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SEÇÃO: EPISTEMOLOGY & PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

## Against fake news: Rethinking the strategy of news abstinence

*Contra las fake news: Repensar la estrategia de abstinencia informativa*

*Contra as fake news: Repensando a estratégia da abstinência de notícias*

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**Abstract:** In his "An Epistemic Defense of News Abstinence" (2021), Sven Bernecker argues for a radical epistemic approach to counter the consumption of fake news. He suggests that a subject can be propositionally justified in ignoring the news under specific circumstances. This paper critically examines Bernecker's account and raises essential concerns undermining its plausibility. Then, it proposes a revision of the news abstinence account. It is argued that the original attitude of ignoring the news is epistemically inappropriate and should be replaced with a more suitable attitude of suspending judgment. This adjustment allows for the maintenance of Bernecker's original idea of an epistemic defense strategy against the consumption of fake news while avoiding its associated issues.

**Keywords:** news abstinence; fake news; ignorance; suspension of judgement; information

**Resumen:** En su "Defensa epistémica de la abstinencia de noticias" (2021), Sven Bernecker propone un enfoque epistémico radical para combatir el consumo de noticias falsas. Sostiene que, en determinadas circunstancias, un individuo puede estar justificado para ignorar las noticias. Este artículo examina críticamente la propuesta de Bernecker y plantea importantes objeciones que socavan su plausibilidad. A continuación, se propone una revisión de la propuesta de abstinencia informativa. Se argumenta que la actitud inicial de ignorar las noticias es epistémicamente inadecuada y debería ser reemplazada por la actitud más adecuada de suspender el juicio. Este ajuste permite mantener la idea original de Bernecker de una estrategia epistémica de defensa contra el consumo de noticias falsas y, al mismo tiempo, evitar los problemas asociados.

**Palabras clave:** abstinencia noticiosa; noticias falsas; ignorancia; suspensión de la sentencia; información.

**Resumo:** Em seu artigo "Uma defesa epistêmica da abstinência de notícias" (2021), Sven Bernecker defende uma abordagem epistêmica radical para combater o consumo de notícias falsas. Ele sugere que um sujeito pode ser propositalmente justificado ao ignorar as notícias em circunstâncias específicas. Este artigo examina criticamente a tese proposta por Bernecker e levanta questões importantes que minam a sua plausibilidade. Em seguida, uma revisão da teoria da abstinência de notícias é proposta. Argumenta-se que a atitude original de ignorar as notícias é epistemicamente inadequada e deveria ser substituída pela atitude mais adequada de suspender o juízo. Esse ajuste permite manter a ideia original de Bernecker de uma estratégia epistêmica de defesa contra o consumo de notícias falsas e, ao mesmo tempo, evitar os problemas que lhe estão associados.

**Palavras-chave:** abstinência de notícias; notícias falsas; ignorância; suspensão de juízo; informação.



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## Introduction

In this paper, I critique the News Abstinence Account as proposed by Sven Bernecker in his "An Epistemic Defense of News Abstinence" (2021). Bernecker argues that a subject can be propositionally justified in ignoring the news under specific circumstances. However, I will argue that his account is problematic as the attitude of ignoring can never be propositionally justified. I propose a modification to his original account and suggest that the adequate epistemic attitude that can support a news abstinence approach is the attitude of suspension of judgment. In this way, we can maintain the spirit of Bernecker's original idea regarding an epistemic strategy of defense against the consumption of fake news while, at the same time, avoiding its associated inconveniences.

Here is the plan. Section 1 introduces the concept of news abstinence as a defense strategy against fake news as proposed by Bernecker. Section 2 critically examines the plausibility of the news abstinence account, raising key objections. Section 3 proposes an alternative approach based on the attitude of suspension of judgment. Finally, Section 4 concludes with remarks on the importance of addressing the challenges of fake news and adopting informed and rational strategies to combat its influence.

## Abstinence from News Consumption

How should we deal with fake news? How can we defend ourselves against the consumption of fake news? To tackle the problems associated with it, we need a multi-faceted approach involving media literacy education, fact-checking initiatives, responsible journalism practices, and critical thinking skills. It is crucial to promote information integrity, foster public trust in reliable sources, and encourage an informed and discerning approach to news consumption to mitigate the adverse impact of fake news on individuals and society.

One possible way to protect oneself against fake news lies directly in the hands of the consumer. This involves reducing considerably the

amount of news consumed and even ignoring news on specific topics or from specific sources. This strategy is known as *news abstinence*. Proposed by Sven Bernecker (2021), the account of news abstinence suggests that an individual can epistemically justify her decision to refrain from consuming news on certain topics or from specific sources, even if it means missing out on true information and potential knowledge. To fully grasp Bernecker's proposal, it is fundamental to understand some of his basic notions.

