

The Contestation of Credibility and the Deliberative Model of Democracy

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Abstract: Political discourse is often dominated by attacks on credibility at the expense of discussions about policy proposals. Such attacks can exacerbate political division and undermine attempts to discuss difficult policy questions in the public sphere. While this is true, it is argued in this article that it is a mistake to simply dismiss all such attacks as irrational and illegitimate deviations from the norms of deliberative argumentation. Resolving questions about whom to trust is vital to our lives as social knowers. Furthermore, the influence enjoyed by speakers (individuals and organizations) is not always warranted and deserves to be challenged. Even though it strains the norms of civility, equality, and inclusion promoted by the deliberative model of democracy, the public contestation of credibility can serve epistemically and socially valuable ends. Thus, the contestation of credibility is a profoundly ambivalent phenomenon. Nonetheless, it has a central role to play in the social rationality of public discourse and merits greater attention by democratic theorists.

Key words: deliberative democracy, trust, credibility, power, ad hominem argumentation.

Political discourse is often dominated by attacks on credibility at the expense of discussions about policy proposals. Politicians seek to score points against their opponents, and journalists try to trip up public figures with embarrassing ‘gotcha’ questions. These tactics are widely criticised, and it is not hard to see why. They can be exasperating for observers, distressing or hurtful to public figures, and counterproductive from the point of view of policy debate. But if such tactics strain the norms of civility and hinder attempts to discuss difficult policy questions in the public sphere, why are they so ubiquitous? Escalating political polarisation has no doubt led to an increase in the prevalence and intensity of these tactics. Likewise, ‘takedowns’ are rewarded by attention in the mainstream media and by likes and shares on social media. But neither of these factors explains the existence of the phenomenon in the first place. In this article, I examine some instances of credibility attacks. I provide an analysis of what motivates them and consider how they should be conceptualised from the point of view of democratic theory. Drawing on observations about the social structure of our epistemic lives, I show why the contestation of credibility has a central role to play in the social rationality of public discourse and why it cannot simply be dismissed as an illegitimate deviation from the norms of civility and deliberative rationality.

I. THE CONTESTATION OF CREDIBILITY

On the 14th of February 2018, a 19-year-old gunman shot and killed 17 people, including 14 students, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. What made this school shooting different from so many other similar tragedies in the

US is that in the aftermath, students from the school found their voice. Parkland students – most prominently Emma González and David Hogg – organized rallies and press conferences, tweeted at President Trump and appeared on TV talk shows. Within a matter of days, these survivors of the Parkland shooting emerged as the new face of gun-control advocacy in the US media, and their message was breaking through in a way not seen for several years.

In response to this fresh wave of advocacy for gun control, defenders of gun rights swung into action, looking to cover their vulnerable flank. Here is a selection of the argumentative strategies unsympathetic commentators employed in the days immediately following the shooting to counteract the new wave of student-led gun-control advocacy:

(i) The *Federalist* published a piece by Chandler Lasch (2018) who warned that “Media tends to treat survivors like Hogg as if they are policy experts [...] Yet enduring tragedy does not make anyone a source of wisdom on legislation.”

(ii) Lucian Wintrich (2018), writing for *Gateway Pundit*, claimed of David Hogg that he had been “heavily coached on lines” and was “merely reciting a script.”

(iii) Ben Shapiro (2018), writing for the *National Review*, argued that the activism of the students should be dismissed because in adolescence “the emotional centers of the brain are overdeveloped in comparison with the rational centers of the brain.”

(iv) Dan McLaughlin (2018), also writing for the *National Review*, similarly opined that “if you have ever been, or known, a teenager, you know that even comparatively well-informed teens are almost always just advancing arguments they’ve heard from adults.”¹

Lasch, Wintrich, Shapiro, and McLaughlin all provide reasons to discount David Hogg’s contributions to the public debate over gun violence: (i) students have no special insight or status in the debate; (ii) students are puppets being manipulated by others, others who may well have nefarious intentions and dangerous agendas; and (iii) students are just adolescents who don’t have the cognitive capacities of adults and can’t be treated as having reasoned views of their own.

These arguments are obviously not presented as reasons for or against any particular gun control policies. Instead, they are presented as reasons to disregard the students as credible contributors to the policy debate. This feature is what makes the arguments surveyed above instances of what I shall call ‘polemical speech’.

