

## BOOK REVIEW

### Democracy and Fake News, Information, Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics, edited by Serena Giusti and Elisa Piras

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**Reviewed by**

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Serena Giusti and Elisa Piras's edited book is a collective effort to analyze, through sixteen essays and an interdisciplinary perspective, how the creation and dissemination of distorted information negatively affects the quality of democracy. This issue is timely and urgent. Indeed, fake news spreading through social media largely influenced two of the most important elections in the last decade, namely that of Mr. Donald Trump as the President of the United States and the Brexit referendum. More recently, the Covid-19 crisis has been accompanied by the massive presence of distorted information in the public sphere, known as "infodemic".

Against this background, the authors first focus on the limitations of the political strategies currently implemented by institutions, journalists and platforms to limit disinformation and then suggest alternative solutions. The book reaches three main conclusions. Firstly, *a posteriori* debunking and fact-checking tools might not be adequate to stop the flow of online fake news. Secondly, it is paramount to face the question of the political accountability of platforms, by legally regulating their role in the fight against disinformation. Otherwise, the risk is to create informal governance led by private companies gaining unprecedented power in handling a problem that is in fact inherently political and public. Finally, not only social media, but traditional media too should be included in a more general legal effort to find a solution to the spreading of fake news.

In its first part, *Post-truth politics and the challenges of democracy* features theoretical contributions dealing with the relationship between fake news and democracy through a reading of Hannah Arendt's political theory (Merenda), the problem of an inclusive public sphere through epistemic justice (Piras), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Ethics (Ireni-Saban and Sherman). The *fil rouge* in this theoretical debate lies in the theorization of an inclusive public sphere, which is able to face the fact that algorithms contain racial and gender biases. Notably, making AI algorithms inclusive is at the very core of a just digital public sphere with collective effort in this direction from academia, industry and media agencies. This is what makes this first section of the book extremely relevant.

By shifting the focus from political theory to empirical political science, Cassidy's and Pizzimenti and Curini's chapters tackle the relationship between fake news and electoral outcomes by reaching opposite conclusions. Indeed, whereas Cassidy states that in the case of Brexit, "the leave vote was motivated by post-truth politics" (p. 54), Pizzimenti and Curini show that people are rarely affected by targeted news in an electoral turnout. These two opposite conclusions well summarize the debate in political behavior studies. While different outcomes might be due to political systems peculiarities, the conclusion reached

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in this chapter is coherent with the advancement of the field towards comparative analyses built on causal inference research designs.

Along a similar line, Hazelton's chapter argues that a more specific attention on the "science of science communication" (p.100) is required in order for scientific yet comprehensible information to circulate. If this is not achieved, fake news is more likely to circulate. The role of experts in the public sphere, especially with regard to scientific knowledge dissemination, is at the center of several innovative studies and its salience is steadily increasing as exemplified by the debate on Covid-19 vaccination.

The second book section, titled *From disinformation to post-truth politics: evidence from Russia*, auspices a broader look at the relationship between Russia and the West in analyzing new forms of hybrid warfare, whose one of the main tools is disinformation. Furthermore, as Morini states, connecting the hybrid war as a foreign policy tool with post-truth politics as an internal political strategy could advance our understanding of the phenomenon.

Specifically, as Zafesova's argues, the creation of an *ad-hoc* reality perpetuating Putin's regime is one of the main goals of Russian internal policy. In foreign policy, instead, as Bechis writes, Russia employs a strategy of constant warfare that does not depend on a specific conflict but rather is the cornerstone of a long-term power strategy. He calls such a strategy "sharp power". He develops this concept further elaborating from Mark Galeotti's seminal article on the definition of hybrid warfare in the "transformation of war" literature in International Relations.

These insights are relevant especially nowadays as the Ukraine crisis is permeated by all the above-mentioned elements, from disinformation to the Russia/West divide up to the implementation of a hybrid system of warfare. In the third part of the book, Caldarelli, De Nicola, Petrocchi and Saracco focus instead on the *Dilemmas of contrasting disinformation and fake news*. They analyze social media activities by looking at tweets concerning migration and Covid-19 in Italy. They find that the most active accounts in propagating messages have a higher number of bots among their followers compared to the average. Caiani and Susanszky go on analyzing social media data. Their comparative political analysis focuses on Central and Eastern Europe social movements, adding to mainstream literature, which has traditionally paid attention only to Western populist movements. In their views, right-wing movements in Central European countries are not monolithic actors. Indeed, a greater degree of online activism is present in contexts where right-wing forces are not in government. As such, Czech and Slovak radical right organizations use visual and textual propaganda more actively than Hungarian and Polish ones. Consistently with the more recent literature in sociology of communication, these two studies show the centrality of online tools for activism and disinformation networks.

Shifting from a political to a legal perspective, Stojanoski and Monti analyze the German law against fake news and the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation respectively. Stojanoski underlies two main weaknesses in the German anti fake-news law. First is that the journalistic and editorial content are removed from the scope of the law that assesses specifically social media activity. Second is that this law neither aims at preventing the appearance of fake news nor at strengthening the media literacy of the public. Hence, these laws address fake news in a merely defensive manner. Furthermore, according to Monti, the biggest constraints of the EU Code of Practice is that it "can be framed as part of a broader general trend that delegates to Internet platforms the process of balancing fundamental rights online" (p.218) by leading to the so-called privatization of censorship. Normatively speaking, Monti states that a right to appeal to independent authorities (which is only granted in the French system) could be the benchmark in fighting fake news.

Finally, Larssen's chapter shows a paradox in the debate on fact-checking. Journalists express the need for digital fact-checking tools, such as web-based applications to be used in day-to-day journalistic tasks, and yet they fear that institutionalized forms of fact-checking could damage their professional autonomy, by ultimately leading to enhanced control and surveillance on a managerial level.

Overall, Giusti and Piras' edited book contributes to several subfields in the social sciences. Yet, the book lacks a conclusion that goes beyond each section's disciplinary boundary. An introduction to each section and a concluding chapter would have helped the reader to better navigate this interdisciplinary collective effort. This notwithstanding, the book sheds light on AI ethics, electoral behavior, law and foreign policy by critically discussing the most recent trends concerning fake news in its relationship with the quality of democracy.

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