of information, how they select information, how they decide what to put in their work, and how they make judgments of credibility. When all this fake news started to come out in the news, I said to Alison that I wanted to revisit the issues I had written about, and to speak to these current debates with different conceptual tools. She said, 'well, you could look at the epistemology of ignorance'.

We put that together in the paper 'Just Google it! Digital literacy and the epistemology of ignorance' (Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019), and it worked well. A lot of the fake news debate focuses on the fakeness of the news. It doesn't focus on how the individual user of technology makes judgments about the thing that they're encountering online, and we decided to explore that angle.

JR: When I started collaborating with *Postdigital Science and Education*, I was new to the concept of the 'postdigital', but not new to the idea of cross-disciplinary studies. In terms of the concept as it relates to deception, I do not see postdigital analysis of deception as limited to daily interactions between humans. The motivations to deceive and the epistemics inherent in deceptive discourse or visual manipulation are epistemological, structural, historical, social, and technological. I take the perspective that dissecting postdigital deception is a matter of explicating the epistemics involved in deception and their relationships with ecologies of knowledge of the past and present, and the knowledge ecologies that technology has engendered. This includes the idea of the postdigital, social ecologies, and the often inert, invisible structures we live by that are webbed throughout our interconnectedness with our environment, other species, as well as each other.

This area of research is highly complex, but all these ideas are interrelated with the idea of postdigital deception. We can think of present day postdigital deception as potential research ecologies that explicate the interconnectedness and relationships of how our world works.

SH: You first edited a Special Issue and then you continued with an edited book. What are the main differences between the two genres?

IB: *Postdigital Science and Education* is far more interdisciplinary than other journals, yet journals are, nevertheless, limited in that they are tied to particular communities and disciplines. I felt that we had more freedom with an edited book than a Special Issue. We could therefore have a wider discussion.

Edited chapters are not valued as much as journal articles within many parts of UK academia, partly because of a particular interpretation of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which, for some, tends to prefer journal articles². Yet I think that we can tell a better story through an edited book. We can be more interdisciplinary.

AM: One of the things I have really enjoyed about *Postdigital Science and Education* is the fact that it's a very open-minded journal. Provided that the work makes reference to the (post)digital in some way, and for as long as the work is stimulating, intellectual, thoughtful, thought provoking, and challenging, it's as if almost anything can go, and I don't mean this in a disparaging way at all!

Concepts such as lies, deceit, fake news online, and so on, belong to a family of speech acts that come under deceit. Because of the complexities of human language, thought processes, and interaction, we are very adept at coming up with multiple ways of being

² See *Postdigital Science and Education*, 3(1), which is a Special Issue on 'Measuring Excellence' in Higher Education, edited by Sarah Hayes. <https://link.springer.com/journal/42438/volumes-and-issues>. Accessed 20 July 2022.

deceitful. Lies are one way of being deceitful, bullshit is another... In *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b) we looked at all of that together philosophically, epistemically, ontologically, and we looked at how that's played out online.

Edited books are given a hard time because of the impression that they are not peer reviewed enough. In our case, the peer review process for the Special Issue and the book was exactly the same. For the peer review, we always had in mind that we would create a community. The contributors who constructively work with others produce a good piece of work. This enables us, the editors, to bring it together in a nice, satisfying whole, that has its distinct parts, but which are, nevertheless, connected to each other. We had a very good editor in Petar, who allowed us to do that.

SH: Your point about community development, I think, is really valuable. I believe this is what Petar would be hoping to see in the *Postdigital Science and Education* journal and book series.

AM: Another thing that I really like is the genuine communication and support between those who write. It feels like a community of thinkers trying to understand things afresh and with a desire not to isolate, alienate, marginalize or individualize.

SH: That's really hard to bring into any REF submission in its current format!

Epistemic Vices and Freedom of Speech

SH: Let's move on to *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b) – starting, perhaps, from epistemic injustice.

AM: Epistemic injustice is a theory developed primarily by Miranda Fricker (2007). Teaching epistemic injustice, I became interested in epistemologies of ignorance, deceit, justice, and the ways in which the quotidian, in person-to-person interactions, either inflate the credibility of the person because of their standing, accent, dress, position, colour, or deflate it for those same reasons.