To give a definition, ‘polemical speech’ refers to utterances whose purpose is to contest the credibility of some speaker in order to influence the degree to which an audience trusts that speaker and takes what they say as having epistemic authority or worth.

In contemporary English, the word ‘polemical’ has a broader range of application. An essay or public lecture can be described as ‘polemical’ if it is disputatious and seeks to

[1] Here I am drawing on the work of journalist Jason Wilson (2018) who reported on these responses to the Parkland students for *The Guardian*.

stage a controversy, especially if it is framed in strong language or delivered with rhetorical embellishments. It is possible for a ‘polemic’ to be addressed against a person, but it is more typical for a ‘polemic’ to be addressed against an opinion or a doctrine. In my usage, speech is polemical if and only if it targets a speaker – that is, if it stages a challenge to the credibility of a person (or, equally, an artificial person such as a corporation, an NGO, or a political party).²

Even though I am using the word ‘polemical’ in a narrow and specialized sense which departs from ordinary usage, the word ‘polemical’ seems to me apt to pick out the kind of speech that I have in view. The Greek word *πόλεμος* means war, fighting, struggle or conflict. And, in disputes over credibility, a conflict takes place: a social struggle for dominance between adversaries espousing different points of view. Words are used to seek advantage or dominance in the field of discourse by affecting the reputation or standing of certain speakers as a source of information or opinion. In these exchanges, the theatre of public debate is not merely a contest of ideas: it is a contest in which the credibility and reputation of participants are at stake. And if credibility and reputations are affected, then the social field is altered as a result. Participants enjoy enhanced or reduced epistemic authority or power. There are winners and losers. Hence, at least in a metaphorical sense, this is war. And this is indeed how we perceive it, as is evidenced by the fact that we routinely use the language of violence and combat to describe polemical speech: e.g., instances of polemical speech are ‘attacks’, ‘hatchet jobs’, ‘character assassinations’.³

II. THE CONTESTATION OF CREDIBILITY AND THEORIES OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

In general, deliberative democrats assume that public discourse has a legitimate role to play in identifying and policing false or deceptive contributions to discourse.⁴ And yet, deliberative democrats have given little attention to the issue of how disputes concerning the credibility of speakers should be handled within deliberative politics. If the issue is touched upon at all, it is spoken of disapprovingly. It is stressed that all participants should be respected and included as equals in a collective and collaborative process of inquiry and decision-making. Hence, participants in public discourse are expected to show respect to all others (including opponents) according to the norms of civility and democratic

2] Although it has long been recognized that political parties, churches, NGOs, businesses and other similar entities play an active role in civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992), the standing of artificial persons as contributors to political discourse and decision-making in contemporary democracies is an under-explored topic in deliberative theory. For a defence of the claim that group agents can be considered ‘persons’ in the sense of functioning as communicative agents, see List and Pettit 2011.

3] The Guardian article cited above is typical in this respect, characterizing the arguments of the rightwing commentators as “attacks” on Hogg and one of these attacks as a “hatchet job” (Wilson 2018).

4] This is implied, for example, in Habermas’s characterisation of discourse as a “self-correcting learning process” (2008, 84).

inclusion. On this orthodox view, any attempt to discredit or marginalise certain voices within the realm of public discourse is *ipso facto* anti-democratic and illegitimate.

Among political philosophers, John Rawls is perhaps the most prominent defender of this orthodox position.⁵ For Rawls, the political and epistemic goals of public deliberation can only be achieved if citizens are reasonable with each other. Reasonable citizens are committed to collective problem-solving. They are civil to each other. They show mutual respect, are open to considering other points of view, and recognise the possibility of reasonable disagreement. They conduct political arguments in a way that seeks to maintain good faith and solidarity despite their disagreements with each other.⁶ Therefore, Rawls strongly counsels that:

We should not readily accuse one another of self- or group-interest, prejudice or bias, and of such deeply entrenched errors as ideological blindness and delusion. Such accusations arouse resentment and hostility, and block the way to reasonable agreement. The disposition to make such accusations without compelling grounds is plainly unreasonable, and often a declaration of intellectual war. (Rawls 1989, 238)

Note that Rawls sensibly leaves open the possibility that there will arise situations in which we find ourselves having to accuse others of self- or group-interest, prejudice or bias, and so on. Nonetheless, he clearly presents this situation as extraordinary, marginal, and largely irrelevant to democratic theory.