First and foremost, the notion of a *fake news environment*. This concept draws inspiration from the idea of *coverage reliability*, originally proposed by Sandy Goldberg (2010). Goldberg introduced the term to describe the extent to which the sources of knowledge in our social environment keep us well-informed. Specifically, if individuals form beliefs (let us say, the belief that  $p$ , there is a flood in India) by relying on their social environment for coverage about a specific domain of interest, they depend on the presence of a source  $S$  in their environment. This source  $S$  should (i) reliably investigate and determine whether  $p$  is true, (ii) reliably report the result of that investigation, and (iii) fulfill both conditions in a timely manner (GOLDBERG, 2010, p. 159).

Coverage reliability comprises two fundamental components: reliable information regarding whether  $p$  is true and exposure to different types of evidence concerning whether  $p$  is true. Thus, an environment exhibits coverage reliability if it can support the following conditional: if a certain relevant proposition  $p$  were true, an ordinary person would be promptly informed about it. Building upon this notion of coverage reliability, Bernecker puts forth the concept of a fake news environment, whose defining characteristic is its failure to meet the condition of coverage reliability. In a fake news environment, it is not the case that an ordinary person would be informed about a certain relevant proposition  $p$  in a timely manner if it were true. This lack of coverage reliability stems from both the unreliability of the media and the information conveyed; in this context, finding the truth becomes a challenging and demanding task

as trustworthy sources are scarce.

A second idea fundamental to the news abstinence thesis is the notion of *motivated ignorance*. The term 'ignorance', in general, refers to some kind of epistemic lack. In this sense, ignorance is understood as a state of lacking knowledge or justified belief about a particular proposition or domain. It views ignorance as a negative epistemic condition resulting from a lack of access to information or failure to acquire relevant knowledge. Within this perspective, there are two main approaches. According to the standard view, ignorance is simply the absence or lack of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The rival view, a less restrictive position, says ignorance is the absence or lack of true belief<sup>3</sup>. The latter entails the former, but not vice-versa. Bernecker's thesis does not necessarily depend on this distinction, but he ends up taking sides with the weaker position: he assumes that if a subject lacks a true belief that *p*, then she is ignorant about that *p*.

The state of ignorance that serves the author's purposes is a qualified state of ignorance, namely, a state of *motivated ignorance*. Motivated ignorance pertains to the deliberate choice to remain ignorant or avoid certain knowledge or information. It involves actively resisting or evading knowledge due to personal motivations, biases, or the desire to maintain existing beliefs or worldviews. Motivated ignorance is an attitude of ignorance that is deliberate. Bernecker, about this point, is inspired by the account of willful ignorance as proposed by Jan Wieland (2017), which deals with the state of ignorance that an agent voluntarily causes. Wieland defines the legal notion of willful ignorance as follows:

S's ignorance about *p* is voluntary only if (i) *p* implies that A (an action by S or another agent S') is wrong; (ii) S should have considered *p*; (iii) S could have considered *p*, but S does not consider *p*; (iv) because it is inconvenient for S. (2017, p. 111).

For an attitude to qualify as an attitude of willful ignorance, the situation must not be such that it excessively hinders the agent from acquiring true beliefs about a specific subject. Therefore, the reason why the agent fails to acquire or possess true beliefs about a particular subject is that they do not desire or intend to acquire those beliefs, even if it would be relatively easy for them to do so.<sup>4</sup> To illustrate this point, let us consider the following example: Imagine a subject, S, who is an inveterate smoker. S lights a cigarette inside a hospital where their mother is receiving treatment. After a short while, a nurse approaches and warns S, saying, "This is an inappropriate behavior as it poses a risk to the fragile health of the hospitalized individuals. Please, put out your cigarette, or you will get a ticket!" In this scenario, S's ignorance of the proposition *p* (let us say, that smoking is prohibited in the hospital H) can be categorized as willful ignorance. This is because *p* implies that S's action is inappropriate, and S should have considered (or known) the proposition *p*. Additionally, S could have considered *p*, but chose not to do so because it would have been inconvenient for him. It is worth noting that, according to Wieland (2017), ignorance is defined not in terms of the absence of true belief (or knowledge) but rather *in terms of the absence of the consideration of the target belief*.

Bernecker transposes Wieland's proposal – originally suggested to a legal and pragmatic context – to an epistemic context and defines *motivated ignorance* as follows:

*Motivated Ignorance*: An agent's ignorance about *p* is motivated if he considers *p* but does not acquire a true belief about *p*, even if he could easily do so via some epistemically respectable route. The reason the agent does not acquire a true belief is that it serves his motives (desires, interests, needs, values, or goals). (BERNECKER, 2021, p. 295)

<sup>2</sup> Among the advocates of the standard view of ignorance are DeNicola (2017, p. 200–2), Fields (1994, p. 403), Haack (2011, p. 25), Le Morvan (2012), and Zimmermann (2008, p. ix).

<sup>3</sup> Proponents of the rival view of ignorance are Goldman (1986, p. 26), Goldman & Olsson (2009, p. 19–21), Guerrero (2007, p. 62–3), Peels (2010), and van Woudenberg (2009, p. 375).

