

# Book Review

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Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli

*Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation*. New York and London: Routledge, 2021.

172 pp. £34.99 (Paperback). ISBN: 9780367332105.

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In the spheres of political communication and digital media, there are few more pressing issues than disinformation and misinformation. The need to ensure freedom of speech and expression while also legislating against and eliminating disinformation and hateful speech has become one of democracy's most imperative tasks. This is an ideal which has recently been thrown into disarray by the conjunction of technological enhancements and politico-economic actors with divisive, authoritarian agendas. Iosifidis and Nicoli's concise and timely volume is suffused by a sense of urgency at the ways in which digital disinformation is eroding democracy, trust, and informed participation, even in countries that they argue to have been historically aligned with enlightenment ideals and liberal political traditions. Nor are the only dangers to democracy from state and nonstate actors who are explicitly using the internet to spread disinformation and fake news. After mentioning the generally accepted positives of the internet for activism and democratic participation, their opening sections question what citizens choose to do online in "selectively exposing the issues that matter to them individually rather than to society as a whole" (p. 23). Confirmation bias and targeted psychographic profiling by firms to whom platforms have sold personal data are only the beginning when it comes to the dangers highlighted.

The opening literature review situates the Habermasian public sphere as an ideal to which the authors are committed, despite the critiques that they briefly reflect on. And indeed, seen from the perspective of this *ideal* of political civility—rational, representative, dominated by neither state nor market and working towards the public good for the greatest number through reconciliation of values and a maximization of wellbeing—our current political and media systems and the debates that we find ourselves in on social media platforms seem hopelessly compromised and inadequate. The discussion of scholarship with regard to citizenship and public spheres is balanced, taking neither a techno-optimist nor an overly techno-pessimist view, if rather limited both by its citation of mainly well-regarded European and American literature

and by the attempted tone of neutrality which occasionally appears to equate far left and far right as “two polarized groups.”

The book is helpfully organized into three sections, the first of which reviews theories pertaining to digital democracy, market trends, and the role of internet intermediaries that will be enormously useful for young scholars new to this field. The following two sections address the state of the art of digital disinformation, as well as strategies for combatting what the authors term “deviant behavior” in the internet political sphere, followed by case studies of disinformation in Russia and digital democracy in Ukraine. The series of definitions of bots, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation make for welcome clarity in chapter 4. Likewise, the discussions of fact-checking, block chain, troll factories, and deep fakes are crisp and informative, whereas the point about the pressing need for intermediaries to be regulated externally (because they have failed to self-regulate), is unarguable. Chapter 5’s review of reports and policies on misinformation and disinformation by commissions and think-tanks within and outside the EU is also valuable. However, some readers might find themselves searching for more robust empirical evidence. In looking to the existing literature for solutions that might slow the spread of disinformation, the authors themselves acknowledge the need for more field research to move us beyond suggestions such as making social media platforms public or listing them as content producers.

The book is, perhaps, less critical than it could be about the mainstream news sphere in western liberal democracies, and this may strike readers as something of a missed opportunity. Media historians, in particular, might be left with questions about the role of legacy media in spreading, or at least in excusing and not disputing the now well-evidenced spin, political disinformation and fake news leading up to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early noughties and to the British elections of 2019. Further, despite noting the rise of the far right in Europe, the authors place greater emphasis on “deviant agents of disinformation” (p. 46) emanating from “foreign” states such as Turkey and the Russian Federation than on trying to understand linkages between the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim disinformation strategies of the Western European and American right and far right, and the far right Hindutva regime in India. The net result of assumptions about the benign influence of western journalists (in conjunction with the assertion of the necessity to strengthen their skills and technological nous in order to combat disinformation) is to downplay the troubling synergy between selected liberal mainstream media on issues such as immigration, borders, austerity, war and race and those of British, American, European, and Indian rightwing politicians and disinformation hubs.

Following a widely accepted but empirically questionable narrative about the *significance* of Russian interference in the 2016 US elections and the UK Brexit referendum, the authors argue that “the main objective of the Russian Federation’s foreign policy is to undermine liberal democracies in the West” (p. 91). While chapters 5 and 6 provide fascinating commentaries on censorship, social media shutdowns and protests and while ample evidence exists of malign intent on the part of Russian troll farms and bots in both above-mentioned cases, as in Ukraine and Syria, seasoned commentators on the Russian regime point out that Russia expends considerably more resources on

controlling news within its own borders to maintain political power than it does externally. Details of the comparative budgets of Russian troll farms in June 2016 and of the British *Vote Leave* campaign suggest that homegrown western disinformation requires greater scrutiny than it currently gets in this volume. Cambridge Analytica's breaking of privacy laws, which the authors do mention, is only the tip of the iceberg. To conclude, this book makes an organized and constructive contribution to the study of contemporary digital disinformation. Nevertheless, readers would be wise to consider that over-stating the case about Russian interference through disinformation conveniently—and dangerously—allows disinformation by western governments, political parties and their allies to proliferate and circulate relatively unscrutinized.