To other democratic theorists, however, it seems evident that contesting the sincerity, motivations, and ideological biases of contributors to public discourse will be commonplace and, indeed, a necessary feature of public discourse in a democratic society.⁷ James Johnson makes the case for this view succinctly when he observes in response to Rawls that:

[...] political actors may, in fact, be driven by self-interest, blinded by prejudice, or deluded by ideology. It very plausibly is among the desirable features of democratic deliberation that it allows participants to raise this possibility, to challenge those to whom the charge in fact applies, and to do so publicly. (Johnson 1998, 166)

According to this view, credibility can and should be tested and contested in public discourse. Indeed, it is an act of democratic and epistemic responsibility for citizens to challenge the credibility that self-interested, prejudiced or deluded actors enjoy in the eyes of others. Acts of public criticism are the appropriate (non-coercive) means at the disposal of citizens in a democracy to oppose the social forces of falsehood, oppression,

[5] In recent years, Jeremy Waldron has taken up the mantle and defended the Rawlsian approach. See Waldron 2012.

[6] In his late work, these moral obligations of democratic citizenship are encapsulated in the idea of “civic friendship” (Rawls 1996, li).

[7] One might expect proponents of ‘agonistic’ models of democracy to align with such a position. However, to my knowledge this line of argument has not been developed by agonistic democrats as such.

and injustice.⁸ In this article, I aim to motivate the Johnson-style view and to further explore why the orthodox view is inadequate.

III. AGAINST POLEMICAL SPEECH

I do not dispute that there are powerful justifications for the orthodox approach. There are indeed many good reasons to take a rather dim view of what I have called polemical speech, especially when it takes an overtly hostile form. War is not something we typically welcome, and even a war of words strikes us as unpleasant and undesirable (Cohen 1995). Rawls is right to charge that public contestation of credibility can “arouse resentment and hostility, and block the way to reasonable agreement” (1989, 238).

As a case study, consider the attacks launched against David Hogg discussed above. There are at least six distinct kinds of objection that could be raised in relation to these attacks.

1. *A moral objection.* The criticisms of David Hogg cited above may appear measured, even courteous, by comparison to other more hot-headed and aggressive instances of polemical speech (not to mention hate speech). Nonetheless, taking account of his personal experiences as a survivor of gun violence and his apparently well-intentioned efforts to advocate for the wellbeing of his fellow students, the dismissals of Hogg by these commentators can seem callous and hence morally objectionable.

2. *A political objection.* In addition to being morally objectionable, the attacks on Hogg could be seen as exclusionary and hence unjust. Hogg is marginalized and his voice silenced in the public debate. He is not respected as a victim of violence and as a fellow citizen who has relevant perspectives that should be considered in the common discussion of what the culture and laws of the society should be. We might say, in terms of the current philosophical literature, that the critics do not treat Hogg as an “epistemic authority” (Zagzebski 2012), and that, instead, he suffers what Elizabeth Anderson (2012, 166) calls “epistemic marginalization”.

3. *A sociological objection.* The attacks on David Hogg are potentially socially divisive. Those who are sympathetic to David Hogg and to the experiences and perspectives he articulates are not likely to respond well to the “hatchet job” performed on him. When gun-control advocates see representatives of the gun-rights lobby working to disparage victims like Hogg, they are prone to become further entrenched in their disapproval of, and even disgust at, the pro-gun camp. The reason for this is straightforward. If person *A* seeks to dismiss the speech of someone, *B*, whom *C* believes, to be honest, and well-intentioned, from *C*'s point of view this reflects poorly

8] A similar line of argument is explored in Iris Marion Young (2001). On her analysis, when political discourse and decision-making is captured by hegemonic interests, public-minded citizens find themselves having to stage public protests aimed at exposing the self-serving motives, wrongful actions, and false claims of political actors.

on *A*. In fact, it presents to *C* a cue of *A*'s hostility or poor judgment. And so, *C* has reason to treat *A* with suspicion and distrust. As a result, *C* might even be motivated to impose moral sanctions on *A* in order to hold *A* accountable for their (ostensibly) nasty and unjust behaviour. If *C* consequently reacts towards *A* with disapproval or criticizes *A*'s actions, these behaviours can, in turn, be interpreted by *A* as a sign of *C*'s hostility, and so on. For this reason, polemical speech begins to look like a causal contributor to a downward spiral of social discord and political polarization.⁹