Within sociology we don't pay much attention to epistemic injustice because we tend to focus on the systemic injustices. The trinity of sociology is race, gender, and ethnicity. But it all starts with the interactions between two individuals, for example, educator and student. Those are very mundane and in themselves can be either the very embodiment or carry the embodiment of systemic injustice.

IB: The focus on the mundane is one of the priorities of literacy studies, the area of my work. Instead of looking at literacy as a top-down thing that you either have or you do not have, we look at literacy as a social practice, and focus on the quotidian and the everyday. When we look at it like that, people engage in a multitude of different kinds of *literacies*.

When I was at the beginning of my career, teaching people who were regarded by educational definition as 'illiterate', I found that many of my students were doing very complex and sophisticated things on the Internet, like buying and selling things on eBay and sorting out each other's visa applications. These complex and sophisticated acts of literacy were part of their everyday social life but were not factored into an educational measurement of their literacy skills. So the mundane plays an important role in my work from a social literacy perspective.

SH: This links very interestingly to Alison's point.

AM: Part of digital literacy is associated with how you know you can trust what you see online, and the chain of events that take you back to where you know the information comes from. Who is this individual? What is the organization that they represent? Why might they be presenting this view in this particular way? It comes back to questions of truth, truthfulness, sincerity, integrity, trust, and the ways in which those issues can play out online. It can be difficult to make those kinds of judgments because in some cases it requires a degree of

knowledge, experience, and expertise; perhaps long exposure to the topics that are being discussed.

All these complex things come into play when we assess whether we can trust what we're seeing. What do we really want to know, and why? And what are we going to do with the information once we have it? What is the purpose? What is the intention behind what we are doing? It's really complex.

SH: And it seems to snowball in different directions. You might also ask, is this a place in which I can even speak? Is this a forum where I can speak?

AM: And who gets to speak? Who's given permission to speak? How loudly can they speak and how far can they go before they're actively discouraged?

IB: As you say, Sarah, it snowballs into different areas and that's one of the reasons why we need to take a transdisciplinary approach. Postdigital theory allows us to have that thread all the way through different interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary contributions to the book.

Take, for example, human-to-human communication. Traditional linguistic theory is based on the human-to-human sender-receiver model, from my mouth to your ears to your brain and your mouth. However, online communication is not from sender to receiver. It's from sender to the infrastructural logics of a platform, including algorithms and many other data points, and then to receiver.

There are multiple factors at play, digital and non-digital, in how communication is carried out online. And then you have the discursive features of deceit and trust. Often, it is a kind of story or narrative that has an appeal to emotions and prior beliefs. Looking at digital literacy, we wanted to get away from this techno-centric view.

SH: In the early days of digital we used to separate out the digital and the analog, in phrases such as e-learning. But the postdigital perspective deeply challenges this view, insisting on radical equality between the two (Jandrić et al. 2018; Jandrić, MacKenzie, and Knox 2022).

AM: Speaking of richness and fluidity, I find Maggi Savin-Baden's *Postdigital Humans* (2021) fascinating (see Savin-Baden and MacKenzie 2021 for our conversation on the topic). Digital afterlife, immortality, cemeteries... I had never considered those ideas before, and their relationships with religious practice or grief.

SH: Technologies and humans are clearly implicated in epistemic vices you're writing about. What about organizational structures such as universities, companies, and so on?

IB: That depends on the organisations. Media organizations are involved because they are part of the ecosystem of information. Many journalists are on Twitter; they are sharing a platform with the hyper-partisan, non-mainstream news outlets and sometimes they have to compete. Sometimes they get things wrong and they follow up with an apology. But the initial tweet has already gone out! One of the first papers on fake news (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018) was about how fast fake news spreads. Often the true versions of that fake news always spread a lot slower and they don't reach as many people.

Organizations like universities are involved in activities such as marketing for internationalization and there's a lot of bullshit involved in marketing. For instance, our own university uses academics to promote itself. I think that our university is a good place and I'm happy to promote it, but I won't promote it using bullshit phrases like 'according to Instagram, Belfast is the safest place in the UK' which I was once asked to repeat. 'According to Instagram'? Alison and I had just written a paper on lies, bullshit, and fake news and they wanted me to go up to people and say, 'according to Instagram'? If my students referenced something as 'according to Instagram' in an essay, it would be unacceptable!

