PI42015 Essay

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Modernising Plato's *Sophist*: How does Plato's defining characteristics of the sophist resonate with the challenges faced by modern journalists?

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Throughout *Sophist* Plato critiques the sophist as somebody who uses language to obscure, rather than clarify truth. Through the method of division, and six subsequent definitions Plato defines the sophist as an 'imitator of the wise man' who 'cannot be called wise since he does not know anything.' [1] The concept of 'imitation' is integral to Plato's critique, as he juxtaposes the philosopher (who he deems a 'wise man') and the sophist, exploring the disparities between the two figures. This ancient critique resonates powerfully in the Digital Age, where journalists must battle with modern sophists; those who use language to obscure, distort, and sensationalize. The rise of misinformation, disinformation, and click-driven content challenges key journalistic principles, its commitment to clarity, credibility, and truth. By closely analysing key passages from *Sophist*, this evaluation explores how Plato's philosophical confrontation with sophistry illustrates the contemporary struggle between journalism and sensationalism. By placing Plato's analysis within today's digitally warped world, the sophist appears not as a relic of antiquity, but as a recurring figure whose rhetorical tactics continue to threaten journalistic practice.

i. The Philosopher and Journalist's Duty to Preserve Truth

"The philosopher, then, is not one who loves many words, but one who loves the truth." [2]

[1] Lesley Brown, 'Definition and Division in Plato's *Sophist', University of Oxford Faculty of Philosophy*, <https://media.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/assets/pdf_file/0011/16589/Definition_and_Division.pdf> [accessed 6 November 2025] p.152

'(d1) a paid hunter of young men who purports to teach excellence; (D2) a travelling salesman of knowledge; (D3) a stay-at-home retailer of products for the soul, whether produced by others, or (D4) by himself; (D5) a combative controversialist who deals in disputation for money; (D6) an educator who separates better from worse, revealing contradiction through cross-questioning; and finally (D7) a producer of images in men's souls, an imitator of the wise person, who is aware of his own ignorance when teaching via private cross-questionings'.

Plato, *Sophist*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), [268c], pp. 235–293.

[2] Plato, *Sophist,* [253e-d].

The above quotation appears in Plato's *Sophist,* when Theaetetus and the Eleactic visitor are differentiating between the attributes of the philosopher and the sophist. In emphasising the philosopher as a 'lover of truth' distinct differences arise between the journalistic and philosophical pursuit of truth. Journalist's, modern and traditional, first obligation is to truth; to *deliver* it to citizens so they can make informed decisions. However, the philosopher seeks *to understand the nature* of truth. As stated by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, 'journalism by nature is reactive and practical rather than philosophical and introspective'[3]. The journalistic pursuit of truth involves verification and centres on simply delivering truth to people so they can make informed decisions. The essential distinction between philosophical and journalistic truth, as outlined by Jesse Branaman, 'lies in their methods of truth seeking. Journalism relies on external sources and evidence to inform its truth claims, while philosophy seeks to understand the nature of reality' [4]. Michael Glanzberg outlines the problem of truth, for philosophers in simple terms; 'what are truths and what (if anything) makes them true'.[5] Glanzberg's sentiment encompasses the philosophical debate surrounding truth and highlights the discrepancy between truth in journalism and philosophy; journalists merely deliver truth without asking questions whereas philosophy investigates the fundamental characteristics of it. In regard to Plato's *Sophist,* we can understand truth in terms of its journalistic nature (verified information built upon facts). This definition is crucial since I aim to investigate the commonalities between the sophist, sensationalist, journalist, and philosopher; not the nature of truth itself.

Amidst the rise of digital media, the journalist faces increasing challenges when delivering truth to communities. T. Shyam Swaroop highlights that:

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[3] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, 'Journalism's First Obligation Is to Tell the Truth,' *Nieman Reports*, 15 June 2001 <https://niemanreports.org/journalisms-first-obligation-is-to-tell-the-truth/> [accessed 2 November 2025].

[4] Jesse Owen Hearns-Branaman, 'Introduction*'* in *Journalism and the Philosophy of Truth: Beyond Objectivity and Balance* (Routledge: 2016), pp.6-7.

[5] Michael Glanzberg, 'Truth,' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2025 Edition <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/truth/> [accessed 3 November 2025].