4. *A logical objection.* Every philosophy undergraduate learns that *ad hominem* argumentation is fallacious: To impugn the character or motives of a person who makes a claim does not *per se* give a reason to reject the claim itself, and it is fallacious to think that you have refuted a claim by showing up some deficiency in the person who makes the claim. At first blush, the attacks on David Hogg might appear to be instances of the *argumentum ad hominem* fallacy. However, on closer inspection, this does not seem to be the case. While the arguments of the commentators quoted above are clearly 'ad hominem' in the sense that they are directed against the speaker rather than against what is said by the speaker, it does not appear to be the case that those criticizing Hogg believe their attacks *justify* a rejection of the views he is espousing. In other words, they don't obviously commit the *ad hominem* fallacy as classically defined. If *ad hominem* attacks of this variety are problematic from a logical point of view, then the next two objections seem to be more apposite.

5. *An epistemic objection: crowding out.* It is widely believed that there is (or should be) an epistemic purpose to public discourse: namely, the purpose of ensuring more rationally justifiable political decision-making through the circulation of relevant information and the critical assessment of arguments and counterarguments (Estlund 2008; Landmore 2012). Like all *ad hominem* arguments, *ad hominem* arguments of the kind directed against David Hogg derail public discourse by diverting attention away from the consideration of claims and arguments and miring participants in nasty, exclusionary, and divisive interpersonal conflicts. In this way, polemical speech diverts participants in public discourse from pursuing the epistemic goals they should be pursuing. There is an opportunity cost incurred. Polemical speech crowds out the more epistemically productive policy-oriented discussion.

6. *Another epistemic objection: undermining.* Relatedly, the epistemic marginalization of speakers such as Hogg, who we presume have relevant contributions to make to public discourse, risks undermining the epistemic goals of the policy-oriented discussion (to the extent that it still takes place). A discourse designed to achieve maximally rational (i.e., justifiable) outcomes must ensure that the process is open to proposals, information, and criticisms from all since we do not know in advance

9] The recent literature on political polarization in the social sciences is extensive. Researchers are still working to understand the phenomenon of political polarization and its dynamics.

whose knowledge, insights or arguments will prove valuable (even decisive) in the course of deliberations. To exclude certain views in advance for ideological reasons, thus undermines the epistemic quality and reliability of the deliberative process.

The deliberative model of democracy promises to avoid the problems enumerated above. It asserts rights to participation in public deliberation to guarantee that no individual or social group is marginalized or excluded from public deliberations. It encourages disagreement but recommends civility and discourages nastiness. These standards are supposed to serve both social and epistemic goals. On the one hand, they ensure that every citizen is shown epistemic respect and that social solidarity is preserved. On the other hand, they ensure that the epistemic purposes of discourse are pursued with maximal effectiveness.¹⁰ Confident in the practical and theoretical virtues of their model, it is no surprise therefore that political theorists have recently called for renewed efforts to strengthen the political culture along the lines recommended by the deliberative model of democracy and to reestablish norms of civility in public life.¹¹

IV. JUDGMENTS OF CREDIBILITY

If public discourse in democratic societies could be pursued exclusively according to the orthodox model prescribed by Rawls and other deliberative democrats, there is little doubt that we could avoid the negative consequences that result from political discourse that is mired in polemical argumentation. However, the orthodox view fails to account for the full range of epistemic and social functions performed by public discourse in democratic societies, especially as it plays out in the mass media.

Most deliberative democrats acknowledge that the ‘informal’ or ‘weak’ public sphere of unconstrained public communication in the mass media has an important role to play in the system of democracy.¹² But the focus of deliberative democrats has been primarily on ‘formal’ or ‘strong’ public spheres: on the design and implementation of organised and controlled processes of deliberation and decision-making involving a relatively small number of citizens or their representatives. Deliberative processes are designed to ensure the equal standing of participants. They are designed to ensure that participants are provided with relevant information from reputable sources, that participants receive input from representatives of all relevant social groups, and that participants hear the

10] Habermas (2008, 50-52), for instance, argues that we are justified in assuming that the process of deliberation secures rational outcomes only to the extent that the deliberations are inclusive, egalitarian, free of deception, and free of coercion.

11] See, for example, the recent public lecture by Jeremy Waldron (2017). For a critique of Waldron and a more nuanced defense of the virtue of civility and its relevance in the contemporary context, see Bejan (2017).

