TRUST, TESTIMONY AND VERIFICATION: AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF CREDIBILITY IN NIGERIA'S DIGITAL INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Anthony Uzochukwu UFEAAROH, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Ejikemeuwa J. O. NDUBISI, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Tansian University, Umunya,

Chidumebi Ngozi OGUEJIOFOR, PhD
Department of Educational Management and Policy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Cheryl Amaka UDOGU, PhD
Department of Modern European Languages
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

This paper examines the role of epistemic trust and testimony in the circulation and acceptance of fake news in Nigeria, using empirical and philosophical analysis. The evidence combines questionnaire responses with five Focus Group Discussions involving 40 participants across Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and Imo States. The findings show that respondents do not treat all information sources as epistemically equivalent. Professional journalists attracted the strongest average trust (48.1% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are credible), followed by fact-checking organisations (37.0%) and academic experts (29.6%), while social-media influencers attracted only 7.4% and government information 22.2%. Yet the qualitative findings show that familiarity, reputation, interpersonal relationships, professional appearance, photographs, videos, perceived authority and repeated circulation can make information appear credible. The paper argues that trust is both indispensable and dangerous: indispensable because individuals cannot independently verify everything they know, and dangerous because misplaced trust can transfer credibility from a messenger to a proposition without adequate evidential support. Repetition creates a further problem when multiple appearances of a claim are mistaken for independent corroboration. The analysis connects these findings with the epistemology of testimony, reliabilism, epistemic authority and social epistemology. It proposes calibrated epistemic trust, based on competence, sincerity, relevant expertise, reliability, track record, transparency, corroboration and provenance. The paper concludes that responsible information practice requires asking not only who communicated a claim but where the material originated, when it was produced, whether it has been altered and whether apparent agreement represents independent confirmation.

Keywords: Fake News; Epistemology; Belief; Justification; Verification; Nigeria; Social Epistemology

1. Introduction

Human beings acquire much of what they know through other people. No individual can independently observe or verify every proposition encountered in everyday life. Testimony is therefore not an optional feature of human knowledge but a central condition of social knowing. The problem created by fake news is consequently not solved by demanding that citizens trust nothing. It requires a more difficult question: when is trust warranted?

This study approaches this question through epistemic trust, testimony, source authority and reliability. It shows that respondents differentiate among professional journalists, fact-checking organisations, academic experts, government, religious leaders, friends and relatives, and social-media influencers. The data therefore do not depict a population that treats every source equally. At the same time, the FGDs demonstrate that source familiarity and interpersonal relationships can sometimes substitute for independent verification. The same person who is trusted as a friend, community figure or authority can become the conduit through which an unsupported claim acquires credibility.

The paper's central claim is that the epistemology of fake news is partly an epistemology of the messenger. A claim does not circulate in a social vacuum. It arrives through a person, institution, platform or network. The recipient must assess not only the proposition but also the source, the conditions of transmission and the relationship between the apparent source and the actual provenance of the information.

2. Fake News as an Epistemic Threat

The study uses “fake news” as a broad working term while distinguishing misinformation and disinformation analytically. The deeper issue is what happens when false or misleading information becomes credible. Uscinski et al. (2024) argue that misinformation research requires an explicit epistemological foundation because claims about falsity, truth and knowledge already presuppose standards for epistemic assessment. Weatherall and O'Connor (2024) likewise emphasise the conceptual, epistemological, social and political dimensions of fake news.

The study's social-epistemological model moves through information, credibility, belief, justification, communication, social reinforcement, collective belief and public reason. Within this sequence, trust operates as a bridge. A recipient first encounters a claim, evaluates a source using available cues, forms or suspends belief, and may then communicate the claim to others. If circulation becomes repetitive, social reinforcement can produce apparent consensus. The epistemic danger is therefore not simply that a source can be false; it is that trust can make unsupported information appear warranted.

3. Testimony and Epistemic Trust

The philosophy of testimony provides a direct framework for interpreting the findings. Reductionist approaches hold that testimonial belief requires some independent reason for trusting the speaker, while anti-reductionist approaches allow testimony to function as a basic source of justification or knowledge (Coady, 1992; Fricker, 1995; Lackey, 2008). The digital environment complicates this debate because users encounter enormous quantities of testimony from sources whose competence, sincerity and provenance may be uncertain. Côté-Bouchard (2024) argues that an overly permissive policy of accepting social-media testimony unless defeated is too generous because the structure of social media facilitates misinformation.