> ‘The **digital revolution has fundamentally altered the world of journalism**… one of the primary challenges modern journalists face is **the erosion of traditional** principles (**accuracy, impartiality, and accountability)**. With pressure to publish breaking news rapidly, many news organizations prioritize speed over thoroughness, leading to incomplete, inaccurate, or **sensationalized reporting.’** [6]

Swaroop accounts for Plato’s notion of ‘many words’ in his addressing of the digital revolution. Social Networking Services (SNS), where many consume news, is a melting pot of ‘many words’ (often nonsensical and of little substance) and is rife with sophistry. Users share and act upon mis/ dis/ information found online, with users often ‘claiming to know’ information, without verifiable evidence. Content found on SNS inherently mimics truth and lacks substance, making it extremely challenging for readers to disseminate between fact and fiction, and increasingly challenging for journalists (who deliver truth) to gain readers’ trust. Sophists and sensationalists operate in the realm of opinion not knowledge, and their power lies in crafting appearances that mimic reality (for example AI deepfakes). In today’s media landscape, this echoes the rise of clickbait and sensationalism; forms of communication that prioritize engagement metrics over epistemic integrity.

ii. The Power of Persuasion over Truth

> ‘Well then, won’t we expect that there’s another kind of expertise—this time having to do with **words**—and that someone can use it **to trick young people** when they stand even farther away from the truth about things? Wouldn’t he do it by **putting words in their ears**, and by showing them **spoken copies** of everything, so as to make them believe that the words are true and that the person who’s speaking to them is **the wisest person** there is?’ [7]

The above extract details the Eleactic visitor confirming that the sophist’s power lies in their ability to deceive through speech, especially through targeting the young and impressionable. In turn,

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[6] T. Shyam Swaroop, ‘The Challenges and Role of Modern Journalism in Digital Media Enterprises,’ *ShodKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts,* (2024), pp. 68–76 (p.68) doi: 10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7.2024.1921.

[7] Plato, *Sophist,* [234c-235a].

highlighting how false beliefs and appearances can be crafted to manipulate public opinion, a tactic often seen in the spread of fake news. This excerpt is one of the most encapsulating in the text as it accounts for various fundamental characteristics of the sophist; (a hunter of young men, imitation, the sophist as presenting themselves as 'wisest,' and an expert of untrue words). The visitor establishes that the sophist is an expert in using language to persuade young men that he is the wisest. A notion with great relevance to online interactions and sources which claim to be news. YellowBrick discussed the dangers of sensationalism with regard to the digital age:

> "(sensationalism) erodes public trust in journalism. When news outlets prioritize sensationalism over accuracy and objectivity, **it undermines their credibility** and fosters **skepticism** among the audience. This erosion of trust is particularly concerning in an era where misinformation and fake news are rampant, as it becomes increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish between reliable sources and sensationalized clickbait."

Drawing upon the lure of sensationalism for monetary gain, YellowBrick assures that journalists must not fall into this trap and remain vigilant and reliable reporters of *facts.* Sensationalist news inherently prioritises clicks (which subsequently generates revenue); and the people clicking are predominantly young people (who read their news on SNS), whereas older generations are more likely to consume traditional media.[8] There are little mitigations in place for combatting sensationalist and fake news, with Big Tech prioritising monetary gain over keeping people informed and safe [9]. Esma Aimeur

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[8] Salman Khawar and Mark Boukes, 'Analysing Sensationalism in News on Twitter (X): Clickbait Journalism by Legacy vs. Online-Native Outlets and the Consequences for User Engagement,' *Digital Journalism* 13.8 (2025), pp.1482-1502 (p.1483), DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2024.2394764

[9] Emily Denniss and Rebecca Lindberg, 'Social Media and the Spread of Misinformation: Infectious and a Threat to Public Health,' *Health Promotion International*, 40.2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daaf02>

HEC Paris, 'The Business Cost of Fake News: Lessons for Leadership in an Era of Misinformation,' *Forbes*, 10 January 2025 https://www.forbes.com/sites/hecparis/2025/01/10/the-business-cost-of-fake-news-lessons-for-leadership-in-an-era-of-misinformation/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

observed that, 'automatic fake news detection remains a huge challenge, **primarily because the content is designed in a way to closely resemble the truth,** and it is often hard to determine its veracity by AI alone without additional information from third parties'.[10] Since sensationalist content presents almost identically as verified facts, credible news sources risk losing the trust of the public; even moreso if trustworthy journalist's fall into the monetary trap of sensationalism.