<sup>4</sup> It is easy to imagine such a situation in a practical context. Think of a mother who prefers to be ignorant about his son's drug abuse. But it does not translate well to an epistemic context in which a lack of knowledge is negative and should be avoided.

Bernecker incorporates this notion of motivated ignorance into his account of news abstinence. However, before delving into that, we need to clarify another fundamental concept related to the epistemic value of ignorance. According to epistemological orthodoxy, the primary epistemic goal is maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false beliefs.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the primary epistemic aim is to believe truths and avoid believing falsehoods. Based on this epistemic goal, it becomes apparent that Bernecker's proposal raises some concerns.

At first glance, the attitude of ignorance seems to hinder the achievement of the first part of the epistemic goal, which is the maximization of truth. However, it does fulfill the second part, which is the minimization of falsehoods. If true belief (or knowledge) is deemed an epistemically valuable pursuit, and if the absence or lack of this pursuit is sufficient for ignorance, then ignorance itself lacks epistemic value. Consequently, if ignorance is not epistemically valuable, it becomes implausible (initially) to epistemically justify an individual's ignorance, even if it is motivated. If this perspective holds, then it would be unfeasible to enhance an agent's epistemic standing through an intentional attitude of disregarding the news.<sup>6</sup>

To mitigate the negative impact of ignorance regarding the epistemic goal of seeking to believe in truths, Bernecker resorts to some specific cases in which the acquisition of true beliefs can yield a negative effect or simply not have any positive effect; such cases involve what he calls trivial truths and bias-inducing information. Thus, even if motivated ignorance prevented the subject from forming true beliefs, such true beliefs could be expendable, not generating any negative effect on the subject. Bernecker's argument involving trivial truths aims to demonstrate that the *veritistic* notion, in which true belief is taken to be the prime determinant of epistemic value and the appropriate criteria of epistemic rightness,

is compatible with the idea that we need not be concerned solely with how *many* true propositions we believe but rather with *how much true* we believe, where the amount of truth is understood as a function of the degree of informativeness and relevance (AHLSTROM-VIJ & GRIMM, 2013; TREANOR, 2014). These are some examples of trivial truths: the number of strands of hair that one has, the number of grains of sand on a beach, or the last species of dinosaurs to become extinct. Hence, recognizing that true beliefs can vary in their epistemic value and relevance, an agent may be justified in abstaining from acquiring a large set of trivial true beliefs to focus on weightier truths. Consequently, Bernecker contends that intentionally ignoring a substantial number of true beliefs can have epistemic value if the agent is aware of the triviality of those beliefs and actively seeks to acquire substantial truths.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding cases of bias-inducing information, Bernecker draws attention to two specific cases. The first case is a procedure that can be observed in clinical contexts and is usually called blinding or masking<sup>8</sup>, commonly used to reduce the risk of bias in the evaluation of treatment outcomes. It involves withholding certain information from participants, researchers, or both, to minimize the influence of expectations or biases on the results. For instance, in double-blind trials, both the participants and the researchers involved in administering the treatments and assessing outcomes are unaware of who is receiving which treatment. This prevents both the participants and the researchers from consciously or unconsciously bias the results based on their knowledge of the treatment assignment. The second case, which comes from a philosophical context, focuses on a similar phenomenon, and can be traced back to John Rawls' (1971) thought experiment on the *veil of ignorance*. This type of experiment was designed to guide the construction of a just and fair society by removing biases and self-interest

<sup>5</sup> According to Chisholm (1966:14), and before him William James (1967) e William Clifford (1877).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, Bernecker could argue that the motivation here is not to enhance the agent's epistemic standing but to prevent it from getting worse.

<sup>7</sup> In the next section I argue that this idea of the triviality of true beliefs by its informativeness and relevance is misguided.

<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon can also be seen in other areas such as legal, political, and philosophical contexts.

from decision-making. The idea behind the veil of ignorance is to imagine a hypothetical situation where individuals are placed behind a metaphorical veil that hides their specific characteristics, such as their social status, wealth, talents, or personal preferences. In this state of ignorance, individuals do not know their position in society or the advantages or disadvantages they possess. From behind the veil of ignorance, individuals are tasked with creating principles for a just society. The veil ensures that individuals do not know how their choices will personally impact them. Without this knowledge, individuals are more likely to adopt fair and unbiased principles that protect the interests of all members of society, regardless of their specific circumstances. So, being ignorant of certain truths would produce positive outcomes regarding people's behaviors and decisions.