SH: This kind of language also makes its way into policy. For a long time I have criticised phrases like 'the student experience' because what is that? (see Hayes and Jandrić 2018; Jandrić and Hayes 2018). How can that be anything? 'Best practice' was another phrase

that got me very angry. Who is 'best practice' to say something? Whose 'best practice' was that? (see Hayes and Jandrić 2014). That sort of almost viral-like contagion (Peters, McLaren, and Jandrić 2020; Peters, Jandrić, and McLaren 2020) can cut across different university departments in strange ways that cause us to use language that actually is nonsense.

You refer to a postdigital era, and the entanglement of digitality in our everyday actions and interactions. How far should we take this idea of a postdigital analysis of fake news? Does it stop at language, images, forms of manipulation, or is it broader?

IB: Images play an important role in dissemination of all information. Linguists like Philip Seargeant, and others who write about conspiracy theories, have written on this. There is a far-right activist who was asked about how he began his movement and he said: 'I memed it into existence!'

AM: I think that one of the things that we haven't discussed enough, in terms of our own work at least, is the role of emotions. I don't mean descriptions such as, 'I felt anger when I saw this'. What do we mean by anger? What are its constituent elements? What are its features? What is its value contained within the response? You don't get angry at everything; you get angry at certain things, and that is a reflection of your beliefs, values, dispositions, and life experiences. Why do we react the way we do to things online? Why do certain things get amplified, and spread as quickly as they do?

We could do a simple analysis by looking at anger and fear. For instance, what did the Brexit-related lies, deceit, distortion, and manipulation, rest on? A lot of it rested on fear: fear at loss of identity, fear of being absorbed by the European Union, fear of loss of Empire and status of the past... And then there is anger at anything that seems to undermine whatever constitutes British identity.

SH: And what about the value of such utterances? Each act of speech online is treated as having a similar relative truth value, regardless of whether it comes from an expert in a related field of knowledge, or just anyone who stumbles into an online discussion and adds an opinion. Is it a good or a bad thing?

JR: To have a right such as free speech, there ought to be an equal obligation for being as responsible as one can be for what is expressed. I word this phrase carefully because epistemologies are a complex mixture of lay and structural epistemologies. This raises questions about the degree to which we are responsible for being indoctrinated with structural epistemologies or for developing our lay epistemologies. Can we be held accountable to adequately justify our beliefs before expressing them? What would adequate justification look like?

If structural epistemologies are part of the problem, we cannot rely on them as part of the justification. We cannot necessarily rely on group collaboration as dominant groups (who are larger in numbers and may share similar epistemologies) can reach conclusions that perpetuate domination and exclusion of others' voices. These are thorny philosophical questions with no easy answer; however, in consideration of dupery by design, unfettered free speech is problematic, and fettered free speech impinges on rights. The historical notion of free speech seems to be incomplete and examining our epistemic obligations as part and parcel to our free speech, we might be able to come closer to reducing the effects of unfettered free speech without impinging on people's rights.

AM: What are the boundaries of free speech, and who gets to decide who speaks? We need to acknowledge that truthfulness can sometimes be fiendishly difficult to assert, particularly when you are positioned differently in society because of your wealth, class, or ethnicity. A poor black person is going to experience the police quite differently from a wealthy white person. Their subjective experiences should not be discounted, but there has to be some way of mediating between their experiences. And the question that begs further questions is why they experience things in the way that they do?

I don't think that there's such a thing as absolute freedom of speech and I'm also concerned about the idea of unfettered freedom of speech. At what point do you say 'enough'? I don't know because it will depend on context. If a speech act is harmful, such as hate speech, antisemitic sentiment, Islamophobia, homophobia, misogyny, sexism, etc., then we have to set some boundaries if they lead to injury, harassment, threats of death.

SH: Boundaries are notoriously difficult to set... What happens when they start to impede the freedom of speech, as suggested by the theorists of 'therapeutic culture' such as Catherine Eccleston, Dennis Hayes, and Frank Furedi?

AM: I don't even know what a woke culture is. It seems to me that anybody who raises a legitimate concern or calls something out, is dismissed, undermined, discredited, and disparaged. Attaching those labels is a cheap and easy way to do these things. I'm very mindful of the ways in which we disparage certain speakers. Have people really become more offended? Or is this just a way of disparaging people who speak out and raise legitimate criticisms against dominant discourses?

