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r/Reddit: Has anyone else noticed the rise of social epistemic tendencies in

internet users lately?

LIS 3261: Introduction to Information Science

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Introduction

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and the investigation of what constitutes justified belief from opinion. Epistemology has undergone multiple phases and iterations through the centuries, leading to the informal development of two main stances: Social and Individual Epistemology. Where individual epistemology emphasizes the individual's role in differentiating justified belief from opinion for oneself, social epistemology emphasizes the collective's role and how cultural beliefs, and crowdsourcing can influence the assertion of knowledge and other epistemic desiderata/ways of knowing. While individual epistemology has remained the primary stance for asserting one's knowledge for centuries, that may be starting to change as our ways of searching and confirming information are moving towards a more globally connected stage. User-generated Q&A forum sites, such as Reddit, may have invertedly caused a rise in social epistemic tendencies in internet users in response to the gradual deoptimization of search engine result pages (SERPs) due to Google's controversial algorithmic changes and interference from search engine optimizers (SEO) and paid search marketers (PSM).

Social Epistemic Testimony and Tendencies

To understand precisely how Reddit fills the metaphorical void left by these search engine deoptimizations, we first need to define what exactly are social epistemic tendencies. Within social epistemology, there are many central topics of debate; however, most relevant to this topic is the idea of "Testimony." Goldman & O'Connor (2021) define testimony as "seek[ing] to determine the truth-value of proposition p by soliciting the opinion(s) of others." While it is still up to an individual to determine what is justified belief and what is an opinion, testimony-based assertion is still firmly a sect of social epistemology because it relies on the appeal of another individual, creating a social connection. For this purpose, *social epistemic*

tendencies can be defined as the tendency for an individual to search for and affirm knowledge using testimonial sources, such as colleagues, peers, or even strangers.

Testimony-based assertion often calls into question if and when an individual is able to trust the testimony of a stranger, to which epistemologists largely agree that, yes, an individual should be able to trust what a stranger testifies because often the stranger's testimony was asserted by other sources. This view is called reductionism because it 'reduces' the amount of testimonial confirmation an individual needs to affirm a proposition (Goldman & O'Connor, 2021). There are three types of reductionism:

- Global reductionism (believing testimony due to its general reliability)

- Local reductionism (believing one specific instance of testimony from a reliable speaker)

- Anti-reductionism (which argues that testimony itself is already a source of justification and that an individual has default justification in believing what a speaker says unless proven otherwise)

The Fall of Google's SERP

Many people today use the internet to search for answers to their questions, and until recently, many people opted to use their search engine of choice (most often Google, which directs upwards of 92% of internet traffic (Copeland et al., 2019)). However, recently, many people have reported finding it much more challenging to find the information they are looking for on their standard search engine, and they are not wrong. Since 2018, Google has made upwards of 3200 changes to its search engine algorithm, all changing what and what does not show up when individuals use google to look for answers to questions (Copeland et al., 2019). Among these algorithm changes include blacklists the prevent certain sites from popping up on the SERP that go beyond blocklists required by U.S. law, site selection that favors large

corporations over smaller businesses, and a larger portion of the SERP being dedicated to Googles own features and ads.

And Google is simply one of many changing how they operate on the internet. Corporations around the world have realized the financial benefits of showing up higher on the SERP, resulting in a 68.1-billion-dollar industry, SEO, dedicated to ensuring that their corporations are pushed to and remain at the top of the SERP through either AI-generated articles or paid ad space (Global Industry Analytics Inc, 2023). In a YouTube video addressing the rise of SEO and cluttering of the Google SERP, YouTuber Enrico Tartarotti showcased how he was able to make a publishable SEO article with full text and pictures with AI in 2 minutes and 32 seconds, an article he explained, did nothing but regurgitate buzzwords and empty information to push his article to the top of the SERP (Enrico Tartarott, 2022). Tartarotti then went on to explain that the Google SERP has gotten so diluted because corporations using SEO professionals are pumping out article after article of the same information, all in the attempt to remain at the top.

All these changes only begin to scratch the surface of what has changed on the internet in only in the last five years. These changes, coupled with a population that struggles to efficiently evaluate their search results and differentiate commercially influenced links from actual intellectual webpages (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2023), you have a recipe for a population of frustrated information seekers with limited avenues to seek and find information efficiently.

Reddit: The Internet's Solution of Choice

Reddit is a user-based Q&A forum where people can pose questions, topics of debate, or opinions and start conversations with people about just about any topic they can think of. According to Brian Dean, a writer at BackLink, reddit is estimated to have over 430 million

active monthly users and over 100,000 active subreddits (Dean, 2023) (other sources estimate

that reddit may host upwards of 2.3 million subreddits, though not all of them are active). Odds

are, if you can think about it, there is a subreddit of people talking about it.

As Google's SERP began getting more and more cluttered with empty and unhelpful

information, many people have begun to resort to adding "Reddit" or "site: Reddit" in order to

bring themselves directly to a trove of information they knew is generated and upkeep by real

people. On a Reddit post discussing this exact topic, several Redditors (the name for users of this

site) shared some of the reasons they now go directly to Reddit with questions or problems

(Auelogic, 2018). Redditor amandapillar shared that they found going to Reddit was easier than

trying to navigate Google's SERP. Redditor tgpineapple shared that they appreciated the

different opinions and perspectives other Redditors could give them on different issues. Redditor

chyteaaa shared that for some problems, no matter how hard they searched, they could not

simply find a solution to their issues anymore, whereas Reddit would get them an easy answer.

Two other Redditors, TwilightVulpine and a deleted user, shared that they simply liked the

community and being able to talk to real people about issues or topics of interest. Any one of

these would be a good reason to look to Reddit for testimonial evidence from one's peer, and as

of November 2023, that Reddit post has over 200 people commenting their own reasons and

thousands of upvotes (or approvals) from other Redditors.

As a result of so many people turning to Reddit and other user-generated response

forums, these users have unknowingly or knowingly created a proverbial treasure trove of social

epistemic testimony-based evidence for those seeking answers and truths to their questions.

Some Redditors have even admitted in posts or comments that they sometimes make posts on the

off chance that someone else could use the information they found. However, the question still

remains: How much can information seekers trust the answers given to them on Reddit? Faced with a similar query, Strukova et al. (2022) conducted a research study looking into how easy it was to accurately identify verifiable experts in data science subreddits. They were able to develop a computer model that could identify if a responder in these subreddits was an expert, non-expert, or an out-of-scope commentator accurately on average 83% of the time, as well as identify traits that characterized each group. This could prove to be significant boon to the Reddit community because it could move Reddit forums away from anti-reductionist justification and instead towards global or even local reductionist justification, as this model could give users a way to verify if a subreddit is known for its general reliability or even if a Redditor specifically is known for giving reliable information. This model could even be used to assert the reliability of Reddit as a whole if this model was launched site wide.

Conclusion

To summarize, Reddit is an incredibly valuable trove of information because it is embracing the social epistemic a population's desire to learn from one another when they found their search engine queries, diluted by Google algorithmic changes and search engine deoptimization due to SEO and PSM interference, lacking. Unless Google and other search engines clean up how they organize and present information, we could see a shift away from search engine-generated queries and a more permanent move towards more social epistemic styles of information gathering in the younger generations.

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