We are now able to understand and evaluate Bernecker's argument that an agent can be epistemically justified in temporarily ignoring the news on a certain topic or news from a particular source. He claims that if a subject has reason to "believe that by following the news they acquire more false beliefs than true ones or that they acquire true beliefs but only irrelevant ones, then they are rationally permitted to take a temporary newsbreak" (BERNECKER, 2021, p. 299). Here is Bernecker's account of *News Abstinence* (NA):

(NA): An agent is propositionally justified in temporarily ignoring news in a given domain or from a given source if (i) he is in a fake news environment or is justified in believing that he is, and (ii) it is cognitively difficult or time-consuming to discriminate genuine news from fake news or to obtain genuine news. (BERNECKER, 2021, p. 300)

Condition (i) is fundamentally rooted in the concept of a fake news environment, particularly the notion that within such environments, the agent lacks epistemic reliability coverage. In a fake news environment, it is not the case that an ordinary person would be informed about a certain relevant proposition  $p$  in a timely manner if it were true. The difficulty in obtaining reliable news coverage arises from the unreliability of both

the media itself and the information it presents. This situation poses a significant challenge in the pursuit of truth, as credible sources of information are few and far between.

Additionally, this condition is there to provide the epistemic status required for the subject to be able to properly ignore the news. This is possible given the general reliabilist approach assumed by the author. Even if a belief that has been justified turns out to be false, the way it was acquired or sustained should typically lead to true beliefs. Simply guessing without a systematic approach does not usually lead to true beliefs, which is why beliefs acquired through guesswork are not considered justified. If a belief is only considered justified when it is reliably acquired or sustained, and fake news environments lack reliability in acquiring and sustaining beliefs, as well as covering relevant evidence, then it may be better to ignore the news to have a more secure justification for one's beliefs.

Condition (ii) highlights the challenge faced by agents in a fake news environment. In an environment where fake news is prevalent, it can be difficult for individuals to differentiate between true and false information. Even if someone were to gather evidence to aid in this process, it would require a lot of effort and time. It can be justified for individuals to abstain from news consumption if it reduces the likelihood of believing false information or leads to more meaningful true beliefs. Differentiating between genuine and fake news is especially challenging when it comes to written news, as it requires comparing multiple sources and fact-checking. Determining if an image or video has been manipulated with artificial intelligence is also difficult. Unfortunately, even with some level of detection technology, correcting false information is rarely as effective as the initial spread of falsehoods.

A final observation about Bernecker's account is that he connects his reliabilist defense of news abstinence with *epistemic consequentialism* (AHLSTROM-VIJ & DUNN, 2018). Epistemic consequentialism establishes normative concepts based on achieving states of affairs that are de-

emed to have ultimate value. In epistemology, the ultimate value is viewed as epistemic correctness, defined as the acquisition of true beliefs and the avoidance of false beliefs, aligning with reliabilism.<sup>9</sup> With reliabilism and epistemic consequentialism in mind, Bernecker reasons that we should form beliefs in a way that maximizes the benefit of believing the truth and minimizes the potential for error. Considering this standpoint, if keeping up with the news leads to acquiring more false beliefs than true ones, it is reasonable for an individual to disregard the news. In environments dominated by fake news, this logical response becomes not only permissible but also necessary.

### Objections to the Account of News Abstinence

As discussed in the preceding section, Bernecker's news abstinence account states that an agent can be epistemically justified in temporarily ignoring news about a particular subject or news from a specific source. The core idea posits that if an agent has reasons to believe that following the news would result in acquiring more false beliefs than true beliefs, or if it leads to acquiring true but irrelevant beliefs, then the agent would be rationally permitted to temporarily abstain from consuming the news. That said, some objections to Bernecker's thesis that in my view undermine its plausibility are presented.

*Objection 1:* Firstly, there is an inconsistency in the condition (i) of (NA). This condition states that the subject must be in a fake news environment or justified in believing that it is. The issue lies in this conjunctive condition and the significant discrepancy in the subject's epistemic position depending on which part of the condition they satisfy. On one hand, concerning the first conjunct, if one is exposed to a fake news environment without realizing it, she is likely to believe the misinformation presented to her. She will not have a reason to doubt the information or its source, making properly ignoring the news an impractical option for her. If we consider standard cases of

justification, a belief needs to be grounded (by evidence or reliability) to be properly held. If one is unaware, that she is in a fake news environment, it is probably because one lacks a proper justification to believe in such a thing. In this case, given one's lack of justification, it would be inappropriate to ignore the news – one's attitude of ignorance would be unjustified and dogmatic. This contradicts Bernecker's argument. He says that "if an agent has reason to believe that by following the news, they acquire more false beliefs than true ones [...], then they are propositionally justified in (temporary) ignoring the news in a certain domain or from a certain source." (BERNECKER, 2021, p. 301). On the other hand, the second conjunct of condition (i) requires the subject to be justified in believing that she is in such environment. In such cases, if the subject fulfills this requirement and her belief is the result of a reliable method of belief formation, she has an epistemic reason to refrain from believing the information being transmitted or to distrust the source conveying it. However, even under these circumstances, it is not immediately apparent that the subject's most probable stance would be to *ignore* the information or its source.

