

# E-Testimony and Justified Belief

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## Abstract

A central issue in the contemporary epistemology of testimony is whether or not testimony is a fundamental source of justification. Reductionists argue that testimonial evidence can be reduced to more basic sources, such as perception and memory. A central argument of some of those who have argued for the non-reductionist position is that we rely on testimony in our justificatory and inferential practices in a way which does not appear to require other sources of knowledge beyond those needed for the perceptual and memorial processing of testimony. They claim that testimony is very often non-controversial and widely accepted, that even where it is not, we often can't find and don't require non-testimonial grounds for our beliefs. This paper explores the question of the justificatory status of testimony in light of the emergence of what I refer to as e-testimony, the electronic transmission of testimony through such electronic media as e-mail, the web, instant messaging, and file-sharing. Emerging practices with these media raise a host of questions about the nature, character and quality of testimonial exchange. While the underlying epistemic principles employed in electronic communication may not be new, the special features of electronic transmission of testimony may require a significant reappraisal of the empirical claims (if they are empirical claims) about testimonial transmission in the application of those epistemic principles. The paper examines the cognitive and epistemic principles at work in the evaluation of e-testimony in e-testimony. As our testimonial transmissions increasingly become e-testimonial transmissions, most of what we receive as testimony is likely to be evidentially unreliable. Does it follow from this that the rational epistemic response is to find non-testimonial sources of justification and eschew testimony, both ordinary testimony and e-testimony? Reflection on the epistemic status of current e-testimony suggests an anti-reductionist strategy. The trust models we will need to develop for distinguishing credible from false e-testimony will themselves largely rely on testimony and on e-testimony itself.