

# Entrenched Disagreement Online and Metaepistemic Negotiation

---

The internet is an integral part of modern epistemic environments. While it can bring great epistemic benefits, *epistemically toxic behavior* also pollutes the internet. Epistemically toxic behavior is a catchall for a variety of behaviors that individuals and groups perform, behavior that degrades an epistemic environment. Epistemically toxic behavior, then, makes it harder for those in effected epistemic communities to gain positive epistemic statuses, such as knowledge, and understanding. In this talk I focus on a particular kind of epistemically toxic behavior: *entrenched disagreement online*.<sup>1</sup> Such disagreement is characterized by the recalcitrance of the interlocutors, including the discounting of the credibility of sources, and the impugning of motives and integrity. In this talk, I try to shed light on entrenched disagreement in three steps.

First, I give a new diagnosis of entrenched disagreement online. Rather than disagreeing about the truth of a first-order claim, participants are better understood as disagreeing about attributions of trustworthiness. For instance, a disagreement about what to believe (e.g., whether the election was rigged or not) is better framed as a disagreement about what sources are trustworthy (e.g., the far-right media or the mainstream media). Call this phenomenon *metaepistemic negotiation*: negotiation not about what to believe, but about *who to believe about what to believe*. (I draw inspiration from the literature on metalinguistic negotiation. See Plunkett and Sundell 2013.)

Second, I use the diagnosis to better understand what is epistemically toxic about entrenched disagreement online. I combine work on echo chambers (Nguyen 2020) with the idea of metaepistemic negotiation. The upshot is that that entrenched disagreement online is often best made sense of not as an attempt to propagate first-order epistemic claims, and but functions rather to establish and secure a certain distribution of trustworthiness in an epistemic environment. Such behavior is epistemically toxic when it contributes to the skewed credibility distribution characteristic of an echo chamber: massively high credibility in sources that discredit other sources. As Nguyen points out, disagreeing with someone in the grip of an echo chamber can reinforce the echo chamber. Thus all parties to entrenched disagreement online, across the boundaries of an echo chamber, can (perhaps unwittingly) bolster the echo chamber.

Third, I explore practical upshots of the preceding discussion. In particular, I outline a case for thinking that the way to proceed in the context of entrenched disagreement online is to make the metaepistemic character of it explicit. Rather than challenging the first-order claims, which perhaps goes nowhere and might even reinforce an echo chamber, we should challenge the attributions of (un)trustworthiness directly.

## References

Nguyen, C. T. 2020. "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles". *Episteme* 17(2): 141–161.

Plunkett, D. and Sundell, T. 2013. "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms". *Philosophers' Imprint* 13(23): 1–37.

---

<sup>1</sup> I focus on entrenched disagreement online, given the increasing importance of the internet to our epistemic environments. But what I say here carries over to much entrenched disagreement offline too.