*Objection 2:* This objection concerns the fundamental epistemic goal of attaining true beliefs and avoiding false ones. Initially, the attitude of ignorance may seem counterintuitive because, while it fulfills the second part of the epistemic goal by avoiding belief in falsehoods, it effectively renders the pursuit of the first part, seeking to believe truths, impossible. Nevertheless, in the long run, adopting an attitude of ignorance puts us in an epistemic deficit where no true beliefs can be acquired. Bernecker attempts to address this objection by appealing to two common phenomena. The first relates to irrelevant or trivial information (propositions). The argument suggests that much of the information we encounter is irrelevant or trivial and, therefore, ignoring it would not significantly impact our epistemic status. However, there are problems with this argument as Bernecker's

<sup>9</sup> This idea is analogous to consequentialism but in an ethical context. In ethics, the ultimate value is often seen as moral goodness, which can be equated with individual happiness, without considering its distribution, leading to utilitarianism.

understanding of relevance or triviality seems mistaken. He cites Ahlstrom-Vij & Grimm (2013) and Treanor (2014), according to which the amount of truth is understood as a function of the degree of informativeness and relevance. However, informativeness does not necessarily have a direct connection with relevance or truth. For example, the proposition "Mary is a bank teller and a feminist" is more informative than "Mary is a feminist," but it does not imply that the former is more relevant or trivial than the latter. In fact, the more informative a proposition is, the higher is the risk of being wrong, so it is advisable to believe less informative propositions to reduce the risk of error. Moreover, both propositions are true, so it is not appropriate to say that one is 'truer' than the other. I follow Floridi (2008), in understanding that the relevance of information has nothing to do with its truth or informativeness. Instead, it is a function of how accurately the information answers a query given the probability of that query being asked.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, appealing to the irrelevance or triviality of information to mitigate the abandonment of the epistemic goal of attaining true beliefs is unsuccessful. The second phenomenon relates to bias-inducing propositions or information. These are true pieces of information that often lead to biased judgments. While this maneuver highlights circumstances in which true beliefs may have negative or neutral epistemic consequences, it fails to directly address the negative

implication that adopting an attitude of ignorance entails being closed off to the possibility of believing truths, even though these truths may often be dispensable. One could turn the argument around by considering that some philosophers argue it is possible to acquire knowledge even when the subject reasons from falsehoods.<sup>11</sup> In such cases, even if one happens to acquire false beliefs, which are typically deemed negative, it can lead to positive epistemic outcomes, namely, the formation of true beliefs (knowledge). If that is the case, having false beliefs would not be as problematic. The point here is to show that the reasons for mitigating the importance of acquiring true beliefs are very weak.

*Objection 3:* This objection is directed to the notion of motivated ignorance as presented by Bernecker, which states that an agent's ignorance about a proposition  $p$  is motivated if they consider  $p$  but do not acquire a true belief about it, even if they could easily do so through an epistemically respectable route. The problem with this thesis arises from the assumption that the agent considers  $p$ . It is important to notice that Bernecker is explicitly using the expression "*consider  $p$* " in his definition of motivated ignorance.<sup>12</sup> Why this is the problem? The problem lies in the fact that if one does consider  $p$ , then one is not in a position that enables ignoring  $p$ .<sup>13</sup> The attitude or action of ignoring presupposes that the proposition  $p$  has not been considered yet. Taking a traditional

<sup>10</sup> Floridi supports "a subjectivist interpretation of epistemic relevance is developed and defended. It is based on a counterfactual and metatheoretical analysis of the degree of relevance of some semantic information  $i$  to an informee/agent  $a$ , as a function of the accuracy of  $i$  understood as an answer to a query  $q$ , given the probability that  $q$  might be asked by  $a$ ." (FLORIDI, 2008, p. 69).

<sup>11</sup> For discussion on this topic see Klein (2008), Warfield (2007), Rodrigues (2017).

<sup>12</sup> An anonymous referee pointed out that Bernecker is thinking about a scenario where the subject does not need to pay attention to  $p$  (the news) as can be seen in the following Bernecker's passage: "On this view [the News Abstinence view], an agent should not pay attention to the news if doing so will result in them acquiring more false beliefs than true ones. Ignoring the news in a fake news environment is then rationally required, not just rationally permitted". (BERNECKER, 2021, p. 302). As I mention in the lines that follow, the notion of motivated ignorance is key to his view, and the definition Bernecker gives for it (BERNECKER, 2021, p. 295) is straightforward: "An agent's ignorance about  $p$  is motivated if he **considers**  $p$  but does not acquire a true belief about  $p$  [...] (my emphasis). If his original intention was to say that the subject is justified in not paying attention to  $p$  (that is, not even considering  $p$ ), then he just makes a serious mistake. Another point is that there are two situations in which Bernecker's view is attempting to deal with. The first one occurs when someone finds themselves in a fake news setting and must take action regarding a specific piece of news that is being conveyed. The second one is when the subject is in a fake news environment and must ignore one or more sources of information. In the first case, I believe that the discussion is a matter of defeaters, specifically, what exactly one can defeat with the belief that one is in a fake news environment – to be discussed in section 3. The second is slightly trickier because it would have to involve using one's belief that one is in a fake news environment not to defeat a specific piece of (mis)information but to justify one's stance of not paying attention to or ignoring all sources of information (the conditional element of his account). Only in this case, we could understand what Bernecker says about the general idea of news abstinence, i.e., if one should not pay attention or ignore the news. Again, my view is that it fails because of his own definition of motivated ignorance because he explicitly says that the agent considers  $p$  but does not genuinely believe in that  $p$ . Ahead in the text, this point is briefly discussed.

