



## Introduction: The Epistemic Turn

*Alessandro D'Arma, Minna Aslama Horowitz,  
Katja Lehtisaari, and Hannu Nieminen*

In today's era of accelerating digital disruption, optimism about democratic dialogues, diversity, inclusion, and other such good things is hard to come by. As much as the recent global pandemic and geopolitical crises have demonstrated the fragility of the way we communicate and receive information, even without it, we would be weary, among other things, of

---

A. D'Arma

University of Westminster, London, UK

e-mail: [a.darma@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:a.darma@westminster.ac.uk)

M. Aslama Horowitz (✉)

University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

e-mail: [minna.aslama@helsinki.fi](mailto:minna.aslama@helsinki.fi)

K. Lehtisaari

Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

e-mail: [katja.lehtisaari@tuni.fi](mailto:katja.lehtisaari@tuni.fi)

H. Nieminen

Dept of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

e-mail: [hannu.nieminen@helsinki.fi](mailto:hannu.nieminen@helsinki.fi)

© The Author(s) 2024

M. Aslama Horowitz et al. (eds.), *Epistemic Rights in the Era of Digital Disruption*, Global Transformations in Media and Communication Research - A Palgrave and IAMCR Series, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45976-4\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45976-4_1)

biases created by algorithms and other possible dangers of generative artificial intelligence, digital divides created by economic or competence gaps, digital surveillance, and the continuing increase in online disinformation and hatred. In many ways, digitalisation may empower us to connect and communicate, but it is also increasingly impeding our fundamental rights.

Although media and communication research has addressed the so-called communication rights in seminal texts such as *Communication Rights and Social Justice* (Padovani & Calabrese, 2014) and has recently attempted to define and analyse those rights in the digital era (see, e.g., Aslama Horowitz et al., 2020), the complexity of the dilemmas and contexts warrants more scholarship. In this book, we argue that because of the multitude of challenges, it is not enough to speak about communication or digital rights. A more comprehensive term is needed to grasp the multifaceted challenges of the current situation to citizens, organisations, and democratic structures.

The starting point of this book is thus the claim of epistemic equality: in a functioning democracy, citizens should be equally capable of making informed choices about matters of societal importance. This claim includes the notion that citizens have equal access to all relevant information and knowledge necessary for informed will formation.

Discussions of epistemic justice have been vast and rich in philosophy. The focus on rights, however, is more recent, and the research around either has only recently entered the field of communication and media scholarship. Concerned voices have warned of an epistemic crisis in the public realm and public discussion caused by the avalanche of online content, often indiscriminate in terms of quality or veracity and the way we process that information (e.g., Dahlgren, 2018). In addition to the structural transformations to democratic debates and deliberation, digital platforms and social media have challenged our ability for self-reflection and self-knowledge (Fisher, 2022): algorithmic digital media, by collecting our personal data and offering us certain content accordingly, feed us knowledge about ourselves without us participating in forming and reflecting on this knowledge.

Calls for epistemic rights and justice regarding the digital media era have recently been expressed by scholars such as Shoshanna Zuboff (2019) regarding the so-called surveillance capitalism that monetises our data. As another example, philosopher Lani Watson (2021) has theorised the need

for epistemic rights in her groundbreaking book *The Right to Know: Epistemic Rights and Why We Need Them*. Watson (2018) has specifically highlighted the case of journalism and Brexit, demonstrating how misinformation is a kind of violation of epistemic rights. Lately, digital rights activist organisations such as the Just Net Coalition and IT for Change (2020) have also argued for the epistemic rights of marginalised groups.

Today, we are witnessing a turn in media and communication-related research towards epistemic rights. However, the discussions remain somewhat fragmented. This book is intended as the first holistic response to an urgent need to address epistemic rights regarding communication as a central public policy issue, an academic analytical concept, and a crucial theme for informed public debates.

Epistemic rights concern people's capability to understand information and knowledge offered by epistemic institutions (such as the media and the like) and, based on this understanding, their ability to act for their own interests and needs, as well as those of society as a whole. In a democratic society, epistemic rights presume, among others, equality in all aspects relating to the access to and the availability of information and knowledge, symmetric relations in public communication, equality in obtaining critical literacy in information and communication, and equal protection of personal privacy from any form of public intrusion. In the digital era, our epistemic rights are increasingly challenged in novel ways by state and commercial actors alike.

This edited volume showcases the history and diversity of current debates around communication rights and digital rights as precursors of the need for epistemic rights, both as a theoretical concept and as an empirically assessed benchmark. In the foundational chapter (Chap. 2), **Hannu Nieminen** introduces the concept of epistemic rights, building on the basic definition of democracy as the rule of the people, by the people, and for the people. According to him, epistemic rights refer to the requirement that in order to have equality in decision-making, society should guarantee that truthful information and knowledge are made available to all and that people have the competence to use these for their benefit and that of society as a whole. As a background, Nieminen offers a short review of the communication rights movement that has paved the way for the present discussion on epistemic rights.