'Young men' who are more likely to fall victim to sensationalism on SNS face the alarming challenge of disseminating between fact and fiction, due to these little mitigations in place by Big Tech. The above extract's specification on imitation and the sophist's use of 'spoken copies' again resonates with sensationalist news, which is designed to manipulate and mislead the public. One prime example of Plato's *Sophist* in modern media is the January 6th Riots at the U.S Capitol, which predominantly saw young men being radicalised by far-right conspiracy theories and disinformation. Wayne Rash said:

> 'the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2020, was the direct result of **a continuous drumbeat of disinformation…largely through social media**…President Trump and a number of his followers were able to convince a large majority of Trump voters that he won the election, despite the fact that it was untrue…the continuous assertions that Trump actually

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Yahoo Finance UK, 'Misinformation Identified as Strategic Threat in 2025 Intelligence Report', *Yahoo Finance*, 6 November 2025 https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/misinformation-strategic-intelligence-report-2025-092100629.html [accessed 6 November 2025].

DISA, 'Global Investigation Reveals Big Tech's Efforts to Undermine Information Regulation,' *Digital Influence and Sovereignty Alliance*, 2025 https://disa.org/global-investigation-reveals-big-techs-efforts-to-undermine-information-regulation/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

Robin Mansell, 'Will Crackdowns on Big Tech Work?' *Media@LSE*, 11 February 2025 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2025/02/11/will-crackdowns-on-big-tech-work/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

[10] Basch, M. C. Meleo-Erwin, and C. C. Fera, 'A Comparative Content Analysis of COVID-19 Vaccine Information on TikTok Before and After the 2021 US FDA Approval', *Journal of Community Health*, 48.3 (2023), pp. 420–427 (p.1) https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36789378/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

> won the popular vote **led to a belief** among Trump supporters that **this was actually the case**'. [11]

Trump envisioned himself as 'the wisest person their is' and used the manipulation of language to persuade his supporters, and outsiders, that the election was genuinely stolen. He tricked 'young men' (vulnerable citizens) into subscribing to this far-right propaganda, which led to the Capitol raid and the violence which ensued. Donald Trump, is a prime example of Plato's rendition of a sophist; he undermines truth-tellers (journalists), and generates sensationalist (sophist) content and sentiment through claiming to be 'the wisest' and using 'copies of truth' (not actual truth) to manipulate young men to subscribe to his ideologies, with little care for their livelihoods, only his ability to gain power and income. [12] He 'puts words' in the ears of 'young men' and shows them 'spoken copies' of things. However, in comparison to ancient Greece, this information can reach the entire globe, not just within small communities. Furthermore, persuasion is (disappointingly) valued over truth in today's digital

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[11] Wayne Rash, 'Disinformation Propelled by Social Media and Conspiracy Theories Led to Insurrection,' *Forbes*, 19 January 2021 https://www.forbes.com/sites/waynerash/2021/01/19/disinformation-propelled-by-social-media-and-conspiracy-theories-led-to-insurrection/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

[12] NPR, 'Trump's Impact on U.S. Press Freedoms,' *NPR*, 15 January 2021 https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/956398176/trumps-impact-on-u-s-press-freedoms [accessed 6 November 2025].

Jake Davis, 'The Role of Sensationalism in Donald Trump's Political Career: A Qualitative Research Analysis,' *WewoChro*, *Medium*, 2025 https://medium.com/wewochro/the-role-of-sensationalism-in-donald-trumps-political-career-a-qualitative-research-analysis-8c3e7b9c9b6f [accessed 6 November 2025].

Susan Krauss Whitbourne, 'Donald Trump's IQ Claims and His Undermining of Others' Intelligence: What It Really Means,' *Psychology Today*, 20 October 2020 https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/words-matter/202010/donald-trumps-iq-claims-and-his-undermining-others-intelligence [accessed 6 November 2025].

PolitiFact, 'Fact Check: What Role Did Social Media Play in Spreading Trump's False Claims?' *PolitiFact*, 14 January 2021 https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2021/jan/14/facebook-posts/what-role-did-social-media-play-spreading-trumps-f/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

Gavin Yamey, 'Disinformation Enabled Donald Trump's Second Term and Is a Crisis for Democracies Everywhere,' *The BMJ*, 382 (2025), p1562 https://www.bmj.com/content/382/bmj.p1562 [accessed 6 November 2025].

media landscape because it generates income. The individual (from a personal perspective) does value truth over persuasion in a world dominated by sensationalism. However, it is becoming increasingly challenging to disseminate between truth and falsehoods, making it all the more vital that we have credible news sources.