<sup>13</sup> In his 'Elusive Knowledge' (1996), David Lewis, give us the *Rule of Attention*. As he pointed out, it is more a triviality than a rule. He claims that the situation in which one has already given attention to is a situation one cannot properly ignore. (LEWIS, 1996, p. 559).

involuntarist approach to belief formation, when one considers a proposition, one is “automatically” compelled (by all available evidence) to adopt a particular doxastic attitude towards it: belief, disbelieve or suspend judgment. Ignoring, therefore, does not present itself as a doxastic attitude, nor is it something one can do once one has already considered or entertained a given proposition. Let us consider the following example: Imagine that I have asked journal editors for information regarding the submission deadline for a text. After a few hours, a reply comes into my box meaning there are two options: ignore the reply (I would not open the email and read its contents); to open the email and read its contents. However, by opening the email and reading its contents, I would be aware of a specific proposition (the submission deadline) and it could not be ignored. Yet, if I choose to ignore the reply, it would be an unreasonable move because it contains information I need to know and have specifically asked for.

Depending on the evidence available, one would be led to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment about it, but ignoring it would no longer be an available attitude. Ignoring  $p$  in a situation where the appropriate attitude would be to believe  $p$  appears irrational. The situation could change if there were a reason for not believing  $p$ . In such a case, one would still be ignorant about  $p$ , but that would not necessarily imply adopting an attitude of ignoring  $p$ . Even when someone believes in a falsehood, they are still in a state of ignorance because they lack the relevant true belief. Being in a state of ignorance about the news is not the same as adopting an attitude of ignoring the news. Thus, motivated ignorance seems incompatible with a proper epistemic attitude of ignorance toward  $p$  when  $p$  is already being attended to. One could argue that when Bernecker uses expressions like ‘not pay attention’ or ‘ignore’ he really means ‘not consider’, and if this is the case in Bernecker’s proposal, the temporary newsbreak would not be any kind of doxastic attitude nor the lack of

it.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, it seems to me that this interpretation is mistaken, since Bernecker is trying to epistemically justify one’s attitude or action in taking a ‘temporary newsbreak’ or ignoring the news. The problem resides with the lack of any kind of doxastic attitude, the question would now be what exactly is there to be epistemically justified. Given that the justification is a property of beliefs (whose contents are propositions), my impression is that Bernecker needs to specify the kind of attitude (doxastic) toward the formation of beliefs.

In Bernecker’s view, ignorance is only able to do part of the job, the other part is due to the notion of motivation. Motivation is the key feature here. It will be the motivation one has that will properly enable (in an epistemic sense) a subject to take an action towards the news, namely, not to pay attention to, ignore the news or have a break from watching it. But, in this view, motivation seems to be strongly connected with autonomous agency, with reasons to act in a certain way. As already mentioned, we are inside a doxastic involuntarist framework, which seems incompatible with the idea of autonomous agency. I take that, in Bernecker’s view, more important than ignoring (the lack of true belief) is one’s *motivation* because it is what makes it reasonable for one to act in a certain way (not to pay attention or ignore the news). According to (NA), the problem is that the only reason one has, despite being justified, can only pragmatically justify one’s action or attitude. For instance, one’s justified belief to be in a fake news setting does not defeat a particular belief (because there may be no belief to defeat); instead, it serves to (pragmatically) justify one’s decision to act in a certain way (not to pay attention or ignore the news). Even if the subject ends up being ignorant about certain true beliefs, the motivation behind such an attitude is pragmatic and not epistemic.<sup>15</sup>

*Objection 4:* There is a pragmatic issue with Bernecker’s proposed thesis, as it does not seem realistically applicable. Even if we ignore specific

<sup>14</sup> See the footnote 11.

<sup>15</sup> This point was made by an anonymous referee, to whom I am grateful.

media outlets and temporarily cease to consume news on a particular subject, it would not be sufficient. The author has overlooked a crucial dimension: the social interaction we have with other individuals. Even if one chooses to ignore news from a certain media outlet, she would still be exposed to that news through the accounts of individuals within their social circle. Let us consider an illustrative example. Suppose they have decided to ignore news about the upcoming elections. Consequently, they choose to disregard any news related to this subject from any available media sources. However, when they arrive at work, their colleagues engage in discussions about the latest news on the elections. When they become aware of the conversation, they cannot simply disregard it and leave the room, meaning that such an approach does not appear to be a practical or viable attitude to maintain.

