

# Fact Resistance in Closed Communities

Erik Sandewall

The increasing prevalence of disinformation has become a serious problem in the public sphere on both the national and the international level. In some cases it is caused intentionally and for the purpose of disrupting a society; in other cases it is an unforeseen effect of new technology, such as social media for example. While methods for preventing the dissemination of 'fake news' (or other types of disinformation) are often being discussed, the present paper shall address a related problem, namely, what are the obstacles and the possibilities for correcting disinformation that has already become entrenched in a particular community?

Most people do not like to hear that they have been mistaken, and it requires a certain degree of open-mindedness to react with interest and curiosity to such a situation. If resistance to new knowledge is a common human trait, one must expect that such resistance will be particularly strong in closed communities that mostly exchange information and attitudes within themselves, so that input from the outside world is relatively sparse. Such communities can often be based on a particular religious creed or a political stance, and they are often also characterized by the presence of a dominating leader. The 'MAGA' group of the followers of Donald Trump is an obvious example which by the way illustrates the importance of the topic being addressed here.

In the present article I shall describe one example of such a situation, and then use it for a discussion of this issue in general.

## Characteristics of Closed Communities

For the purpose of the present article, I define a *closed community* as one that has a well-defined membership, great similarity of world-view and values among its members, and restricted input of information and opinions from its outside. The homogeneity of opinions may often be maintained by a strong leader of the community, both by his (usually) preaching and by his power to expel members that do not conform. The restrictions on input may be realized by common attitudes and social pressure within the group.

If an entire country is a closed community then government control of the media can contribute both to the similarity of opinion and the input restrictions.

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*Notes:*

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However, the present article shall not consider those situations, and instead address how fact resistance is achieved in communities that are embedded in an open society where information can be exchanged freely. The question is then, what are the conditions and practices that contribute to fact resistance in such communities?

The leadership of a closed community has strong reasons to restrict the arrival of new facts, because of the relation between new facts and new values. Open societies are characterized by the possibility to challenge and to reconsider current beliefs, which includes current attitudes and values. The changing attitudes to family relations and to homosexuality are some obvious examples, but such changes have often been enabled by new insights, and the realization that previously held beliefs had simply been false.

In a closed society, on the other hand, value change is likely to be discouraged since it is a threat to the authority of the leader. Since the acceptance of new facts at the expense of previous beliefs may cause values to be reconsidered as well, fact resistance is a natural feature of a closed society.

### **Studying a Closed Community through its Promotion Materials**

It is evident that direct observation of a closed community is fraught with difficulties. However, in the case of communities that actively promote their message in order to recruit new members, those promotion materials can provide an insight into their views and attitudes.

For the present article, I have selected a booklet that is published by the Ahmadiyya community, with the title *Muhammad the Liberator of Women*, by Mirza Mahmud Ahmad [1], originally published in Urdu in 1928, but in English in 2015. This brochure is disseminated widely, and often for free, and it has been translated into numerous languages. It begins with an account of living conditions for women "everywhere in the world" before the advent of the prophet Muhammad. This is followed by a description of the rulings concerning the rights of women that are stated in the Quran and which would therefore be adopted in Muslim-ruled countries. The text concludes by stating that for a long time the rest of the world rejected the message of Muhammad, and that it was only during the twentieth century that the world adopted some of the reforms for women that Muhammad had put forward 1300 years earlier.

This text is peculiar since it contains so many factual errors in such a small space. I shall first review these mistakes and then discuss what can be learnt from them.

One may ask whether it is worthwhile to worry about the many errors in one single document. After all, there are so many other errors in books and journals, so why pay attention to this particular pamphlet? It was originally written in Urdu,

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since Mirza Mahmud Ahmad lived in India and Pakistan where he passed away in 1965. He may be excused for his mistaken understanding of European history.

On the other hand, this is a prime example of how fake facts can be promoted indiscriminately, and apparently without having been checked. A Google search for [1] shows that its English translation (first published in 2015) is distributed by Amazon, Google, Apple, Scribd, as well as being distributed for free by the Ahmadiyya organization. Additional translations exist in French, German, and Swedish for example, and they are likewise promoted.

