

Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli, **Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2021, 172 pp., \$44.95 (paperback).

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Finding accurate information on contemporary disinformation is a hard task on the easiest of days. The web of national interests, media regulations, and private actors has yet to be unraveled. In their latest book, **Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation**, sociologist Petros Iosifidis and communication scholar Nicholas Nicoli try to encapsulate modern disinformation. I do not think they succeed, but the challenge they present is worth understanding.

In arguing that nations need to address disinformation, the authors first discuss sociological and communications theories of disinformation and deceit. Then, they describe disinformation developments from the 2010s to now, and finally, they present case studies from Russia and Ukraine to ground their arguments.

In their first section, Iosifidis and Nicoli examine how the populist resurgence in 2016 affected disinformation production. They start from a promising point—lies as integral to human communication. Now, they argue, the “networked ecosystem” of social media is “rewiring our brains” to create new emotion-laden communication (p. 2). The authors argue for this physiological effect through Jürgen Habermas’s theory of public spheres, extended to the Internet and networked public spheres (Habermas & MacCarthy, 2007). They admit the utopian limitations of Habermas’s work but believe the Internet’s intermixing of public and private takes idealized democratic society further out of reach—in Habermas’s theory, an ideal democracy requires citizens to have private space to reflect and build self-conception before they can argue for it in public.

Against the democratizing effects of social media, exemplified by the Arab Spring and the #MeToo movement, Iosifidis and Nicoli hold up the media’s incentives to amplify popular information regardless of its truth value. This, they argue, makes public communication less rational and thus less democratic. Hence, a democracy should reduce disinformation to preserve the educated citizenry it needs to survive.

Already in this first section, Iosifidis and Nicoli’s liberal vantage point is clear. They describe left- and right-wing populists as profiting from social media and disinformation:

Rationality is thus weakened, as the political messages that are circulated online are highly emotional and covered with a symbolic meaning. . . . Populism functions and spreads with the help of social media networks in order to mobilise political emotions, exploit the public sphere and disrupt individual realities. (p. 32)



On social media and democracy, the authors begin with the democracy of ancient Athens, limited by the Athenians to male, property-owning citizens, and claim direct democracy makes for unrepresentative governments. Representative democracy is more inclusive, they say, and threatened by social media's temptations of direct democracy. I think this is an odd argument, since it was disenfranchisement, not direct democracy itself, that made Athenian politics unrepresentative. This argument also contradicts social choice theory, which shows that representative democratic systems alone do not guarantee governments that accurately reflect their constituents (Tangian, 2014). This is where another problem with the book first crops up—it is already outdated. A reference to Jeremy Corbyn as a populist does not mention his electoral loss in 2020. The alarm bells only got louder when I reached a section about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Talking about platforms' self-regulation, Iosifidis and Nicoli strike a positive note by describing the cooperation between platforms and governments to prevent pandemic disinformation. This is immediately undercut by a statement that, from my viewpoint in the United States, is simply untrue: "For a start, false stories about the novel coronavirus are relatively easy to detect compared with political information" (p. 38). The authors admit it is hard to write about the pandemic, and I don't envy them the task of predicting its effects in early 2020. Still, the discrepancies are hard to ignore. The mask-efficacy debacles, the UK government's promises of herd immunity, the discovery of New York's hidden nursing facility death rates—these are not easily separated from "political information." The authors' choice to use an academic monograph to discuss topical events has not served them well.

With their liberal framework and the destabilizing effect of the Internet established, Iosifidis and Nicoli move to government regulation of disinformation. They divide their discussion between official information sources, like media companies or state-run campaigns, and unofficial sources, such as peer information sharing. After a rundown of how technologies such as the blockchain, deepfakes, and bot accounts contribute to disinformation and disorient regulators, they argue that computational propaganda has blurred war and peace, as countries try to destabilize one another from afar.

Iosifidis and Nicoli suggest that the solution entails building trust in traditional news media sources and supporting fact-checking operations. The more proactive technological methods follow the example of social media companies. On blockchains, the authors state that transparency and decentralization will usefully "disrupt" information systems (p. 57). These techniques are supported by examples from European Union (EU) disinformation regulation, starting with the 2015 East StratCom Task Force created in 2015 and reports such as the European Commission's (2018) *Tackling Online Disinformation*. Through these policy documents, Iosifidis and Nicoli take a Europe-wide perspective, neglecting to address the different policy interpretations of EU countries as scholars of legal culture, such as Meg Leta Jones (2018) have.

I found the book's last section, on case studies of Russian and Ukrainian disinformation, the most interesting. Both studies show how the core tenet of disinformation is its *lack* of a concentrated message, compared to traditional propaganda. The goal isn't to instill a particular idea but to raise enough plausible alternatives that people can't discern the truth. The authors draw heavily on European Commission reports (2018), which mostly address recent Russia-related disinformation. The book's reliance on only those reports for analyzing international disinformation forces the authors to awkwardly speculate:

Judging from the lack of information on the Western Balkans and South task forces (no online presence) the [European External Action Service]'s investment in them is at an early stage and it is choosing to concentrate efforts on the East StratCom task force. (p. 66)

The case studies, however, provide useful comparisons of Russian domestic and international disinformation to show how states use disinformation to destabilize.

The Ukrainian case study begins, fruitfully, with the Glastnost era and the country's early adoption of the World Wide Web. The information provided by new Internet infrastructure created public transparency and alternatives to government information, but it also made residents open to outside influences. While traditional local media was marked by government censorship and bias, social media facilitated the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests. In Ukraine, social media became a practical organizing tool and a way for international users to contribute and receive information. Through these examples, Iosifidis and Nicoli convincingly describe the complicated interplay between limiting disinformation and encouraging state censorship.

Eventually, however, enough errors added up that I found it hard to trust *Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation*. In one spot, the linguistic subfield of natural language processing is incorrectly defined (p. 57). In other places, the supporting literature is too thin. While reading, I felt the authors didn't have an accurate understanding of Internet "trolls," described as slacktivist sofa warriors. Many anthropologists, like Phillips (2015) and Coleman (2015), have discussed how the transformation of trolls from apolitical trickster figures to dedicated hacktivists is a recent one. Researchers like Gabdulhakov (2018) have connected trolls' vigilante justice to Russian institutions, like comrades' courts. In discussing Ukrainian trolls, Iosifidis and Nicoli refer mostly to a single news story and a longer journalistic book, omitting social science literature.

Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation would be most useful for European or U.S. policymakers looking for an overview of the topic and relevant academic theories. This is not a book about global disinformation, for its Europe-centered sources and case studies. For a graduate student, I fear this monograph will be too outdated to serve as an introduction to disinformation. For the experienced scholar, the theoretical presentation will not be new, and relevant case studies can be found in greater detail elsewhere. The book's reliance on current events coverage and gray literature has, unfortunately, given it a short shelf life. If this work had used a faster medium than academic publishing, it might have reached its audience in time to be of use.

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