Levy (2022) similarly emphasises epistemic vigilance and responsibility. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate trust but to calibrate it. The supplied study identifies competence, sincerity, track record, transparency, accountability, relevant expertise, consistency with available evidence and corroboration as factors relevant to warranted trust. This approach avoids two extremes: blind trust and indiscriminate scepticism.

4. Method and Empirical Base

The quantitative component contains 27 questionnaire responses. Because the dataset is small and geographically broader than the intended five-state study area, its results are descriptive rather than statistically representative of Nigeria or even strictly of Southeastern Nigeria. The qualitative component follows the intended geographical structure: eight youth/media consumers in Anambra, eight in Enugu, eight community leaders/stakeholders in Abia, eight youth/media consumers in Ebonyi and eight community leaders/stakeholders in Imo.

The FGD themes most relevant to this paper were trust as a basis of belief; belief and evidence; repetition and social confirmation; identity and confirmation; social media and speed; institutional trust; epistemic responsibility; and culture of verification. The analysis distinguishes participants' perceptions from independently verified factual claims.

5. Findings

5.1 Trusted sources

Most trusted source	Frequency	Share of 27
Television	11	40.7%
WhatsApp	3	11.1%
Newspaper	3	11.1%
X/Twitter	2	7.4%
No clear trust / uncertain	2	7.4%
YouTube	1	3.7%
TikTok	1	3.7%
Instagram	1	3.7%
Friends/Family	1	3.7%
Radio	1	3.7%

Television was the most frequently identified single trusted source, followed by WhatsApp and newspapers. The presence of both traditional and digital sources demonstrates that digital participation has not displaced traditional media as an epistemic reference point. At the same time, the distribution of trust across informal platforms indicates that epistemic authority is now dispersed across institutional and interpersonal environments

Source	Mean	Agree/Strongly Agree
Professional journalists	3.33	48.1%
Fact-checking organisations	3.11	37.0%
Academic experts	3.07	29.6%
Religious leaders	2.74	22.2%
Government information	2.52	22.2%
Friends and relatives	2.81	18.5%
Social-media influencers	2.26	7.4%

Professional journalists attract the strongest reported trust, while social-media influencers attract the weakest. Government information also receives relatively modest trust. The pattern indicates differentiated epistemic evaluation, but the moderate level of trust even in relatively authoritative sources suggests that credibility is contested.

5.2 How credibility is constructed socially

The FGDs identify several cues that make information appear believable: identity of the sender, familiarity, reputation, social position, professional appearance, photographs and videos, perceived authority and the number of people sharing the claim. An important implication is that credibility is partly relational. People may initially believe a message because it arrives through someone they know or respect. The Anambra discussion also noted that "breaking news" presentation, photographs and videos can create an appearance of authenticity.

This illustrates the distinction between social credibility and epistemic warrant. A message can look credible because it is professionally packaged or transmitted by a respected person while still lacking adequate evidence. The source can explain why a claim is believed without establishing that the claim is true.

5.3 Repetition and apparent corroboration

Repeated circulation emerged across the FGDs as a mechanism through which information gains apparent credibility. Participants acknowledged that encountering the same claim from several people can make it seem more believable, even when the different messages originated from one common source. The questionnaire provides quantitative support: 29.6% agreed that if many people share a story, they assume it is true.

The philosophical distinction is between independent corroboration and repetition. Ten independent witnesses reporting an event may provide multiple testimonial grounds; ten people forwarding the same unverified message do not automatically provide ten independent reasons. Social-media networks can therefore manufacture the appearance of consensus without increasing evidential support. The problem is particularly relevant to what the study describes as social reinforcement. This interpretation is consistent with the study's broader discussion of epistemic flooding and the information environment (Anderau, 2023). The challenge is not merely volume but the epistemic status of the repeated material. Repetition can increase familiarity and confidence without increasing truth or justification.

5.4 Source authority and pseudo-expertise

The findings also support a distinction between social influence and epistemic authority. A communicator may possess a large audience, high social status or strong institutional visibility without possessing relevant competence. Croce and Baghramian (2024a, 2024b) and Croce and Marsili (2025) provide conceptual resources for distinguishing expertise, epistemic authority, pseudo-expertise and unreliable expertise. The relevance to the empirical findings is direct: respondents use titles, positions, reputation and social influence as credibility cues, but such cues do not guarantee reliability.