What follows is a section focusing on concepts and issues central to policies supporting media environments conducive to epistemic rights. **Bart Cammaerts** in Chap. 3 underlines the challenges of both liberal radical and socialist radical imaginaries that have empowered democratic public interventions in the context of media and communication and calls for their expansion and reinvention in the current conjuncture era of (digital) inequality, surveillance, mis- and disinformation, and oligopolistic power. **Philip M. Napoli** in Chap. 4 provides a typology of information inequalities ranging from digital divides and disparities in media ownership to news deserts, disinformation divides, and algorithmic bias. The chapter provides concepts for policymaking that support individual and collective epistemic rights. **Tarlach McGonagle** in Chap. 5 offers a detailed review of the European Convention of Human Rights from the viewpoint of epistemic rights. Analysing several European Court of Human Rights cases, he calls for more explicit attention on the epistemic dimension within the human rights framework. Terry Flew, in Chap. 6 continues the critical inventory of the current conditions by outlining a prominent tension in tech policy between the digital rights of the individual versus the idea of communications forming epistemic commons. Flew argues for an inclusive version of digital citizenship in policymaking that narrows the gap between technocratic decision-making and politics. In Chap. 7, **Maria Michalis** and **Alessandro D'Arma** discuss one traditional tool for supporting epistemic rights—public service media (PSM). The authors argue that notwithstanding the risks of marginalisation they are currently facing, PSM organisations, given their institutional mandates, have a major role to play in supporting epistemic rights and promoting epistemic justice. The chapter identifies the main conditions and governance implications for PSM organisations if they are to fulfil this role.

The second section of the book is dedicated to case studies that highlight the complexities of epistemic rights in particular contexts. While discussing different countries and regions, the fundamental problems are shared in most parts of the globe: access, availability, participation and dialogicality, privacy, precarity, and veracity of knowledge. **Anita Gurumurthy** in Chap. 8, in her powerful account of what the platform economy may mean for women, illustrates the challenges with four stories from India. **Tendai Chari** in Chap. 10 highlights not only the global capitalist structures underlying the internet but also those of

national authoritarian power that may disrupt epistemic access. Similarly, **Marius Dragomir** and **Minna Aslama Horowitz** in Chap. 11 discuss how state and non-state actors become epistemic violators in Central and Eastern Europe when capturing legacy and online journalistic outlets. **Reeta Pöyhtäri**, **Riku Neuvonen**, **Marko Ala-Fossi**, **Jockum Hildén**, and **Katja Lehtisaari** in Chap. 12 explore challenges for epistemic rights in Nordic countries, where the developments regarding freedom of speech and dialogue have common roots but differing outcomes. **Fernando Oliveira Paulino** and **Luma Poletti Dutra** in Chap. 9 discuss approaches to guarantee a fundamental epistemic right—the right to information—in the information laws of Brazil and Mexico. Finally, **Yik Chan Chin** in Chap. 13 examines the academic debate on access to digital data in China and the Chinese state’s policy, demonstrating the lack of consideration of epistemic rights in regulating access to digital data in China and the interplay of global tendencies and local particularities.

In the concluding section, **Lani Watson** and the editors in Chap. 14 discuss the implications of the insights in the previous chapters. They reflect on both further theoretical and empirical research needs in the field of communication and media research, and national and global policy agendas: What should be known about epistemic rights, and how should they be factored into human rights and communications policies?

One thing is certain: there is a growing consensus about the necessity of epistemic rights. These rights are not only about the right to know but also, in our digital era of abundance of information, the right to have a voice and be heard. As Nick Couldry (2010) has posited, having a voice—the ability to be heard as a valued contributor—is in today’s society as important as economic advantages, determining one’s social standing and opportunities. Moreover, Mathias Risse (2021) argues that we should understand epistemic rights as a new segment of human rights because democracy can only flourish if both individual citizens and groups and collectives are protected as those who know and as those who are known. In these chapters, we make visible some of the challenges and opportunities for both.

This volume is partly based on the project ‘Communication Rights in the Age of Digital Disruption’ (CORDI, 2019–2022, grant number 320891), which was funded by the Academy of Finland and has enabled

the open-access publication of the book. The book has also received support from the project 'Democratic Epistemic Capacity in the Age of Algorithms (DECA)', funded by the Strategic Research Council within the Research Council of Finland (grant number 352557). Special thanks to Elis Karell at the University of Helsinki, who has been instrumental in the book's editing process.

## REFERENCES

- Aslama Horowitz, M., Nieminen, H., & Schejter, A. M. (2020). Introduction: Communication rights in the digital age. *Journal of Information Policy*, 10(2020), 299–303. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jinfopoli.10.2020.0299>
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. SAGE.
- Dahlgren, P. (2018). Media, knowledge and trust: The deepening epistemic crisis of democracy. *Javnost—The Public*, 25(1–2), 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/013183222.2018.1418819>
- Fisher, E. (2022). Epistemic media and critical knowledge about the self: Thinking about algorithms with Habermas. *Critical Sociology*, 48(7–8), 1309–1324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211044193>
- Just Net Coalition & IT for Change. (2020). *A digital new deal: Visions of justice in a post-COVID world*. <https://projects.itforchange.net/digital-new-deal/>
- Padovani, C., & Calabrese, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Communication rights and social justice: Historical accounts of transnational mobilizations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Risse, M. (2021). The fourth generation of human rights: Epistemic rights in digital lifeworlds. *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, 8(2), 351–378. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mopp-2020-0039>
- Watson, L. (2018). Systematic epistemic rights violations in the media: A Brexit case study. *Social Epistemology*, 32(2), 88–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1440022>
- Watson, L. (2021). *The right to know: Epistemic rights and why we need them*. Routledge.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Public Affairs.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