IB: To some extent, the same argument can apply the other way. Those people who are accused of being offended easily are themselves often accusing and dismissing other people.

Every society has its no-go areas; things you can't talk about. It wasn't that long ago in this country that if you offended somebody's mother you got thumped in the face. The more diverse we have become, the more of these no-go areas there are. So the free speech argument is related to the diversity argument. Those arguing about an apparent lack of free speech are usually the same people who are also having trouble with the level of diversity in our society, because the two are related.

AM: That's a fair point, Ibrar. They don't have the freedom to say what they used to have the freedom to say. They're constrained and it frustrates them. Yet I also think that there are genuine concerns on the part of many people to get things right. How can I describe this individual? How can I describe these groups of people without misrepresenting, stereotyping, or offending them?

IB: We are in Belfast. I could go to West Belfast and say things that I would not be openly allowed to say in East Belfast. And I could go to East Belfast and say things that I could not openly say in West Belfast. And that's just two groups of the local white demographic, without even considering non-white ethnic diversity.

Put On the Mask, See the Real Person

SH: We're back to some of the postdigital aspects of this. What about the data and the data interaction around humans?

IB: There's been a lot of work in media literacies and we have talked about it to some extent in our paper (Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019) and related seminars. We tried not to repeat what had already been written, but one of the things mentioned was that participants in our research became more aware about their own epistemologies of ignorance and their own use of digital technology through our questions and through tracking and tracing their digital practices as part of the study. People would have an app that would give them data on how often they use certain apps and at what time of the day. They would see these analytics and say, 'Oh my God, I didn't know I spent that much time doing that!' So there was a process of reflection within the research process itself, which we didn't think about before the research, that allowed the participants to benefit from the research and they were able to reflect on it.

A lot of people use technology while on a kind of 'autopilot'. Technology companies exploit that and use people's attention in ways they don't understand. That's how we can be so easily duped and deceived. We began by engaging in a kind of reflection rather than talking about a set of skills. This itself can be a form of training for people to use technology and subsequently to be aware of such things.

SH: That's really helpful!

IB: The more people become aware, the more likely they are to use technologies more judiciously, but the more information people have, the less time they have to analytically check every single thing that they see. So, I think we will see people falling back on traditional actors of trust.

One of the participants in the research comes to mind. He was doing a degree in politics and economics. He opened a Twitter account to keep track of the news because it was related to his study and when the news feed got too much for him, because there's so much news out there, he cancelled the Twitter account and just relied on Guardian Online. We could argue that a student of politics should diversify their news sources, but then there's only so much time in the day to check news.

People have to make these types of judgements all the time. We need to teach our students to reflect on such judgements, as part of an educational process, and we need to make them aware of what they do not know or might not know, and how trust is being accorded in online practice.

JR: Being conscious about what data is collected, who collects it, and how it is used, can reduce the risk of being deceived. Rather than having surreptitious online avatars and algorithms that affect our epistemologies, having transparency and a say in what data is collected and how it is used, and by whom, will raise awareness with users and help hold platform owners accountable for breaches to users' say so.

AM: An important part of the problem, as we've discussed in one of the earlier papers (Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019), is the lack of time. But what's also at play is attention. We lack time and we're not attentive. We can be duped and deceived, and fall prey to illusions. This is how magic works: the magician distracts you while they're doing something in the periphery of your vision. The whole psychology of magic is to distract and disarm, so that the manipulator can come at you from a different side.

We are now beginning to learn about the platforms from people who have left tech companies. They realized early on that human attention is worth money; one of the reasons that they're so phenomenally successful is because of the addictive nature of the slide ups, the likes, etc.

On the one hand, they don't want us to be very attentive. Flick, flick, flick, flick, flick. On the other hand, they want to hold our attention in order to make money from us. One of the ways in which we can begin to mitigate some of the problems that we encounter with these online practices is to make people aware of how the platforms work, such as how we become addicted, why we like the likes so much, what's happening to our attention, and how our attention is being manipulated.

SH: I like the analogy with magic! Can you comment on how social media reveals the hazards of deceit? For example, how are epistemological questions linked to lies, manipulation, deceit, post-truth, and fake news, over social media?