Reliabilism adds another dimension. Goldman (1979, 1986, 2008) connects justification and knowledge to the reliability of belief-forming processes. Applied to information sources, the relevant question becomes whether a source tends to produce true beliefs. This shifts attention from prestige to track record, competence and reliability.

5.5 Provenance in the digital environment

The study's philosophical discussion extends source evaluation beyond the immediate account that posted a message. Participants in Ebonyi noted that old videos can be presented as though they depict new events and that edited videos can mislead viewers. Screenshots may remove context, anonymous accounts may obscure provenance and repeated reposting can make copied material appear independently confirmed.

The epistemic question must therefore change from “Who posted this?” to a sequence of provenance questions: Where did the material originate? When was it produced? Has it been altered? Is the present context the original context? Has an apparently independent source merely

reproduced the same claim? This is a practical extension of testimony evaluation and source criticism.

6. Institutional Trust and Epistemic Cynicism

Trust problems operate in both directions. Misplaced trust can cause acceptance of unreliable information. Persistent exposure to misinformation can also generate excessive distrust. The FGDs reported that accurate government information may be dismissed as propaganda and that repeated misinformation can produce generalised suspicion. The study calls this condition epistemic cynicism: a state in which distrust extends so broadly that individuals cease to regard sources as reliably informative. Neither blind trust nor indiscriminate distrust is epistemically satisfactory. Knowledge requires dependence on others, but responsible dependence requires calibrated trust. The relevant standards include competence, sincerity, reliability, transparency, accountability, relevant expertise and corroboration. Institutional credibility therefore becomes part of the epistemic infrastructure of society.

7. Towards Calibrated Epistemic Trust

The evidence supports a model of calibrated epistemic trust. First, identify the source. Second, assess relevant competence and authority rather than relying on status alone. Third, consider the source's reliability and track record. Fourth, examine the evidential basis of the claim. Fifth, seek independent corroboration for significant claims. Sixth, inspect provenance, date and context. Seventh, remain open to correction. This procedure recognises that ordinary people cannot verify everything independently while refusing the inference that trust is automatically justified.

The model is compatible with the study's account of epistemic responsibility. A responsible information user does not have to become an investigator of every minor claim. But the more consequential the claim, the stronger the reason to expend verification effort. This principle also fits the study's proposed framework that evidence should be proportionate to the significance of the claim.

8. Concluding Reflection

The empirical evidence shows that epistemic trust is indispensable to the information environment but also constitutes a route through which misinformation can acquire credibility. Respondents differentiate among sources, yet interpersonal familiarity, reputation, social identity, repetition and presentation can influence belief. The resulting epistemological problem is not simply whether citizens trust; it is whether their trust is appropriately calibrated. Trust remains a necessary condition of social knowledge because individuals cannot independently verify every claim they encounter. However, when trust is detached from adequate evidence, relevant competence and source reliability, it can facilitate the acceptance and circulation of false or misleading information. The central challenge, therefore, is to preserve the epistemic value of testimony while developing the critical capacities necessary to distinguish warranted trust from misplaced confidence.

The findings further demonstrate that credibility is not always a reliable indicator of truth. Although respondents expressed greater confidence in professional journalists than in social-media influencers, the focus group discussions revealed that information may acquire credibility through familiarity, perceived authority, professional appearance, photographs, videos and the reputation of the person sharing it. These findings highlight the distinction between social credibility and epistemic justification. A message may appear convincing because it comes from a trusted friend, respected community member or seemingly authoritative source, yet remain unsupported by adequate evidence. Consequently, the assessment of information must extend beyond the identity and reputation of the messenger to include the competence of the source, the reliability of its previous claims, the evidential basis of the proposition and the circumstances under which the information was produced and circulated.

A particularly significant implication concerns the relationship between repetition and corroboration. The study demonstrates that repeated exposure to a claim can increase its apparent credibility without increasing its evidential strength. When individuals encounter the same message across multiple social-media platforms or through several acquaintances, they may interpret its circulation as evidence of independent confirmation. Yet the apparent multiplicity of sources may conceal a single, unverified origin. This distinction is essential to understanding how misinformation gains social acceptance and becomes embedded in collective belief. Repetition may strengthen familiarity and confidence, but neither familiarity nor confidence establishes truth. Responsible information practice must therefore distinguish between the widespread circulation of a claim and the independent verification of its content.