### **The Ahmadiyya Organization**

The author of [1], Mirza Mahmud Ahmad lived between 1889 and 1965 and was the eldest son of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) who had founded the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam. He succeeded his father as a leader of the organization which met a lot of resistance and outright persecution. Therefore, according to [1], in 1934 he instituted "a new scheme by the name of Tahrik-e-Jadid the aim of which was to spread the message of Ahmadiyyat all over the world". The purpose of this organization is described as follows in [2]:

*Tahrik-e-Jadid, as laid out by (Mirza Mahmud Ahmad) is not only a scheme of financial sacrifice, but a scheme that demands a complete overhaul of one's personality and character.*

The character of this 'overhaul' is specified in nineteen clauses that include, for example requirement number 11: "Seek advice from the Jamaat when deciding about higher education and careers for children", and requirement number 10: "Prepare counter arguments against the adverse propaganda". It is evident that Ahmadiyya has many of the characteristics of a sect with a dedicated purpose, and the promotion of its writings is a natural part of its activities.

This being so, one would expect that this organization should be careful to check the correctness of all statements in one of its most important promotion materials. However, this has obviously not been done, and a simple Google search does not retrieve any published objections to what is written in [1] Apparently, fake facts can be used freely in a situation like theirs.

It is interesting, therefore, to study the status and the role of fake facts for the dissemination of Ahmadiyya's message, as well as their methods for resistance to facts. But we must first review the actual fake facts in the document at hand.

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## **On the Status of Women in Ancient Times**

According to [1] ,

*Before the arrival of the Holy Prophet, women in all countries were in the same position as slaves.*

However, according to the wikipedia [3] ,

*The ancient Egyptians viewed men and women, including people from all social classes, as essentially equal under the law, and even the lowliest peasant was entitled to petition the vizier and his court for redress. ... Both men and women had the right to own and sell property, make contracts, marry and divorce, receive inheritance, and pursue legal disputes in court.*

The wikipedia article contains references to reliable sources for these statements. According to the same article, the time-honored traditions from ancient Egypt continued to prevail during the Ptolemaic period that lasted until 30 BC. The following years, until the Muslim takeover in 641 CE was a period of political and religious strife.

From a religious perspective it is believed that Muhammad's teachings were the results of divine revelations, but from a secular point of view it is natural to consider other explanations. Since Egypt is adjacent to the Arabian peninsula, one may ask whether Muhammad's reforms of the status of women in his community may have been inspired by the traditions in Egypt. In any case, the quoted statement in [1] is manifestly incorrect.

## **Observations on the Status of Women in Europe before Modernity**

Besides its statement about the treatment of women 'in all countries' as slaves before the advent of Muhammad, the document [1] also proposes that their conditions did not change in the non-Muslim world:

*For 1300 years the world blindly ridiculed the precepts which the Holy Prophet had taught for the betterment of humankind. It condemned his teaching as being opposed to the natural human state.*

*Then there came a time when the sublimity of the Word of God could no longer be gainsaid and it began to shine forth. Those same people who once viewed themselves as the custodians of civilisation began to obey the injunctions of the Holy Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. Governments undertook to change their laws in a manner which conformed to the principles of the Holy*

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*Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.*

In fact, of course, while the status of Western women has changed considerably during the last 150 years, this must be seen as a consequence of the Enlightenment, and it is absurd to claim that it has been due to influences from Islam. But even before 1750 their status was by no means comparable to slaves, which is what [1] is claiming. In Scandinavia during the Viking age, for example [5] ,

*But women in Viking Age Scandinavia did enjoy an unusual degree of freedom for their day. They could own property, request a divorce and reclaim their dowries if their marriages ended. ... If a woman wanted a divorce, she had to call witnesses to her home and marriage bed and declare in front of them that she had divorced her husband. The marriage contract usually stated how family property would be divided up in case of a divorce.*

*If the man of the household died, his wife would adopt his role on a permanent basis, singlehandedly running the family farm or trading business.*

Also, as reported in a Danish source [6] ,

*If the marriage did not work, then the wife and husband could divorce. When the Spanish-Arabic traveller al-Tartushi visited Hedeby in the 900s he was surprised to hear that women had the right to divorce if they wished.*

For additional detail, there is an annex to the present article [12] that contains a selection of quotations from medieval Swedish laws that verify what has been said above.