AM: Well, I think it might go back to helping people be aware of what social media is. The platforms rely on our deep evolutionary need to connect to others. It is that very neediness that makes us vulnerable to manipulation. If we're to counter these effects, we need to be aware of our vulnerability and how it is exploited.

Those skilled at manipulating and abusing people prey on our sociability and our need for approbation, love, and connectedness. Understanding what it means to be the kind of people we are, as well as what these platforms are doing, equips people with more skills to question: Do I really need to do this? How do I know that this is truthful? How do I know that this is beneficial?

SH: Sometimes I know I'm being manipulated and I'm just going ahead and doing it anyway.

IB: A lot of people do irrational things, and their life is sometimes improved by those irrational things. For instance, people fall in love.

AM: Moral philosophy, stemming primarily from Kant, claims that because we have the power to reason, we are therefore rational. Of course, as psychology reveals, we are not always rational. I love a line from Montaigne, which we quote in our edited book (MacKenzie, Rose and Bhatt 2021), where he says that truth has one face while lies have a hundred thousand faces and an infinite field. With that conception of deceit in mind, you can see a thousand ways in which we fall prey to deceit.

SH: How do fake news and disinformation affect people's capacities to reason, evaluate, deliberate, and analyse information?

JR: There is evidence that people with a lower cognitive ability are more prone to believing fake news stories than those with higher cognitive ability (e.g., Murphy et al. 2019). However, it is not so much that exposure to fake news and disinformation can change people's brain capacity for *how* they might reason, evaluate, deliberate, or analyse information. The problem is that when people believe false or misleading information, their reasoning, evaluating, deliberating, and analysing produces false results because they are reasoning with false or misleading information.

AM: The best way to make good decisions is to make informed decisions on the best available evidence. Deceit subverts that and disables us from making informed decisions; that is one of the more significant harms of lies. So deceit subverts a person's will and makes them less agentic than they think they are. Morally and ethically, that is wrong.

SH: What are the new norms that technologies and social media platforms create in relation to discourse? In relation to the public sphere, power, inequality, humour?

IB: Sociology has always said that there's no such thing as a 'public sphere' in the strict sense of the word; there's just lots of cross-cutting social categories. That has become more evident through online practices. If you look at older propaganda models like Chomsky's manufacturing consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988), there are governments or leaders, and then there is the mass media industry that they use to spread their messages to the public. This linear top-down propaganda model is still in use. But there's also the breaking up of the public into lots of different publics, which results in alliances of people from completely different perspectives. Brexit, for example, resulted in large alliances consisting of all kinds of people from across the political spectrum.

This goes back to the idea of digital literacy as a social practice. If I gave you all the same smartphone and came back to you in a week, you would probably all exhibit different digital literacy practices because of your different backgrounds, hobbies, interests, networks, languages, etc. It goes back to examining user practice.

AM: I think the other norm is that we go nowhere without our phone. They are necessary for work, socializing, getting from one place to the other, stopping us from getting lonely. As a woman, if you're out and about on your own, and you don't want to draw attention to yourself, you use your phone as a form of protection.

SH: The uses are endless as well as the anxieties that go with the misplacing of the phone for even for a short period of time. How is language then infected or debased by the dupery or fake news? We mentioned earlier this idea of saying 'Instagram said it', but are there any other ways in which you know our language is changing, or in ways that might be alarming?

IB: Deceit can have discursive properties. It can look a certain way and it is goal oriented. Conspiracy theories are a form of storytelling; they have some features that we can examine and the visual media plays a really important role. There is not much room for nuance on social networks and visuality is one of the key vehicles of deceit. The visual mode is

particularly salient in examining how language, or semantic practices, are being laid out in online environments.

SH: Can you comment on relationships between dupery by design and democracy?

JR: Truth is sometimes said to have intrinsic value – meaning that it is always worthy, useful, or beneficial. However, as discussed in *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b: Chap 2), truth can be weaponized to build trust. If a politician polls citizens aiming to find out their truthful epistemic stances, and uses their stances to tell them what they want to hear so s/he can gain more support and votes, the truth has been weaponized. If truth can be weaponized, then it cannot have intrinsic value, because weaponization is not beneficial to those who are deceived. If we follow the law of non-contradiction, truth then cannot have intrinsic value.

