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Review, Democracy and Fake News: Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics

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Reviewed by Peter Krapp¹

Democracy and Fake News: Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics. London: Routledge 2021. 246pp / ISBN 9781003037385 (ebook)
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Long before computer networks and social media, disinformation was recognized as a dangerous development of mass media. But arguably digital media have even more successfully weaponized disinformation. That awareness in turn has led to the competing development of regulation attempts and of exploitation techniques. Crucially, “misinformation” and “fake news” should be distinguished from “disinformation”: the latter is strategically and deliberately (and often covertly) spread, while “misinformation” may be the accidental result of incorrect, misunderstood, or badly remembered information - and of course the phrase “fake news” has been politicized beyond repair. To focus specifically on disinformation requires tracing the media history of disinformation campaigns. To do so, one is well advised to focus less on ideological debates around what partisans (on one side or another) call “fake news” or propaganda, and more instead on a historical framework for critical media literacy in the context of recognizing and understanding (the use and the disarming of) disinformation. And long before the dark netscape of bots, troll farms, and the viral potential of deepfake videos was the center

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of attention in this nexus, successful disinformation campaigns deployed clever forgeries and front organizations rather than propaganda or leaks to effectively sway public sentiment, dismiss the critics, distort the facts, distract from the main issues, and dismay the audience.

In 1970, media scholar Marshall McLuhan (1972, 66) predicted that World War III is a guerrilla information war with no division between military and civilian participation. Whether one thinks here of the Eastern European defectors Ladislav Bittman and Ion Mihai Pacepa who published rich accounts of their former exploits, or of the quieter disclosures by Heinz Felfe and Horst Kopp about East Germany, the majority of studies on disinformation leaves little doubt that the undisputed champions of these dark arts worked behind the Iron Curtain (Bittmann 1985; Felfe 1986; Pacepa and Rychlak 2013; Kopp 2016). A magisterial recent book by Thomas Rid (2020) provides several reasons why this formation is plausible, even as other nations of course hurried to join the fray.

Democracy and Fake News: Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics, a collection edited by Serena Giusti and Elisa Piras on democracy and fake news under the auspices of information manipulation and post-truth politics, provides multiple insightful and topical accounts, mostly blaming the spread of smartphones and social media, singling out Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram as particular vectors. The introduction by editors Giusti and Piras capably distinguishes the terms misinformation, fake news, post-truth, and disinformation, though the various entries then nonetheless commingle them at times. The discussions of fake news here frankly name

and shame a number of politicians, led of course by Trump and Bolsonaro, though one expected to see Duterte and Orban with them. The conference this edited volume is based on expressly focused on the post-Soviet space, and while many of the twenty-three authors in this volume work in Italy, there are also contributors based in England, Belgium, Sweden, Israel, and Switzerland. The book is based on a conference held in Pisa in 2019, and the authors mostly have a background in international relations and political philosophy, while also drawing on law, computer science, and journalism. Conspicuously absent from this constellation is a historical perspective, and that may be the main drawback of this book. A rigorous survey of disinformation studies ought to point to a few pivotal titles that provide a longer perspective on active measures and their peculiar weaponization of the press, of radio and TV, and of the internet and social media.

Organized into three sections, the sixteen chapters in this conference volume focus on challenges to democracy (chapters 1-7), recent evidence from Russia (chapters 8-11), and dilemmas of contrasting fake news versus disinformation (chapters 12-16). In the first section, this reviewer found most rewarding the discussion of Hannah Arendt's work by Federica Merenda, a doctoral candidate in Human Rights and Global Politics (chapter 1, pp. 19-29). The most trenchant interventions among the chapters of the second section is, in this reviewer's eyes, the discussion by Francesco Bechis, a foreign policy journalist based in Rome, of (dis-)information operations as key to Russian doctrine, particularly in wars with Georgia and Ukraine (chapter 9, pp. 119-131); unfortunately, none of the seminal sources for the history

of disinformation mentioned earlier are cited in the volume under review here, though chapter 9 does draw the line from Soviet tactics to Putin's. In the third section, one chapter that stands out is Matteo Monti's dissection of the EU code of practice on disinformation (chapter 16, pp. 214-224) and its warning against privatizing censorship; Monti writes as post-doctoral researcher in constitutional law. A particular strength of the volume is that the perspectives combined here juxtapose philosophical discussions of the fraught relation between politics and truth with the practice of journalism and politics, cover timely examples of disinformation from Brexit to COVID19, and consider ways to evaluate avenues of countering disinformation.

It may surprise readers to see coronavirus disinformation comprehensively discussed in a book based on a 2019 conference, but several authors were able to add the pandemic into their texts; for example, see chapter 7 by Alice Hazelton in particular (pp.92-103). The complex miasma of COVID19 conspiracies clearly recalls the rumor that HIV/AIDS was in fact a virus engineered by the U.S. at Fort Detrick in 1977, and then used either accidentally or on purpose; Gorbachev eventually apologized officially for this Soviet disinformation campaign (Qiu 2017).² Some might wonder how much it will help if political philosophers think about truth rather than about regulation of online speech, for if neither our politicians nor our social network operators are held responsible for such a rigorous framework then this is academic. Yet the contributors here earnestly demonstrate that under-

² Compare with Rid 2020, especially his chapter 22: "AIDS Made in the USA."

standing automated accounts or “bots” can help with fact-checking algorithms and gatekeeping, that journalistic ethics can draw on legislation, and that the media ecosystem can react when formerly credible sources turn out to be tainted by propaganda, wittingly or unwittingly.