12] The term ‘weak’ public sphere, denoting communication among the general public, as opposed to the ‘strong’ public sphere consisting in forums empowered to make binding decisions, was coined by Nancy Fraser (1992).

best arguments from all sides on a given issue. Yet, in the 'weak' public sphere, none of these design features or controls are in place. There is no guarantee of equal standing or equal participation of all citizens; no one guarantees the quality of information that circulates or the availability of relevant arguments, or ensures fair representation of social groups and viewpoints. Thus, as participants in the political public sphere we are forced to answer for ourselves a series of questions that are taken off the table by architects of organised deliberative processes, including: Where should I source my information? Who should I take as a credible guide to factual and normative questions? Whose contributions to public discourse should I listen to?

To better understand the epistemic situation we find ourselves in as ordinary citizens, we need to turn to social epistemology. Our capacity to generate knowledge of the world as solitary inquirers is limited. Most of our knowledge of the world is generated by others and is communicated to us either verbally or via some other medium. Where were you born? Which planet is closest to our sun? Do you have a spleen? The knowledge we have on each of these topics has come to us from others; we have been told it or we have learned it from a written source. And our dependency as knowers is not restricted to simple matters of fact. It is also in play when it comes to more complex theoretical and practical judgments. Is the German economy performing well or poorly? Are we on track to exceed 2°C of warming globally? Has the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees on Manus Island by the Australian government amounted to a human rights violation? Questions such as these require a synthesis of multiple sources of information and, additionally, require the competence to perform specialized forms of inference. Very few of us will have the time or expertise necessary to form a competent and informed judgment for ourselves on such matters. Nonetheless, we can and do form opinions on such matters by allowing our opinions to be informed and shaped by the opinions and judgments of others who we take to be credible sources of expert judgment in the relevant subject area. We defer to others whom we take to be suitably placed to form an authoritative judgment.

Knowing on the basis of 'testimony' allows us to acquire knowledge cheaply, without having to expend the effort associated with generating the knowledge ourselves and without even having to independently assess the evidence or justification for what we are told. It would be practically impossible, not to mention pathological, to test everything we are told or to seek out independent and direct confirmation of it. And, by acquiring beliefs from trusted sources, we benefit from a remarkable and expansive division of epistemic labour (Webb 1993). Nonetheless, trusting others opens us to the possibility of being deceived or misinformed. Our success as knowers depends upon our ability to screen out deceptive sources and latch onto credible sources. As epistemic agents, therefore, we are inevitably engaged not only in the business of evaluating and sorting evidence and arguments for beliefs but also in the business of evaluating and sorting speakers in terms of their credibility and trustworthiness as sources of information, moral insight, prudent advice, and so

forth. For this reason, we are constantly forming and revising judgments of credibility. This is part of what epistemic responsibility requires of us (Sperber et al. 2010).

This is not to say that we generate a reasoned judgment about a speaker's credibility in each interaction. From infancy, we demonstrate a readiness to trust the words of others, and even in adulthood, we remain largely credulous and do not exhibit a global distrust of social sources. When it comes to trusting social sources beyond our local networks, we rely upon a variety of heuristic devices in order to calibrate our level of credulity. We follow some rules of thumb: be wary of claims that do not cohere with what we believe to be true of the world; be more suspicious when dealing with certain sorts of characters, e.g., used car salespeople or members of hostile social groups (Rini 2017). We also make heuristic judgments of trustworthiness based on reputations or credibility markers. Reputations are pieces of "second-hand information" circulating among social networks that aid us in our task of filtering social sources (Origgi 2012). Credibility markers are socially accepted or institutionally sanctioned symbols that are taken to indicate a certain standard of knowledge and/or reliability (Anderson 2012). The university graduate is assumed to be intelligent; the family doctor is assumed to be competent; the police officer is assumed to be honest. All of these heuristic devices are only reliable from an epistemic point of view to the extent that they track epistemic competence and performance.¹³ Hence, habitual patterns of trust and even the heuristics used to judge credibility must be calibrated and recalibrated.¹⁴

My claim is that, as with other challenging tasks of rational reflection and self-correction, the task of calibrating our credibility judgments and heuristics is something we tackle in conversations with others. Just as we converse and reason with others about how the world is and how it should be, so we converse and reason with others about the credibility of speakers (including about reputations and markers of credibility). And given the central role that assessments of credibility play in our lives as social knowers, we should regard this as a perfectly legitimate and potentially useful topic about which to converse and argue. To the extent that polemical speech can be seen as a contribution to the process of *reasoning with others about the credibility of social sources*, it too is a perfectly legitimate and potentially useful type of deliberation.¹⁵

13] Obviously, markers of credibility do not always reliably indicate the capabilities of speakers, and reputations do not always reliably track the past epistemic performance of speakers. Indeed, supposed markers of credibility are notorious vehicles for the cultural embedding of bias and prejudice, as has been discussed in the recent literature on "epistemic injustice" (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011; Medina 2013).