This is not to say that truth is not valuable or that truth-telling should not be promoted. This merely means that while ‘truth’ is valuable, it is not necessarily intrinsically valuable. In this example, the truth was weaponized to manipulate a democratic decision-making process, which can build trust, and situate citizens to misplace trust, and therefore be deceived.

IB: I spoke to somebody online just two days ago. In a friendly discussion, I gave that person evidence of something, and he just said, ‘well, I don't agree with you’. And I said ‘it's not about agreement or disagreement. It's a fact.’ People think they can say what they want, so they do.

Back in 2006 Slavoj Žižek argued that one is more likely to be a desired version of themselves via their screen persona over their ‘real’ self: ‘Our social identity, the person we assume to be in our social intercourse, is already a “mask” that involves the repression of our inadmissible impulses.’ (Žižek 2006) Though this idea is very old, coming from Greek tragedies, I think, the argument that when we put the mask on, i.e. in an online interactive environment with a different or untraceable name and profile details, the rules regulating our ‘real life’ exchanges are temporarily suspended and we can permit ourselves to display our repressed attitudes that we cannot exhibit while, for example, engaging in banter by the water cooler at the office.

Take the proverbial impotent shy person who, while participating in a cyberspace interactive game, adopts the identity of an irresistible seducer or sadistic murderer. It is all too simple to say that this identity is just an imaginary escape from real-life impotence. The point is rather that, since he knows that the cyberspace interactive game is ‘just a game’, he can ‘show his true self’ and do things he would never have done in real-life interactions.

Put the mask on, and you'll see the real guy. Because you can never be sure who people really are, as the screen persona can be a mask for a multiplicity of desired personalities.

AM: This is a common question in moral philosophy. What is it like to be a moral person? If you knew that nobody was watching you, would you, for example, steal? I'd like to think that just because nobody's watching me, I wouldn't go ahead and do something that's bad or immoral or harmful. That might be my upbringing – I was brought up to believe that God is sitting on my shoulder and watching everything I'm doing.

IB: Religion, or some sort of metaphysical view of the world, plays an important part for many people. These beliefs have regulated people's behaviours for a long time.

What Comes Next?

SH: Let's make a wee thought experiment. If we lived in a different political economy, which is not neoliberal or capitalist, would these epistemic vices change?

AM: No, absolutely not. To change the mechanisms of deception, I think, you would have to change human psychology.

JR: The political economy is a monstrously influential force that motivates deception. There are many illustrative examples of deception throughout Western life that relate to

capitalism and neoliberalism. Few would disagree that many politicians lie for their own gain whether that be to accumulate cotton and polymers, gain voters support, or push through legal bills that are related to capitalistic agendas. Fake news creators aim to increase their wealth by creating clickbait through fake news stories, images, or videos. Many people will put on their dupery cloak while implicitly following ideals of performativity.

A changed political economy would help reduce some deception as well as social injustices and inequalities. However, in Western societies in particular, equalizing the political economy would not extinguish deception, inequality, and injustice. Our modern Western world fundamentally operates on historical hierarchical classifications about what constitutes different sorts of labour, genders, sexes, 'races', ethnicities, languages, aesthetics (what constitutes beauty), humanity (what kind of humans should we be), epistemologies (what is the best way of knowing), and commitments to *a* truth that creates an inertia to social change; consequently, all of these classifications perpetuate inequality and are potential sources of 'truth' which deceivers can use to deceive. For as long as our minds are connected to these historical idealistic, hierarchical classifications, they will likely continue to re-emerge in deceptive acts in new and changing forms that technological advancement engenders.

While the evidence is clear that the present capitalistic and neoliberal political economy is ineffective in alleviating inequalities, injustice, and deception, and requires changing, other social classifications that require remediating remain. As *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b) begins to illuminate, these historical classifications manifest and can be perpetuated and used in deception.

And how much are epistemic vices *only* connected to the political economy? I will not postulate that epistemic vices are only connected to the political economy (where there are humans involved, there will likely be deception), but they definitely are connected. Epistemic vices are not limited to deception and are not mere individualistic psychological-epistemic traits but also symptoms of historical forces that can engender commitments to particular epistemic stances. For instance, in reference to the vice of close-mindedness, if people believe that they are fully autonomous agents, and are therefore close-minded to the idea that they have some interdependence with others in the world, is this merely a psychological-epistemic trait? Or is it connected to the historical notions of agency and autonomy fostered in the development of the modern political economy?

