



Bad Beliefs and Polarization workshop

Epistemology and Psychology on Propaganda and Echo Chambers

– Abstracts –

Olena Komar

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Her philosophical research focuses on the cognitive basis of belief formation and neuroethical issues. Also, her interests are related to the philosophy of consciousness, social and political epistemology, philosophy of language, and ethics of beliefs. She is the author of the first Neurophilosophy course in Ukraine. She lectures at on the methodology and philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, and artificial intelligence. In addition to her academic activities, she is a popularizer of science and philosophy, and a guest lecturer at the educational platforms. She is the co-author of several books on the philosophy and methodology of science.

Abstract: Bad beliefs and Social Polarization - How Language Contributes to Echo Chambers

In this talk, I will consider how unjustified beliefs that contradict both the expert opinion and proven facts can unite and polarize people, and the role of language in this process. I will also show how the echo chamber effect contributes to the persistence of bad beliefs, influences social polarization and reduces personal moral responsibility for malformed beliefs and their potential harm.

My talk will focus on the language of echo chambers. Propaganda that targets a particular group of people combines these ideas: polarizing communities based on their adherence to emotionally significant beliefs, amplifying the voices of supporters, and drowning out and devaluing the voices of dissenters. Although linguistic means of propaganda, such as euphemisms, are quite well described, their selective impact on communicators remains a subject of debate. In particular, the question of whether language polarizes and creates an echo chamber effect or whether clearly identifiable linguistic differences are an effective sign of polarization of the echo chamber remains problematic. The language of war is a particular example of affectively labelled language that demonstrates the difference between filter bubbles and echo chambers. Filtering takes place on the basis of hate speech, so those who are unaware of the experience of war are excluded from meaningful discourse, while the ones involved in the confrontation are not only armed with words but also weaponize language.

Dmytro Iarovyj

Dmytro Iarovyj is an Assistant Professor at Kyiv School of Economics (Ukraine) and Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania), PhD in Political Psychology. In 2022-2023 – non-resident fellow at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at George Washington University. Academic and professional interests: societal resilience to disinformation and propaganda, political psychology, social media. Link to his website: <https://kse.ua/people/dmytro-iarovyj/>

Abstract: Resilience to Propaganda and Disinformation - How Critical We Are in Self-Assessment?

Russia's information policy is adaptive and efficient, and its deliberate efforts to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior should not be underestimated. This phenomenon not only seeks to create divisions between nations but also within societies. This shift in approach, from promoting a positive image of Russia to disseminating negative news about the Western world, among other aims to undermine the legitimacy of Western democracies. The COVID-19 pandemic is just one case which became a tool for Moscow, as it leveraged conspiracy theories, economic impacts of lockdowns, civil rights discussions, healthcare access, and anti-vaccination debates to sow mistrust and misinformation. Vulnerable minorities bore the brunt of these disinformation activities, leading to a crisis of public trust in the authorities. We understand the importance of media literacy and critical thinking in countering disinformation, but should be aware against unrealistic expectations of rapid change. The fight against disinformation should not be a mere denial but a concerted effort to promote a strategic narrative that is simple, logical, and continually tested. Ultimately, the success in countering propaganda and disinformation lies in the hands of society, experts, and professional communicators working together to build a resilient and informed public.

Tobias Kretschel & Daniele Valentini

Tobias Kretschel is a Cognitive Science student pursuing his master's degree at the Institute of Cognitive Science, University of Osnabrück, Germany. His research focus lies in situated cognition and affectivity. Daniele Valentini is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Cognitive Science, Osnabrück University. He is also an Associated Ph.D. at RTG Situated Cognition

Abstract: Using users' votes to detect echo chambers in social media

Echo chambers have become a relevant topic of research. A key concern is how to reliably detect echo chambers, in particular on social media. Traditionally, approaches on how to empirically detect echo chambers rely on the assumption that people are in echo chambers whenever they interact only with like-minded individuals. On the other hand, significant interaction with other-minded people is taken as evidence against the presence of an echo chamber. However, this approach has been criticised: not only the quantity but importantly the quality of interactions matters when investigating echo chambers. In fact, evidence suggests that a certain kind of interaction with opposing viewpoints is a key aspect of echo chambers. Nguyen describes this kind of interaction as a *disagreement-reinforcement mechanism*. In this paper, we argue that empirical research on echo chambers should take this finding into account and in the context of social media, we suggest users' votes as an empirically measurable indicator for the quality of interaction between users. A further criticism of recent echo chamber research is that it has been neglecting the affective dimension of echo chambers [8]. We address this issue and claim that users' votes are also able to capture users' affective stance. We apply our findings by using users' votes in an exemplary study, investigating political interactions between Trump and Clinton supporters on Reddit.



Rebecca Watzlawek

Rebecca Watzlawek is a Cognitive Scientist pursuing her master's degree at the University of Osnabrück, Germany. She has a strong focus on Philosophy of language, Philosophy of Emotions as well as epistemology. Within these rather broad fields, she is especially interested in epistemically as well as societally relevant phenomena such as echo chambers, their affective dynamics and the specific metaphor use common in these spaces.

Abstract: Language in Echo Chambers – How Metaphors intensify Affective Phenomena

Echo chambers have become a topic of much philosophical discussion. Their affective dimension, however, has consistently been overlooked. I claim that what makes echo chambers so sticky and hard for individuals to leave is their affective allure, which unfolds its power in the form of an encompassing affective scaffold. This scaffold is further corroborated by the metaphor use particular to the respective echo chamber, fostering specific emotions, facilitating the discourse between members as well as strengthening the community. In this presentation, the affective side of echo chambers will be demonstrated through the poignant example of pro-anorexia communities. By this example, I will show how metaphors aid in maintaining and reinforcing the epistemic as well as affective scaffold at the heart of the detrimental structure.

Illia Yahiiaiev

Illia Yahiiaiev is an Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, PhD in Psychology. He is a social psychologist in Open Minds Institute (OMI). Academic and professional interests: psychology of social, religious, and political beliefs, evolutionary psychology, psychology of human aggression. Link to his profile:

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Abstract: Conspiracy Theories and Shared Worldviews - Differences in Russian Citizens' Beliefs Based on Their Attitudes Towards the Russia-Ukraine War

This presentation examines the psychological basis for the belief in conspiracy theories among Russian citizens, depending on their attitude towards their country's war against Ukraine. Attitudes towards the war are a factor that polarizes Russian society into supporters and opponents of military action. The cognitive biases that create the conditions for believing in conspiracy explanations of social and political reality are universal to all people. However, people differ both in the presence and degree of belief in conspiracies as such, and in which conspiracy theories they believe. In this talk, I will conclude that belief in conspiracy theories is not a significant factor in worldview formation. Instead, a person's general worldview is a background that predisposes them to accept some conspiracy theories and reject others. For example, liberal Russians may be more likely than war supporters to believe that Russian intelligence organized the apartment bombings in 1999, or that Putin is terminally ill and has doppelgangers. This is not necessarily because of the evidence supporting these claims, but rather because such beliefs are consistent with their prior beliefs about the world. This presentation highlights the importance of understanding the underlying social processes that lead people to believe conspiracy theories.