Agnieszka Kampka and Wojciech Mincewicz (eds.)

A Worrying Present and an Uncertain Future. Challenges for Security in Central and Eastern Europe Region

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Challenges to Epistemic Rights in the Era of AI: (Re)mediation(s) of Russian-Ukrainian War

Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska[1]

Abstract: Algorithmic news prioritization and AI-driven content-creation tools have become standard resources of contemporary news, yet in the world of multiple crises and wars, the questions of how information is provided, how conflicts are framed, and how public deliberation is shaped with mediated technologies have been elevated in importance. The security and stability of democratic systems and cohesive societies is dependent on the ethics of information providers and issue stakeholders, and on the responsibility of remediators. This chapter is devoted to exploring the challenges to epistemic rights and information security, as seen from the perspective of young users of AI-based tools who increasingly resort to chatbot applications for news. The case study presented in the chapter is located within the international project CORECON (2024–2026), which concerns the coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and offers recommendations for media literacy and information security.

Keywords: ChatGPT, epistemic rights, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, representation, user profiles, information bubbles

1. Introduction

In the world of multiple crises and wars, the questions of how information is provided, how conflicts are framed, and how public deliberation is shaped with mediated technologies are of utmost importance. The stability of democratic systems and the cohesion of societies depend on informational and technological security achieved in a regulatory context that guarantees the epistemic rights of all citizens. Universal epistemic rights of access to quality information, in turn, depend on the ethics and responsibilities of information providers and remediators. In neoliberal democracies, however, information provision is increasingly delegated to profit-motivated tech companies. To cut costs and increase engagement, they use algorithmic news prioritization and automated data analysis for trending. Even content creation with AI-driven tools has recently become a standard practice of

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contemporary newsrooms, both commercial and public, mainstream and alternative (cf. JournalismAI 2022-).

This chapter revisits some recent discussions about the critical challenges to epistemic rights and information security posed by technological advancements. Scholars note that some societies are approaching a crisis of epistemic rights, as an increasing percentage of citizens do not have sufficient access to quality information and knowledge to exercise all their civic rights (cf. Horowitz et al. 2024). Such a situation has been created as a result of a complex interplay of economic, regulatory, social and educational issues that cause "knowledge gaps" (Baran and Davies 2021). Among these issues, one pressing problem that has been identified is the rise in prominence of non-human communicators in the public sphere, with algorithms or bots as information providers and public communication gatekeepers (Harari, 2024). Some critics see them as potential manipulators of public opinion and call for new protections for the epistemic rights of humans.

The aftermath of the onslaught of AI-driven chatbot applications that are effectively replacing news media providers in delivering easy-to-digest and seemingly neutral information to young populations is spotlighted in this chapter. The case study presented here addresses the question of whether an application, such as ChatGPT-4, is capable of skewing the representation of a political issue depending on the data it is fed about the user via a profile. Is a chatbot, a personal assistant, or a similar application, likely to overcome entrapments resulting from polarizing trends, algorithmic echo chambers or social media information bubbles, or, on the contrary, to perpetuate them?

To verify whether there is a significant difference in the answers to queries on contentious political issues, the study adapts an earlier science-news-related experiment (Volk et al. 2024), in order to verify what information is offered to various users regarding the topic of the Russian-Ukrainian war. A qualitative comparative analysis is conducted of three ChatGPT-4 answers to three related questions on (1) the motivations for the war, (2) the responsibility for the war, and (3) the preferred post-war scenarios. It is observed that the answers vary in important details depending on whether ChatGPT-4 "believes" the user is (1) a pacifist favoring a diplomatic solution to political conflict, (2) a militarist accepting the hegemony of a stronger state, or (3) a person that is apolitical, disengaged and impartial. The results

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of the analysis are to provide implications for developing interventions related to resilience to disinformation (cf. Molek-Kozakowska, 2024) in the international project CORECON (2024–2026). The project concerns the coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and offers recommendations for media literacy and information security (<https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/>).

2. Epistemic Rights

The rapidly changing political contexts and technologies shaping our access to information, communication and mediation are now seen to have created an unequal "knowing field," to use Alison Bailey's (2020) wordplay. This refers to a situation where some types of knowledge and knowers become privileged while others tend to be marginalized, excluded or even oppressed (Harari, 2024). While research on "the knowledge gaps" across various societies dates back to the 1980s and confirms a correlation between lower socioeconomic status and poorer access to knowledge, new media technologies and digitalization do not seem to have bridged the gaps, as had been expected (Baran and Davies 2021, pp. 292–94). The current epistemic crisis—a situation in which a sizable percentage of citizens in a democracy do not have sufficient protections of their epistemic rights, which entails the lack of access to quality information and knowledge to exercise all their civic rights—requires addressing the legal, political, economic and educational challenges (cf. Padovani and Calabrese, 2014; Freedom House, 2022).

While enabling unprecedented civilizational advancements, the current neoliberal hegemony of technocracy is not "kind" to people: it is not equitable and just, or channeled to democratic decision-making, despite seemingly offering choice, personalization and access (Cammaerts, 2024). A reliance on "the market self-regulating principle" that has driven the monopolization of the ownership of media organizations as well as communication infrastructures has certainly not worked well in terms of access to quality information for all citizens, especially the already precarious, disadvantaged and minoritized communities (Harari, 2024). Current epistemic divides range from (racialized) disparities in media ownership, interest representation and market participation to pervasive digital exclusion through lack of access to technology and cycles of education deprivation (Napoli, 2024).

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In addition, communication scholars are encouraged to help campaigning for digital protections, for example within communication rights movements, which flag the tension between the digital rights of individuals and the interests of big tech companies that have not yet assumed their full responsibilities for epistemic protections (Flew, 2024, p. 87). For-profit companies are free to monetize public and private data and develop algorithms that prioritize engagement with unverified information instead of monitoring for harmful disinformation and increasing the moderating standards. Recent policy recommendations have been primarily congruent with the industry's interests (e.g., knowledge transfer between research institutions and the tech industry, commercialization of AI technologies, increased funding for high-tech solutions in the administration) and sometimes at odds with democratic values (Liebig et al. 2022). A return to the collective commons for epistemic rights, information security and for an inclusive version of digital citizenship is needed to background technocratic decision-making (particularly populism and profiteering) and foreground citizen-oriented participatory politics.

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