If people have this belief, even if they exercise agency, and autonomy, the belief is still connected to historical forces that are behind the manifestation of close-mindedness to the idea of interdependence. However, epistemic vices are not only tightly connected to the political economy, but are also disseminated throughout our social world and require a thorough epistemological re-evaluation of their genesis and impact on our minds. This is an area that requires further development and explication.

SH: In her chapter, 'Learning from the Dupers: Showing the Workings' Christine Sinclair (2021) asks an interesting question: whether or not, in ethics and education, we should potentially teach students not only how not to be deceived, but how to deceive?

JR: Technology has provided new tools for deceivers, which can create new subcultures of deception such as online epistemic bubbles (e.g., QAnon). However, what are the ethical implications of *not* teaching people how to protect themselves when, in particular, it is well-documented over hundreds of years that deception is pervasive in the human condition? As discussed in the book, deception is an act and concept that not only requires a deceiver, but also requires that a hearer be deceived. For an act of deception to be executed the hearer must *believe* the statement/s that the deceiver utters. Without the hearer believing the statements of the deceiver, we do not have a case of deception, only a case of a speaker *attempting* to deceive.

Deception is an ancient concern, which points to its resilience and re-emergence. Deception existed before technology, and will likely continue in the future, because we cannot stop people from engaging in deceptive acts. So what might be the motivating factors behind people's aim to deceive? Does technology *encourage* people to deceive merely because there is an increased number of technological tools and opportunities? Why do people believe deceivers? And what role does technology have in the generation of belief in deception?

The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b) starts to reveal the complexity of deception. The implicit stance taken in the book is that explaining deception will help reduce deception. Will some people attempt to exploit what they learn about deception? Perhaps. And this is another critical problem that points to a necessary understanding of motivating factors behind deceptive acts. However, if we can begin to reduce deception by helping people recognize what deception is, how it works, and what additional sources, questions or information they might try to avoid being deceived, then even though the deceivers are still motivated to deceive, we might be able to reduce the number of the deceived.

AM: An interesting idea. In order to prevent deceit, we might need to deceive. For example, going along with a scammer in order to prevent them from scamming others. This could be construed as a virtuous act if the aim is to prevent and expose deception. Then there is deception in sport, which is permitted provided it's within the rules. Poker is about deception - bluffing, for example, in order to win - and skilled players are adept at deception. It's part of the game.

IB: I think Christine might be pointing to education. You do get these memes that 'quote' Abraham Lincoln saying something about the use of the Internet. You know straight away that this is clearly not a quote from Abraham Lincoln; you laugh and think about all the fake quotes being circulated. That can be a one way of 'deceiving' for educative purposes.

SH: What are the next themes, or steps, emerging from your Special Issue, 'Lies, Bullshit and Fake News Online: Should We Be Worried' (MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020), and your book, *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b)?

JR: This book is a beginning to exposing deception in a postdigital era. Knowledge ecologies require explication, and how they connect, intersect, and operate to sustain postdigital deception also requires more exploration. *The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era: Dupery by Design* (MacKenzie, Rose, and Bhatt 2021b) directs readers towards thinking about the role technology has in the development of their beliefs, epistemic commitments, ideals of truth, and how they are connected to our past, present, and future. The possibilities left to explore are vast, and it is an exciting area of research.

AM: One emerging question is digital rights. Maggi Savin-Baden also raises this issue in *Postdigital Humans* (Savin-Baden 2021; see also MacKenzie and Savin-Baden 2022). Who owns this data? Who has a right to this data? How do you claim your right to that data? (Hayes, Connor, Johnson, & Jopling 2021) I'm thinking about image-based sexual abuse, where 'leaked' explicit images are distributed and sold without their owner's permission or knowledge, and about deepfake techniques such as the transposition of a face onto a body that's in a pornographic film. How can you tell whether it's true or not? Of course, these are just a few examples. There are many more areas in which we need to ask: What freedoms do we have? How can those freedoms be secured for all?

IB: With Sadia Khan, I am now working on some sort of a guide for researching language online for the Postdigital Science and Education book series. It will revolve around how people use different languages online, online multilingualism, online linguistic ethnography, and different aspects of trust and epistemology. We are trying to create some sort of a handbook that postgraduate students can use for their projects.

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