What makes this a relevant title for readers of *Secrecy and Society*?

On the one hand, the covert nature of disinformation campaigns may have its appeal here, on the other hand one needs to beware of conspiracy theory and remember that disinformation often flirts with conspiratorial modes that exhort people to “think more” as the motto of *RT* has it. Not appealing to abstract ideas might prevent critical engagement with the media environment, but debating too much online might lead Netizens to believe that the loudest voices are the most correct. Disinformation taps into preexisting worries, as we see when perfectly capable vaccines are tainted by loose association with anti-vaccine propaganda. Fake social media accounts can create groups of seemingly like-minded people whom we readily trust and who can in turn undermine our trust in other communicators (who are not fake), as we saw in disinformation campaigns to sow doubt about voting machines in recent U.S. election cycles. The core concern is therefore what remedies are available; while the American discussion revolves around technical solutions for media self-regulation, this conference volume is steeped in the European context of regulatory zeal. Yet as Swedish media anthropologist Urban Larssen, a contributor to this edited volume, accurately warns in a cogent account of fact-checking (chapter 15, pp. 198-213), demonetizing or disincentivizing problematic content can backfire, if it undermines our belief

in freedom of expression in the public sphere. Any attempt to identify, analyze, or counter disinformation must be maximally transparent and accurate, or it risks feeding into the mirroring of hostile information operations.

Often disinformation is simply about flooding the internet with contradictions. We now know that members of the Russian Internet Research Agency were required, during an average twelve-hour day, to post fifty comments on news articles, to maintain six Facebook accounts publishing at least three posts a day, and to discuss the news in messaging groups at least twice a day (Bail, et al. 2019). By the end of the first month, they were expected to win five hundred subscribers and get at least five posts on each item a day. On Twitter, they might be expected to manage ten accounts with up to two thousand followers and tweet fifty times a day. In the context of Russia war against Ukraine, several countries have seen disinformation campaigns that push a debunked conspiracy theory originally promoted by the Russian military: namely that the U.S. was conducting biological weapons research in Ukraine (Falk 2022). Such spurious claims have been widely debunked, even after China extended the spread of this Russian conspiracy theory (Cercone 2022; Robinson, Sardarizadeh, and Horton 2022; U.N. 2022).

But this is not a Russian topic exclusively, despite the conference volume's emphasis on the post-Soviet space in chapters 8 through 11 (Moscow correspondent Anna Zafesova on Putin's regime, Roman journalist Francesco Bechis on cyber warfare, political science professor Mara Morini on post-truth politics, and data analyst Giorgio Comai on the vulnerabilities of

open societies to media manipulations from abroad). A lot of countries and corporations around the globe have recently gotten into the game, and it is unclear how the current vogue for disinformation can be tamed. A 2017 study by Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Research Project found that, all told, at least twenty-nine regimes follow the model of state media censorship to steer public opinion, spread misinformation, and undermine critics (Woolley and Howard 2017). Even more worrisome, by 2017 at least eighteen national-level elections were targeted by social media manipulation. The Brexit referendum, discussed extensively by Jennifer Cassidy in chapter 4 (pp. 53-63) was only one rather transparent example for the covert and overt impact of disinformation campaigns. While thirty-one countries passed new laws to regulate disinformation, twelve countries arrested and charged people accused of disinformation. Eleven countries hope to boost media literacy to weaken the effects of disinformation, while several others set up task forces to monitor suspicious information operations. When the Brazilian Supreme Court ordered the suspension of Telegram over pro-government disinformation campaigns, this set up a highly visible test case. While censoring political speech is risky, debunking disinformation can be costly: Brandolini's law proposes that the energy necessary to refute disinformation is an order of magnitude bigger than that used to produce it - as it is much easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled (Williamson 2016; Brandolini 2013). Arguably, democracies are most vulnerable to disinformation - not only because bad media literacy is good for the advertisers that pay for our apparently free internet media land-

scape. Several chapters in this book point to viable remedies, whether in the form of a code of practice on disinformation (Monti in chapter 16, pp. 214-225), changing how Twitter is governed (Caldarelli, De Nicola, Petrocchi, and Sarocco, chapter 12, pp. 157-172), or drawing on foundational principles to outline the stakes more clearly (Merenda, chapter 1, pp. 19-29). Democracy can be said to hinge on a broad consensus on how elections work, how the legislature and the judicial branch work, and how the media function; if these institutions are solid and trusted, democracy can debate its disagreements to solve its problems. Autocratic regimes by contrast do not brook much dissensus, they see open media as a risk or a threat, and therefore do not hesitate to seize control of media and to weaponize them (Farrell and Schneier 2019). Thus, as one of the most interesting chapters here has it (Giorgio Comai, chapter 11, pp. 143-154), responding to interference needs to focus on the vulnerabilities that disinformation exposes.

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