iii. The Manipulation of Language

"The sophist has now appeared as having a kind of belief-knowledge about everything, but not truth." [13]

Building on the analysis of sensationalism on SNS and its relevance to Plato's sophist, attention shifts to the strategic use of language in sensationalist content (or so-called 'journalism') where manipulation is often disguised as clarity. The above excerpt highlights how fake news often presents information that appears credible but lacks factual accuracy, like that of the Capitol case study. The sophist and sensationalist both inherently weaponizes language, (through ambiguity and emotional appeal) to imitate credibility and manipulate perception, undermining that of the journalist and philosopher. Merriwether Academy importantly points toward the two varied styles of language used by the philosopher and sophist, noting that:

> "The philosopher used questions, paradoxes, analogies, and introspection. The sophist used slogans, emotional appeals, and theatrics. The philosopher risked losing the audience in pursuit of nuance. The **sophist won applause while leaving nothing of substance behind**. One aimed to teach you how to think; the other taught you how **to appear as though you already knew everything**."[14]

Similarly, the sensationalist story 'wins applause' (monetary gain) with its emotionally charged headlines which lack factual accuracy. The 'theatrics' of the sensationalist take the form of mass

[13] Plato, *Sophist,* [233d].

[14] Meriwether Academy, 'The War of Words: Philosophers vs. Sophists,' *Meriwether Academy*, 13 May 2025 https://meriwetheracademy.com/2025/05/13/the-war-of-words/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

misinformation spreading on SNS and baseless claims whose existing purpose is to generate clicks and income. Merriweather continued, drawing connection between the sophist and sensationalist; 'influencers, pundits, and "thought leaders" are often judged not by the truth of their claims, but by the charisma of their delivery'.[15] Sophist's and sensationalists appeal to individuals for their *charisma,* their ability to *persuade* and *manipulate* individuals to believe they are the 'wisest'. The key difference between the journalist and sensationalist lies in their values and intended purposes; journalists have an inherent obligation to truth and sensationalists have an obligation to obscuring that truth, to put out content which will get clicks and income. The very language of fake news, as found in a study by Jack Greive and Helena Woodfield has a belief-based knowledge, with its content relies on modal verbs (might, could), passive constructions (it is believed, was said to be), and emotionally charged language (words which amplify drama and urgency) to imply authority without actual accountability. [16] Like the sophist, sensationalists avoid direct truth claims and evade accountability and scrutiny. These linguistic tactics, used by the sensationalist and sophist, obscure the origin of their claims, making it hard for readers to disseminate fact from fiction and more likely for vulnerable readers to blindly accept the rhetoric sensationalists put forward, as was seen in the Capitol case study.

Like the sophist, the sensationalist inherently manipulates language. This interpretation of Plato's *Sophist* presents alarming challenges to the modern journalist; just as sophistry threatened the philosopher, sensationalist content erodes public trust in credible journalism.

Although the Digital Revolution has mobilised journalism through multi-media storytelling and real-time reporting, the dangers presented by sensationalism far outweigh these positive consequences of SNS. It is vital that individuals remember to *think* (like Plato's philosopher) about the news they are consuming, engage with it, and question it. Pamela Madrid notes that 'the biggest influencer in the

[15] Meriwether Academy, 'The War of Words.'

[16] Jack Grieve and Helen Woodfield, 'The Language of Fake News,' *Corpora*, 20.1 (2025), pp. 1–65 (p. 56) https://pure-oai.bham.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/210961069/the-language-of-fake-news.pdf [accessed 6 November 2025].

spread of fake news is social platforms structure of rewarding users for habitually sharing information.' The USC study she cites dismantles the comforting myth that misinformation spreads merely because users lack critical thinking. Instead, it reveals a systemic issue: platforms incentivize impulsive sharing, regardless of truth.[17] In Plato's *Sophist*, the philosopher is tasked with exposing the sophist's illusions. Today this task falls to both journalists and readers. Critical thinking is imperative in today's digital landscape where users are constantly fed with fake content. In order to combat sophistry, which is rife today, individuals must resist the lure of sensationalism and question the narrative to reclaim journalism as a pursuit of *truth* not a theatre of persuasion.

[17] University of Southern California, 'USC Study Reveals the Key Reason Why Fake News Spreads on Social Media,' *USC Today*, 6 November 2025 https://today.usc.edu/usc-study-reveals-the-key-reason-why-fake-news-spreads-on-social-media/ [accessed 6 November 2025].

PI42015 Essay
2503402

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