14] There are complex and still contested epistemological questions at stake here which I will leave to one side. For an overview of the literature on the epistemology of testimony, including expert testimony, see Adler (2017).

15] Not all verbal attacks on persons can be viewed as contributions to an argument about credibility. But, viewed charitably, even smears and slurs can, in some contexts, be taken as an inarticulate and nascent form of polemical argumentation.

V. POLEMICAL SPEECH AND THE CRITIQUE OF POWER

Speakers who are taken to be credible have the ability to inform and shape the beliefs and actions of those who take them to be credible, not only because those hearers will take what they say on trust but also because those hearers will preferentially attend to their words on a given topic over other potential sources of information or opinion. This social dynamic gives trusted speakers *power* of a particular kind: the power to cause hearers to believe p by asserting that p or to cause hearers to Φ by recommending that they Φ . Speakers who are trusted by a large number of people and who have the ability to communicate their beliefs and opinions to those people can accrue to themselves a significant degree of this kind of power. We call these speakers ‘influential’.

In the ideal case, where speakers who are in fact reliable sources of information or judgment are taken to be credible and hence influence the beliefs of others, then (all else being equal) the power of those speakers is legitimate. However, when speakers who make dishonest or unreliable claims are taken seriously – and hence enjoy influence – then (all else being equal) their influence is illegitimate. In the latter case, we have reason to worry that the deceptions of these speakers will be effective, that the misinformation they communicate will be accepted as truth, and that harm will result. Conversely, when speakers who are honest, reliable and have important information or judgments to communicate are not taken seriously – and hence do not enjoy the influence they should – we have reason to worry that ignorance or error will persist when it need not, and that harms may result.

No doubt each of us will be able to bring to mind individuals (or organisations) who are regarded by others to be sincere and knowledgeable, morally insightful or prudent, but whom we judge to be dishonest and/or unreliable, even deeply misguided. Conversely, each of us will be able to bring to mind individuals (or organisations) who are regarded by others to be deceptive, ignorant, morally misguided, or foolish, but whom we judge to be sincere and/or reliable. In such cases, we find ourselves in disagreement with others not merely over the truth of *claims*, but more fundamentally over the level of *credibility* that speakers claim for themselves or that hearers attribute to them. In these circumstances, we might be motivated to seek to influence others to revise their assessment of the credibility of these individuals. When we do, we find ourselves engaged in ‘polemical’ argumentation for reasons that seem to us to be both morally and epistemically justified: namely, in order to convince others to judge the credibility of some speaker differently so as to better track what is epistemically warranted. Disputes of this kind are intrinsically ‘political’ in the sense that convincing others to alter judgments of credibility has implication for the balance of *power* among speakers – i.e., for the relative levels of influence they enjoy – in the field of public discourse.¹⁶

[16] Of course, disputes over credibility do not only occur in democratic contexts. This is because, as Hannah Arendt writes: “All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they

This explains why disputes over credibility are often a central focus in political debate. It is possible, for example, to see the public interventions by the critics of David Hogg in this light. These critics understand that sympathetic audiences will be inclined to attend to and give weight to Hogg's public statements and that they may well have their opinions and judgments shaped by his words. They are worried, in other words, that this misguided soul, whom they take to be a profoundly unreliable source of opinion, will have an *undue influence* on the public debate. Therefore, they are motivated to demonstrate to Hogg's audience that he should not be taken that seriously. And so, they aim to cut him down to size in the eyes of his hearers and thereby nullify his influence. This is the goal of their arguments or 'attacks'. This underscores the point that we should not think that these critics are simply poor reasoners who have foolishly fallen into the logical fallacy of arguing *ad hominem*. Rather, they are launching a pre-emptive strike so that the audience is cautioned against giving this social source too much credence.