In the case of Poland, women had a relatively strong position in earlier times but it was eroded during later centuries. The situation during the XII century is described as follows in [7] :

*There are information in the earliest records of women from the nobility class educated and expert in law, managing goods and occurring in the legal matters in the name of their husbands. Records also mention outstanding women from the lower class with similar abilities and education, ... Until XIV century noble women's rights has been increasing in the dowry situation, having the rights to co-decide on the dowry along with the husband.*

Things changed when the Polish state was divided between its neighbors:

*The partitions of Poland had ambiguous effect on the situation of women, from*

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*the interest side and social position. Loss of statehood created a situation where, rising up children in the patriotic spirit, became a political issue, as it was the way to keep up the national identity. Women's role, as one responsible for the family and rising future patriots, increased significantly in the society. Loss of the statehood, created the image of heroic women, able to manage all the challenges, where women was responsible for up keeping the national traditions as language, culture and religion.*

The German-speaking areas of Europe have seen an entirely different development, as described in [7] as follows.

*For one thing, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation contained a large number of sovereign territorial units – almost 2,500 when one includes the sovereign estate of Imperial Knights, and 384 even when these are excluded. Moreover, these territories were widely heterogeneous on almost every conceivable axis of comparison including their legal systems.*

The sixth page of this reference contains a map of German-speaking Europe c. 1815, at a time when Enlightenment had begun to set in, especially since areas under Napoleonic occupation had been influenced by the ideas of the French revolution. In this figure, the autonomy status of women in each area is shown graphically, on a scale from white to black, through shades of gray. At the most liberal end, a certain number of territories (those shaded white in the figure) allowed full legal autonomy to both unmarried and married women. At the other end, both unmarried and married women continued to be subject to a completely non-autonomous legal status.

Already at this point, it becomes clear that European history bears witness of great diversity of laws and practices with respect to the status of women, and that generalizations about 'European laws' are not possible. As one further example, [7] mentions

*the medieval period had seen a limited legal emancipation of women in German legal thinking, especially with the so-called 'Reception' of Roman Law, overlaying (though not eradicating) the older German customary law.*

This is paradoxical considering that ancient Scandinavian laws gave such a strong position to women. One might have expected that ancient laws in Germany and in Scandinavia would be somewhat similar, but this was apparently not the case.

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## **The Account of Contemporary Conditions in Mahmud Ahmad's Article**

The last part of the article by Mirza Mahmud Ahmad [1] addresses the status of women in the Western world during the twentieth century. He states that 1300 years after Muhammad,

*there came a time when the sublimity of the Word of God could no longer be gainsaid and it began to shine forth. ... Governments undertook to change their laws in a manner which conformed to the principles of the Holy Prophet,*

Several examples are quoted, such as:

*In 1919, Italy passed the law that established full property rights for women allowing them to spend their wealth in charity or however else they pleased (at a time when European laws did not consider women as the rightful owner of her wealth).*

This statement about "European laws" is incorrect as we have seen. In Scandinavia, in particular, women have been seen as rightful owners of their wealth in all recorded laws, ie. since the XIII century. The author continues:

*Portugal in 1915, Norway in 1909, Sweden in 1920 and Switzerland in 1912 have passed laws which legislate for divorce and rights of separation.*

Swedish and Norwegian laws have contained rules for divorce since the earliest time. In Sweden, 1919 was the year when the law was passed whereby women were allowed to vote.

Mirza Mahmud Ahmad's article concludes with the following wish:

*A future in which all the teachings of the Holy Prophet, ... are accepted as the norm is not too distant and the struggle which the Holy Prophet saw launched for the rights of women will soon bring forth its fruit.*

## **Resistance Mechanisms**

Let us proceed now to the question of how people react to new knowledge, and what can cause them to resist it, The discussion of this question requires a model for the acceptance process. This topic has been studied both in Philosophy and in Artificial Intelligence, often under the name of Argumentation Theory [8, 9] . The seminal work of Dung [10] has been used and extended by several authors. Dung introduces the abstract concept of an *argumentation framework* consisting of a set of 'arguments' and an 'attack relation' between these arguments. The statement

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of a fact counts as an argument, for example. The basic idea is that arguments can be added by logical inference, and they can be removed if they are subject to attack and there is no counter-attack.