The findings also underscore the need to distinguish social influence from epistemic authority. Popularity, institutional visibility, professional presentation and social status may influence how a message is received, but they do not necessarily demonstrate the competence or reliability required to justify belief. Equally, the relative distrust of certain institutions should not automatically lead to the rejection of everything they communicate. As the focus group discussions suggest, sustained exposure to misinformation can produce epistemic cynicism, in which individuals become increasingly suspicious of information sources, including those that may provide accurate and verifiable information. Both uncritical acceptance and indiscriminate scepticism undermine responsible knowledge acquisition. A healthy information environment must therefore support a balanced disposition in which trust is neither abandoned nor granted without sufficient reason.

A responsible information culture consequently requires more than identifying unreliable accounts or warning citizens against fake news. It requires the cultivation of practical and philosophical habits of verification. Information users should be encouraged to identify the original source of a claim, assess the source's relevant competence and track record, examine the evidence presented, establish the date and context of the material, determine whether photographs or videos have been altered or misrepresented, and seek confirmation from genuinely independent sources. Particular attention should be given to provenance because a message may be detached from its original context, reproduced by anonymous accounts or recirculated as a new development even when the

material is old. These practices shift information evaluation from the superficial question of who shared a message to the more demanding questions of where it originated, what supports it and whether its apparent credibility is justified.

The principle of epistemic responsibility also requires that verification be proportionate to the significance of the claim. It is neither realistic nor necessary for individuals to investigate every piece of information with equal intensity. Nevertheless, claims that may influence public decisions, communal relationships, institutional legitimacy or individual welfare warrant greater scrutiny. The more consequential a claim, the stronger the obligation to examine its evidential foundation before accepting or disseminating it. This responsibility extends beyond the original producer of misinformation to those who forward, endorse or reproduce it without adequate verification. Every act of communication can either strengthen the quality of the shared information environment or contribute to the circulation of unjustified belief. Responsible participation in digital spaces therefore involves recognising that sharing information is not merely a social activity but also an epistemic act with consequences for others.

At the institutional level, the findings point to the importance of strengthening the conditions under which public trust can be reasonably maintained. Journalists, fact-checking organisations, academic experts, public institutions and other information providers have a responsibility to demonstrate competence, transparency, accountability and consistency with available evidence. Clear correction practices, accessible supporting evidence and openness about uncertainty can help establish the grounds on which credibility is warranted. At the same time, citizens require opportunities to develop critical media literacy and epistemic judgement so that they can assess claims without becoming wholly dependent on reputation, social identity or the apparent consensus of their networks. Such efforts should not assume that all misinformation results from deliberate deception; they must also address the ordinary social and cognitive processes through which unsupported claims become believable and are transmitted in good faith.

The study's empirical findings must, however, be interpreted within the limits of its methodology. The questionnaire component comprised 27 responses, making its results descriptive rather than statistically representative of Nigeria or even Southeastern Nigeria as a whole. The focus group discussions provide valuable insight into participants' experiences, perceptions and reasoning, but these accounts should not be treated as definitive evidence of the behaviour of the entire population. The findings are therefore best understood as a contribution to the empirical and philosophical examination of epistemic trust, testimony and misinformation within the study's research context. Further research involving larger and more diverse samples, additional geographical settings and systematic examination of verification practices could clarify how trust is formed, how it varies across information environments and which interventions most effectively encourage responsible belief formation.

Eventually, the central contribution of this study is to demonstrate that misinformation is not merely a problem of false content; it is also a problem of how credibility is assigned, how testimony is evaluated and how beliefs acquire social reinforcement. The epistemology of digital misinformation must therefore address both the truth of propositions and the social processes through which people come to accept them. The decisive questions are not only whether a message is widely shared or communicated by a familiar person, but whether the source is competent, the evidence is adequate, the provenance is traceable and the apparent corroboration is genuinely independent. Repeated circulation is not equivalent to independent confirmation, social influence is not equivalent to epistemic authority, and familiarity is not equivalent to truth.

Trust should remain possible because knowledge depends, in significant measure, on the testimony of others. What must change is the manner in which trust is granted, maintained and revised. A more responsible digital information environment requires calibrated epistemic trust: a disposition that acknowledges the necessity of testimony while remaining alert to the possibility of error, manipulation and misplaced authority. Such trust combines openness to information with a willingness to question, verify and correct one's beliefs when adequate reasons emerge. The ultimate objective is not to produce a society in which citizens distrust everything, but one in which belief is more consistently guided by evidence, credibility is earned through demonstrated reliability, and the circulation of information is accompanied by a corresponding commitment to epistemic responsibility. In this sense, epistemic vigilance is not the enemy of trust; it is the condition that enables trust to contribute meaningfully to knowledge rather than become a vehicle for misinformation.