Of course, rightwing political commentators are not the only people who find themselves motivated to publicly contest the credibility of others on the basis of such concerns. To illustrate this point, let me introduce another example. In February 2018, the Alliance for Automobile Manufacturers in the United States published a Report calling into question impacts of climate change and tailpipe pollutants in an effort to undercut the need for fuel economy regulation (AAM 2018). In response, a physicist named Dave Cooke wrote a piece for the Union of Concerned Scientists in which he criticized the report. There are two main lines of argument in Cooke's piece. The first line of argument is that the authors of the report have an ideological agenda:

The report funded by the Alliance was written by industry shills with ties to the Heartland Institute [...] The group the Alliance funded to put together the report has a long history of working against environmental regulations – that's pretty much their schtick. Past clients include the American Petroleum Institute, the American Coal Council, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Monsanto, the American Enterprise Institute, and, of course, the Alliance. (Cooke 2018)

The second line of argument concerns the credibility of the contents of the report itself. Cooke argues that the report fails to fairly summarise the scientific literature. Instead, it cherry-picks results and even misrepresents the findings of the scientific studies that it does cite. Furthermore, the scientific research that is cited is suspect, he claims, because the people responsible for writing it have dependencies that place the impartiality of their work in question: "The papers cited to support weakening environmental protections are often paid for by industry and/or published in journals with weak peer-review standards and disclosure policies."

petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them. This is what Madison meant when he said 'all government rests on opinion,' a word no less true for the various forms of monarchy than for democracies" (Arendt 1972, 140).

Cooke provides examples and evidence to substantiate each of these criticisms. His writing is no less ‘polemical’ for this: in providing evidence and arguments, his goal is not simply to refute each claim but also to *demonstrate* that the report “tak[es] a page straight out of the disinformation playbook”, that it “follows a familiar pattern, generally calling into question the science behind the health impacts of [insert pollutant here], frequently based on a convoluted and biased modelling effort masquerading as science.” In other words, even when Cooke is debunking *arguments*, he has a *polemical goal* in mind: he is trying to discredit the report and its authors as a source of information and opinion.

By my lights at least, Cooke’s piece is well-intentioned, its arguments seem more or less compelling, and it serves a useful social purpose, namely to expose the biases and hidden agenda in a report that represents itself as scientific and impartial but which, if taken seriously, could justify the weakening of important environmental protections. But even if this example does not satisfy the reader, it will be possible to find many other examples of polemical argumentation that could be judged in a similarly positively light: that is, as epistemically responsible, well-intentioned, and socially useful. It should be clear, then, that polemical speech can be (and often is) motivated by laudable moral and epistemic goals.¹⁷

VI. THE CYNICAL USE OF POLEMICAL SPEECH

It is manifestly true that polemical attacks can be used in ways that are neither well-intentioned nor aimed at serving worthy moral, political or epistemic goals. Polemical attacks can themselves be self-interested, prejudiced or deluded. They can also be made with cynical disregard for epistemic goals, simply aiming to damage the reputation of someone for personal or political gain.

In May 2018, as Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 US Presidential elections was continuing, Donald Trump repeated his claims that the investigation was a “witch hunt” and implied that the investigation was an illegal or corrupt exercise by calling it “Spygate”. Trump’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani commented in a TV interview that their goal in making such claims was to undermine the credibility of the Mueller investigation. The former New York City major admitted to CNN that:

It is for public opinion, because eventually the decision here is going to be impeach or not impeach. Members of Congress, Democrat and Republican, are going to be informed a lot by their constituents. So our jury, as it should be, is the American people. And the American people, yes, are Republicans (largely),

¹⁷ When scholars and activists talk of ‘the critique of power’, it seems to me that they sometimes have in mind something like this phenomenon: the use of public criticism in order to undermine the credibility and epistemic power of a social institution or political agent, especially those whose epistemic power is used to justify oppressive social systems.

independents (pretty substantial), and even some Democrats now question the legitimacy of it. (YouTube 2018)

Michael Hayden, a former director of the CIA, was asked to comment on the same public comments and he said that Trump was “simply trying to delegitimize Mueller [...] and he’s willing to throw anything against the wall” (McCarthy 2018).

