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Dr Caitlin Rybko
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Whisper Networks

ABSTRACT

The term whisper network is typically associated with informal communication. Here, whispering can be understood as a metaphor for sharing information behind the scenes where it is given without the knowledge of those who hold power. Networks such as these are often used as a private channel between women to warn other women about known sexual harassers or offenders. They also often function to fill gaps in existing reporting systems. So, they are fundamentally a space where members can exercise their often limited power and agency. As such, they were a vital part of the #MeToo movement, and continue to be used in many spaces of the internet as part of digital call-out culture. Despite this, they have remained unexplored in philosophical literature.

In this paper I begin by describing the background of whisper networks, followed by a discussion of how they function, and why they form a fundamental part of our online infrastructure. I will argue that they present us with an epistemically curious case due to their nature: by aiming to fill the gaps left by often weak and unreliable reporting systems and correct an injustice, they are vulnerable to enabling various forms of epistemic injustice themselves.



Dr Caitlin Rybko is a lecturer at the Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research focuses on digital epistemology, AI, and applied ethics. In their doctoral research, *The Epistemology of Googling: Diagnosing Digital Knowledge*, Dr Rybko developed a novel account of digital testimony, arguing that platforms like Google can function as genuine epistemic agents from whom we can responsibly accept knowledge.

Inquiries: pbenton@uj.ac.za

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Organiser: Paige Benton

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