### Reformulating the News Abstinence Thesis

In this section, a reformulation of the news abstinence thesis, the *Doxastic Account of News Abstinence (DANA)* is proposed.

(DANA): An agent  $S$  can be propositionally justified in refraining from consuming news in a specific domain or from a particular source by adopting an attitude of suspending judgment if (i)  $S$  is justified in believing that he is in a fake news environment, and (ii) it should be cognitively challenging or time-consuming for  $S$  to differentiate between genuine news and fake news, or to access reliable sources of genuine news.

As observed, the general spirit of Bernecker's account is preserved, but there are two fundamental modifications suggested by DANA. First, the concept of motivated ignorance has been replaced by the notion of suspension of judgment. Then, only the second disjunct condition (i) from NA has been retained. But how do these modifications address the issues associated with NA and respond to the objections raised against them? To begin with, we need to understand the attitude of suspending judgment and how it differs from the alleged attitude of ignorance.

Traditionally, within the realm of epistemology, the attitudes of belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment are considered fundamental doxastic attitudes. (FELDMAN, 2004). Belief and disbelief involve considering a proposition and forming a specific belief about it, no matter if it is  $p$  or not- $p$ . Both attitudes pose problems when confronted with a fake news environment as they entail the formation of a belief. Therefore, neither of these attitudes can serve as a defense strategy against fake news to reduce news consumption. This leaves us solely with the attitude of suspension of judgment.

Suspension of judgment refers to a situation in which the subject *considers* a certain proposition but is unable to assess its truth or falsity due to insufficient evidence. The agent is not in an adequate epistemic position to believe or disbelieve  $p$ . However, if suspending judgment about  $p$  does not involve forming a belief that  $p$  or not- $p$ , how does it differ from the attitude of ignorance?

To address this question, I will explore various perspectives on the nature of suspending judgment. Several theories shed light on this topic. According to the higher-order belief approach, suspending judgment is equivalent to holding a higher-order belief regarding a specific proposition. For example, if I suspend judgment about  $p$ , it can be understood as 'I'm not in a position to know  $p$ ' or 'I can't determine the truth or falsehood of  $p$ .'

Another approach, Bayesianism, views doxastic beliefs or attitudes as the degree of confidence an agent exhibits in the truth or falsity of propositions. These degrees of confidence are measured by real numbers within a unit interval, typically ranging from 0 to 1. In this sense, if one's degree of confidence in the proposition 'We are in 2023' is 0.9, it signifies a high level of confidence in its truth. Suspension of judgment, in this view, would correspond to a moderate level of confidence, somewhere closer to the interval midpoint, around 0.5.

Still, another perspective, known as the inquisitive or interrogative attitude thesis proposed by Friedman (2017), characterizes the content of an

agnostic attitude as an interrogative construction such as 'Is it the case that  $p$ ?'. Suspending judgment about  $p$  can be seen as dubious interrogative state regarding the truth or falsehood of  $p$ . This state arises from the agent's current epistemic situation lacking an answer to the question. These different approaches shed light on the nature of suspending judgment, offering various frameworks to understand this attitude and its distinction from the attitude of ignorance.

Although these approaches differ, they share a crucial feature that is relevant to my proposal. They all suggest that when an agent suspends judgment, and even if she remains ignorant about the target information, a specific mental state is formed – one the agent did not possess before. It is this mental state that accounts for the epistemic distinction between the attitude of suspending judgment and the attitude of ignorance.

For instance, according to the thesis of second-order belief, when an agent suspends judgment, she develops a mental state that corresponds to a second-order belief, such as 'We are not in a position to determine the truth or falsehood of  $p$ .' This is something that does not occur with the attitude of ignorance. The formation of this belief explains how the suspension of judgment can align with the epistemic goal of maximizing belief in truths and minimizing belief in falsehoods. The belief derived from suspending judgment, 'We are unable to determine whether  $p$  is true or false,' is a true belief and contributes to ensuring the fulfillment of the fundamental epistemic goal. In this case, despite the suspension of judgment about  $p$ , a new true belief has been incorporated into the subject's belief system.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the subject continues to be ignorant about  $p$  (lack of belief), but this is not due to a doxastic attitude of ignoring.

In (DANA), condition (i) excludes the second conjunct from condition (i) of (NA), retaining only the first one. Therefore, condition (i) of (NA) states that the agent believes they are in a fake

news environment. This condition is crucial as it explains the epistemic nature of the suspension of judgment attitude. To grasp this concept, it is necessary to introduce the notion of epistemic defeaters.