It would be impractical to use this argumentation framework directly in the present work. I shall use a more concrete model and then relate it to Dung's framework towards the end of the article. The following is a basic version of the model that will be used here:

Every person has a *cognitive state* consisting of their knowledge and beliefs about the world and about actual events there, as well as values, attitudes, and miscellaneous other kinds of information. When additional statements of those kinds are presented to the person, they will relate those statements to their current cognitive state, in order to decide whether the cognitive state shall be updated according to those statements, or not. In many simple cases, statements expressing facts that the person did not know before will be accepted, ie. lead to the addition of those facts into the cognitive state. However, if the current cognitive state contradicts the proposed additional facts, then there is an attack relation between those two, in the sense of Dung. In such a case, the person has a choice of whether to update the cognitive state accordingly, or to ignore the proposed statement. The choice may be made using other parts of the cognitive state.

This was the simple version of the model which is formulated for the case where each statement is either true or false. The full model of the knowledge adoption process must also account for a cognitive state that contains uncertain knowledge of many kinds, for example, statements or mechanisms for assessing the credibility of a proposed fact. Such mechanisms can often be entirely rational and serve an important purpose, but they may also be used for resisting knowledge that the agent in question does not wish to accept, for some extralogical reason such as due to social pressure. They may likewise be used for facilitating the adoption of proposed statements that would not have been accepted otherwise.

According to how they are used, we shall distinguish between 'structures' (beliefs and cognitive mechanisms) that give credence to proposed facts (called 'supports') and, on the other hand, structures that contribute to disbelief in a proposed fact ('barriers'). Statements and other input that is intended to rely on supports, to defeat barriers, and to cause the adoption of new knowledge may be described as *intrusive*.

Let us now apply this extended model to a situation where a hypothetical member of Ahmadiyya has read the text of the present article so far, and where they wish to perform the requirement to "prepare counter arguments against the adverse propaganda". In the following I shall show what could be possible counter arguments from the point of view of argumentation principles, including logic but not restricted to logic-based arguments. At the same time, there shall also be examples of arguments that are actually invalid, but which gain credibility through



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the use of 'supports' and 'barriers'.

The purpose of these scenarios is to illustrate how the extended knowledge adoption model can be used for analyzing situations with a given set of 'adverse propaganda' or 'intrusive knowledge'. There will only be space for a few scenarios here, but additional ones may follow in another context.

### ***Perceived authority may stifle valid objections***

The fact that [1] had been authored by Mirza Mahmud Ahmad, the second khalif of the Ahmadiyya movement, may have discouraged adherents from questioning what he had written.

### ***Literal reading of text***

Literal reading of a text is a method in common use. In our case, the argument about the status of women in ancient Egypt may be countered with the observation that [1] merely says "Before the advent of the Holy Prophet ... women in all countries were bound to enslavement and servitude", which *may* be interpreted as "During the years right before...". Therefore it may be argued that this statement is correct; it just requires the reader to interpret it in the way intended. The same interpretation would have to be applied to the phrase "prior to his advent", on the next page.

Having found this argument against the "adverse propaganda", the reader in question may be satisfied that no update or footnote would be called for in the published text. But from the point of view of intellectual honesty, they should ask themselves how they interpreted this passage the first time they read it, and how they remember it. Moreover, what about all those other people that have read [1] and have taken it to heart – do they believe that Muhammad liberated women from oppression that had lasted since time immemorial, or just from some time before 630 CE? If the former is the case, do they (or the Ahmadiyya organization) have a moral duty to correct the misunderstood phrase in future editions of this pamphlet?

### ***Appealing to an irrelevant counterexample***

Another possible way to deflect the argument about early Egyptian history may be to observe that the law of Hammurabi, in Babylon, did assign an inferior position to women. From a rational point of view this is not a viable defense since the original text talks about "all countries", but in many situations – especially in oral discussion – it may seem like a convincing argument anyway.

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### ***The notion of 'true X'***

It is a widespread practice to redefine a concept X by introducing the concept of 'true X'. One example of this practice is found in [1] when it says:

*True freedom is achieved when the laws of culture and civilisation are followed. Freedom which is attained by breaking the bounds of these laws is a fallacy because it is conducive not to ambition but to indolence instead.*

....