References

Adeyemo, T. (2026). Nigeria. In R. Fletcher, N. Newman, K. Eddy, A. Robertson, C. T. R. Nielsen, & R. Nielsen (Eds.), *Digital News Report 2026*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31* (2), 211–236. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211

Anderau, G. (2023). Fake news and epistemic flooding. *Synthese, 202,* Article 106. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04336-7

Audi, R. (2011). *Epistemology: A contemporary introduction to the theory of knowledge* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A philosophical study.* Clarendon Press.

Croce, M., & Baghramian, M. (2024a). Experts—Part I: What they are and how to identify them. *Philosophy Compass, 19* (9–10), Article e13009. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.13009

Croce, M., & Baghramian, M. (2024b). Experts—Part II: The sources of epistemic authority. *Philosophy Compass, 19* (9–10), Article e70005.

Croce, M., & Marsili, N. (2025). Misplaced trust in expertise: Pseudo-experts and unreliable experts. *Social Epistemology, 39* (6), 667–682. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2025.2491104

Côté-Bouchard, C. (2024). Should we trust our feeds? Social media, misinformation, and the epistemology of testimony. *Topoi, 43 (*5), 1469–1486. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-

024-10116-w

Fricker, E. (1995). Telling and trusting: Reductionism and anti-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony. *Mind, 104* (414), 393–411.

Goldman, A. I. (1979). What is justified belief? In G. S. Pappas (Ed.), *Justification and knowledge* (pp. 1–23). D. Reidel.

Goldman, A. I. (1986). *Epistemology and cognition.* Harvard University Press.

Goldman, A. I. (2008). Reliabilism. In P. K. Moser (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

Harris, K. R. (2022). Real fakes: The epistemology of online misinformation. *Philosophy & Technology, 35* Article 83. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00581-9

Ibrahim, A. T., Jibril, U. F., & Mohammed, A. (2024). Between trust and misinformation: A study of user engagement with cloned pages of Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers on Facebook. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 15* (3), 40–55. https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2024-0034

Jibril, U. F., & Ibrahim, A. T. (2025). The impact of fake news and cloned online pages on media credibility, public trust and societal cohesion in Nigeria: Solutions and implications. *Nigerian Mass Media Communications, 107* (1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.7176/NMMC/107-01

Kirmayer, L. J. (2024). Science and sanity: A social epistemology of misinformation, disinformation, and the limits of knowledge. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 61* (5), 795–808. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634615241296301

Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from words: Testimony as a source of knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Levy, N. (2022). In trust we trust: Epistemic vigilance and responsibility. *Social Epistemology, 36* (3), 283–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2022.2042420

Ndubisi, E. J. O. (2014). Nature and function of logic in African epistemology. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 19*(11), 32–36.

Ndubisi, E. J. O. (2023). *Eupraxophic perspectives on religion and the paranormals: Towards a new humanist theory*. Altograde Publishers.

Oran, R. (2025). Reconceptualizing testimony: Integrating socio-phenomenological and ethnomethodological insights into analytic epistemology. *Human Studies, 49* (1), 89–110. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-025-09743-1

O'Connor, C., Goldberg, S., & Goldman, A. (2026). Social epistemology. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Fall 2026 ed.). Stanford University.

Rini, R. (2017). Fake news and partisan epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal, 27* (Supplement), E43–E64. https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2017.0022

Simion, M. (2021). Testimonial contractarianism: A knowledge-first social epistemology. *Noûs, 55* (4), 891–916. https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12337

Tandoc, E. C., Jr., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "fake news": A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism, 6* (2), 137–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

Uscinski, J. E., Littrell, S., & Klofstad, C. (2024). The importance of epistemology for the study of misinformation. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 57,* Article 101789. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101789

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359* (6380), 1146–1151. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559

Weatherall, J. O., & O'Connor, C. (2024). Fake news! *Philosophy Compass, 19* (6), Article e13005. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.13005

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researchers gratefully acknowledge the **Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)** for providing financial support for the conduct of this research under the **Institutional-Based Research (IBR-TETFund)** programme. The support provided through this intervention made a significant contribution to the successful execution of the study and is deeply appreciated.