Giuliani and Hayden are both clearly describing Trump’s public statements as, in my terms, polemical speech. But, their comments suggest that Trump’s public statements are instances of a cynical and calculated use of polemical speech. They are ‘fake’ polemical speech in the sense that they mimic sincerely motivated polemical speech. They challenge credibility simply in order to achieve the reputational damage that predictably follows from a public attack on the credibility of some person or agency by a trusted speaker (in this case, by the office of the US President). In such cases, it would be a mistake to treat polemical speech as though it made a worthwhile epistemic contribution to public discourse. But, of course, this is why cynical polemical speech presents itself as sincere: in order to be treated by hearers as though it were epistemically significant. Just as lies only function if they are told in the guise of telling the truth, so tactically motivated attacks only function because they don’t present themselves as tactically motivated but present themselves as truth-telling exposés. Giuliani’s confession that he and Trump were saying these things purely to try and discredit the Mueller investigation is the exception that proves the rule.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to tell sincere from cynical polemical speech. What’s more, many cases polemical speech will arise from mixed motivations: they will be motivated *in part* by a desire to promote one’s own agenda by decreasing the influence of opponents and *in part* by a sincerely held belief that the opponent is speaking insincerely or falsely and is not to be trusted. There may be polemical speech acts that are *purely* cynical and calculating (‘politically motivated’, as we say), and even some that are *purely* sincere; but most polemical speech will sit somewhere in the middle. (It is possible that Trump’s criticisms of the Mueller investigation fall into this middle category.) In any case, the point is that *conceptually* we should not conflate sincere polemical speech and cynical polemical speech any more than we should conflate honest assertions with lies. If we want to understand how ‘politically motivated’ attacks (including ‘fake news’ and other kinds of propaganda) function, we need to understand how sincere polemical speech functions; just as if we want to understand how lying functions, we need to understand how truth-telling functions.

VII. CONCLUSION

While norms of equality and inclusion in deliberative models of democracy are motivated by well-founded concerns about what I have called ‘polemical’ attacks on interlocutors, it is neither desirable nor possible to exclude polemical speech from public

discourse. This is because public discourse performs at least two important epistemic and social functions at the same time. First, it processes disagreements about how to understand the world and about what should be done. Second, it processes disagreements about whom to trust. Resolving questions about whom to trust is vital to our lives as social knowers, and ultimately, it is essential to the pursuit of the very epistemic goals that the deliberative model aims to promote. Thus, I have argued that it is a mistake to simply dismiss all polemical speech as an irrational and illegitimate deviation from the norms of deliberative argumentation. Even though it doesn't conform to the norms of mutual recognition (norms of equality and inclusion) promoted by the deliberative model, there is a *rationality* to polemical argumentation and it can serve epistemically respectable ends and ends of justice. Polemical argumentation is required to challenge unwarranted claims to credibility; and, conversely, it is required to challenge inequalitarian and exclusionary attitudes and behaviours of other speakers.

At the same time, I do not by any means intend to justify all and every polemical use of speech – quite the contrary. Nothing I have said about the epistemic and justice goals of polemical speech negates the fact that it can be (and often is) nasty, socially divisive, and politically polarizing. Nothing in what I have said negates the fact that polemical discourse is prone to distract us from debating the substance of knowledge claims or policy positions. Furthermore, while polemical speech can be used to challenge illegitimate power, it can also be used to perpetuate injustice and exclusion. The rhetorical strategies used to press disagreements over credibility can be just as unprincipled and unreliable as the false, ideological and self-interested contributions to public discourse they are ostensibly being used to expose.

Polemical speech is thus a profoundly ambivalent phenomenon, one we ought to treat with caution. Nonetheless, polemical argumentation is ubiquitous in public discourse. Disputes over credibility and influence continually arise both in 'weak' and 'strong' public spheres. We already navigate these disputes in practice as participants in public discourse. But we are far from having a satisfactory theoretical understanding of them. There is more work to be done to understand how polemical speech functions, how it malfunctions, and how it might be handled within democratic societies so as to achieve overarching epistemic and social goals while minimizing the negative consequences.¹⁸ What is clear is that the orthodox view of democratic deliberation is inadequate and that we, as political theorists, will require a more sophisticated epistemic model of democracy if we are going to be equipped to contribute to the societal challenge of navigating a way through the contemporary (epistemic) crises of democracy.

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[18] Studies that indirectly contribute to this research agenda can be found in the literatures on civility, hate speech, political polarization, epistemic bubbles, and epistemic injustice, among others. However, none of these existing literatures approaches the topic of public discourse from the angle articulated in this article, namely in terms of the negotiation and contestation of credibility through public discourse.

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