*Until (1350 years ago) no religion or people accorded a woman such freedoms which recognised her intrinsic rights.*

This statement is of course refuted by the case of Egypt in pharaonic times, but it is also interesting as an example of the concept of 'true X'. It has a grain of truth in it, since freedom should always be exercised in a responsible way, but it is also often used in a dominant way, in order to claim that the speaker's view is the only correct one. However, in the quoted passage it is not all clear what the author wants to convey by introducing the concept of 'true freedom'. Does he mean that some earlier cultures had provided women with a freedom that break the laws of culture and civilization? If so, what are those laws?

In a similar vein, Ahmad Vaezi (the chief ideologue of the Shia regime in Iran) writes in [11] that one of the three objectives of a religious government shall be to "protect true freedom of human beings", by which is meant self-control:

*But those who exercise control over themselves and strive for self-purification, rather than merely obeying their impulses, are truly free.*

Self-control and self-purification are admirable endeavours, but they can not compensate for the loss of freedom as defined by human rights.

Another example of the 'true X' construct is 'true happiness'.

### ***Authority and credibility by proper address***

One major part of [1] describes the status of women before the arrival of Muhammad. This account is provided without any reference to sources, which means that the reader will have to trust the author for his word. This is a quite common situation, of course, but it requires that the reader has some a priori reason for believing what is being stated. In the case of [1], the first page of text has a heading saying 'In the Name of Allah the Compassionate the Most Merciful'. One may assume that many Muslim readers will take this as an indication that the author is 'one of theirs', and that this will increase the credibility of the text, especially when it is

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combined with the names of the author and the publisher.

### ***Social factors that favor resistance to new knowledge***

It is well known that some social groups use rejection of outside ideas as a way of strengthening their internal cohesion, which means that the attitudes of the group are in themselves a 'barrier' in the sense described above. One example of this has been mentioned already, namely, the requirement for followers of Ahmadiyya to "prepare counter arguments against the adverse propaganda". With such a requirement, members will not be encouraged to study outside information sources with an open mind.

### **A More General Model using the Argumentation Framework**

The argumentation model that has been used here can be seen as a restricted version of Dung's argumentation framework since one may consider the combination of the mental state and the proposed intrusive facts as the set of 'arguments', and the 'attack relation' as a record of those inconsistencies that have been found so far during the argumentation process. This way of looking at argumentation is actually more powerful since it also allows for situations where there are inconsistencies in the mental state itself, and not merely between the mental state and the intruding statement. This extension is applicable, for example, for scenarios where the 'attacker' leads the 'defendant' to discover contradictions in his own cognitive state and, therefore, to modify it. This is a well-known method for getting a person to change their opinion.

### **The Particular Character of Closed Communities**

The present article has addressed patterns of behavior that may lead to resistance against the adoption of new knowledge, in particular when such behaviors prevail in closed communities. This is an important issue in several ways, and also since resistance to new knowledge may in turn lead to resistance against new attitudes, especially if the new insights replace earlier prejudices.

From a common-sense point of view, it seems likely that there should be less resistance to new knowledge in communities whose members have a lot of communication with the surrounding society, but this is beyond the scope of the present article. It should be noted, however, that we have used an argumentation model that only allows for the interaction between one cognitive state and one intrusive argument. That cognitive state may represent one single individual, or several individuals that have quite similar opinions. Such homogeneity is characteristic of closed communities, but in order to address resistance to new

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knowledge in open communities one would have to generalize the argumentation model in non-trivial ways.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

We have described a peculiar situation where a multinational organization has been using promotion materials for a long time although these materials contain substantial factual errors in several respects, apparently without seeing this themselves or receiving any notifications of the problem. This has led us to consider what may be the character of a state of mind or a 'cognitive state' that is able to resist the adoption of new knowledge in situations where, from a rational point of view, that knowledge should have been received and the mental state should have been amended. A simplified version of Dung's argumentation frameworks has been defined and has been used for analyzing several of the 'fake facts' in the observed article.

The natural next step should be to analyze a few more examples using the same framework as has been used here.

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