In general, an epistemic defeater can be defined as follows: an epistemic defeater, denoted as  $D$ , is a belief or mental state characterized by a true proposition that, when combined with the evidence  $S$  possesses for believing that  $p$ , renders  $S$  unjustified in holding that belief (or significantly diminishes the epistemic status of that belief for  $S$ ). There are two fundamental types of defeaters.<sup>17</sup> *Rebutting defeaters* are evidence or reasons that directly contradict or undermine the support for a particular belief. They provide sufficient grounds to reject or revise the belief in question. For instance, if one believes that it will not rain today based on their observation of clear skies, but then receives reliable information about an approaching storm, this new information serves as a rebutting defeater that challenges their initial belief. *Undercutting defeaters*, in turn, do not directly contradict the evidence or reason supporting a belief, but they weaken or undercut the reliability of that evidence, or the credibility of the sources involved. They introduce doubt or uncertainty regarding the basis of the belief's trustworthiness. If someone holds a belief based on a friend's testimony, but later discovers that their friend has a history of dishonesty or bias, this information acts as an undercutting defeater that diminishes the reliability of the friend's testimony.

Condition (i) of (DANA) functions as an undercutting defeater. By requiring the agent's awareness of being in a fake news environment, it implies that the agent holds a second-order belief with the content: 'We believe we are in a fake news environment.' This belief functions as an undercutting defeater since it can undermine the credibility of the information sources from which the agent is receiving the news. Consequently, by forming this second-order belief, the agent

<sup>16</sup> This proposal is unbiased regarding which view of suspension of judgement should be adopted, i. e., my view is compatible with all accounts of suspension of judgment mentioned.

<sup>17</sup> I am using Pollock's notions of defeaters.

can justifiably suspend judgment regarding the information conveyed in their environment.<sup>18</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

In this paper, two primary objectives were pursued. Firstly, objections to the news abstinence thesis were raised since it fails to adequately defend the propositional justification of an attitude of ignorance and does not demonstrate how this attitude aligns with the epistemic goal of maximizing belief in truths. Secondly, a reformulation of the news abstinence thesis was suggested, which I referred to as the *Doxastic Account of News Abstinence*. My argument was that replacing the attitude of ignoring with the attitude of suspending judgment is better suited to explain and propositionally justify an agent's doxastic attitude of refraining from fake news consumption. Additionally, this reformulated account preserves the ability to fulfill the epistemic goal of attaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs.

This text serves as an additional step toward a more comprehensive investigation of epistemic defense strategies against fake news, focusing on reducing the consumption of such misinformation. It is a vast and fertile field with numerous research possibilities, and the discussion is still in its early stages (Bernecker's proposal being the only one I acknowledge thus far). The theoretical potential of the thesis presented in the previous section

warrants further exploration and examination.

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<sup>18</sup> An anonymous referee suggested considering Michael Bergman's paper 'Defeaters and Higher-Level Requirements,' (2005), he suggested that Bergman's stance would be a more defensible way to explain the demands of rationality in fake news environments. First, I would like to say that disagree with the referee that Bergman's position would be suitable in this scenario and, second, that I simply disagree with Bergman's notion of 'no doxastic attitude.' Bergman says "One can take no attitude whatsoever towards  $p$  (not even withholding it). One way in which this may happen is if one never even considers  $p$ . Indeed, it is natural to think that we take no attitude towards most propositions, because we have never considered them." I think everyone would agree with Bergman in the sense that if there is a proposition that one hasn't yet had the chance (for whatever reason) to consider, then, obviously, one has no doxastic attitude at all towards such a proposition. In fact, that is the case for all propositions that, right now, I haven't considered. But this is just a platitude. So, it becomes relevant to determine the situations in which one could properly refrain from considering a certain proposition. It seems clear that propositions that one already considered or that one is aware of cannot be properly ignored anymore. Bergman also affirms that "Together with the possibility of taking no doxastic attitude at all, this gives four ways of relating to a proposition [besides believing, disbelieving and suspending judgment]." But it seems to me that his 'no doxastic attitude' implies that one has no relation at all with propositions. What kind of relation one could have with a proposition one never had the opportunity to consider or to be aware of? I think the answer is: that there is simply no relation at all. Additionally, it is important to remember the reason why doxastic attitudes like believing, disbelieving, and suspending judgment are *epistemically* important. The reason is because they are the attitudes that can be epistemically accessed and evaluated, this is why attitudes like desire, fear, hope, expectation, wish and many other attitudes are not relevant to the discussion about knowledge and justification. The 'no doxastic attitude' proposed by Bergman has no epistemic implications, in the sense that there is no way to say that the subject ignoring propositions, in the way Bergman suggests, is in any sense doing something epistemically valuable; actually, there is no sense of agency because the subject is not actually doing anything (deliberately) – just by being awake he will be in such a position, because of all the things that he is now ignoring. Of course, this is the involuntary sense, but Bergman also says that this is the case even in voluntary cases. I simply don't see how this is possible. If there is a voluntary (deliberate) sense, we are not talking about epistemic reasons anymore but pragmatic ones, such as intentions, desires, etc. The problem is that any doxastic attitude is thought in connection with the available evidence. A rational doxastic attitude is one that respects one's evidence. Attitudes like desire, fear, and expectations don't need to be epistemically justified by evidence, there is no relevant sense in which these attitudes are justified in an epistemic way.

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