Ultimately, the text is successful in offering a detailed and focused understanding of U.S. drug control policies and the media’s association with controversies surrounding the War on Drugs. This is both timely and of social consequence. I would be remiss, however, if I failed to note that the heavy lifting that the discipline of Communication has performed in developing and building a body of empirical evidence in the domains of agenda setting, framing, and media effects (all central themes in this text) have been largely ignored. Of course, siloed knowledge remains an ongoing shortcoming across disciplines. Yet in the context of understanding multifaceted and complex social phenomenon such as this, it is a constraint worth noting.

**Beyond Fake News: Finding the Truth in a World of Misinformation.** Justin P. McBrayer. New York: Routledge, 2021. 248 pp. $142.85 hbk. $31.87 pbk, ISBN 9780367483081.

**Disinformation and Fake News.** Shashi Jayakumar, Benjamin Ang, and Nur Diyanah Anwar (Eds.). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 170 pp. $29.99 hbk, ISBN 9789811558764.

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The fake news crisis has generated a veritable cottage industry of books and academic articles over the past few years. And yet, so much more needs to be said. Two new books take the conversation forward with varying degrees of success. Justin P. McBrayer’s monograph offers a thought-provoking exposition of not just the supply of but also the demand for fake news, especially in the United States. Shashi Jayakumar and colleagues’ edited volume opens our eyes to how the challenge of fake news varies across countries and cultures, but it ultimately falls into the trap of selection bias itself.

McBrayer, who is a professor of philosophy at Fort Lewis College in Colorado, wrote his book to give the lay reader a “thirty-thousand-foot overview of the fake news crisis landscape” (p. xvi). While the book is not technical, McBrayer draws upon a vast body of empirical research to make his arguments. On the supply side, he tackles the “oversized” role of technology in creating the current crisis. But unlike many other scholars, he places this role in the context of two other factors: market-driven journalism and deregulation.

McBrayer argues that purveyors of news, from *New York Times* to fly-by-night web operations, are driven by the same motive of profit. And telling the truth is not the only, or even the most effective, means of improving the bottom line. Indeed, reminding readers of the tradition of yellow journalism from the 19th century, he notes that the problem of fake news is “as old as the hills” (p. 12). The difference today is the volume of fake news being produced and the speed with which it is able to travel, thanks to advancing media technology.

Most American newspapers used to have localized readership, so any fake news they produced would also be geographically limited in reach, McBrayer argues. But the
local news industry has been disappearing under the onslaught of digital technology, leaving the door open for online sites with wider reach—and wider consequences of publishing fake news. The problem has been compounded by deregulatory measures such as the revoking of Fairness Doctrine for broadcasters in 1987, which was followed by the growth of partisan talk radio and, within a decade, the emergence of Fox News.

The book distinguishes itself by drawing much-needed attention to the demand side of fake news. Media scholars tend to treat users as hapless victims of media messages who accept fake news as the “truth.” But McBrayer argues that the public’s desire for truth is overestimated. More than the truth, people care for consuming and disseminating information that conforms to their beliefs and group identity, especially partisan identity. However, sharing information that other groups can also easily believe in is not enough as it fails to signal a difference between one group and another. Hence, the “need for beliefs ‘on the edge’ of rationality or in the face of ambiguous evidence provides a constant incentive to consume misinformation that supports those beliefs” (p. 47). This is a crucial insight as it explains why misinformation tends to spread faster than regular information.

McBrayer disapproves of the human tendency to rely on gut instinct for answering “big questions” that he says our intuition is incapable of addressing. He also distinguishes various “intellectual blind spots” that underpin the willingness to believe in fake news. These include cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, which leads people to find information that supports their worldview; and social bias, or the inclination to overestimate how many people share their worldview. McBrayer staunchly defends the importance of expertise, especially academic and scientific, and concludes with a series of prescriptions on “how we can do better.”

The book’s broad intellectual sweep, however, leaves behind some litter in its wake. McBrayer’s definition of fake news borders on what media scholars would recognize as “framing” and acknowledge as an inescapable feature of news production. All news, by this definition, would be fake. McBrayer’s definition would thus fail the falsifiability test he himself recommends as a touchstone for good theory and the mark of an expert.

The book reduces all motivations, be they for institutional producers of news or individual consumers of news, to financial or cognitive cost–benefit calculations. But as decades of scholarship on the sociology of news has showed, there are many other factors that bear upon news production. Similarly, individual beliefs are not shaped only by the tendency to find cognitive shortcuts, and there is more to group identification than intellectual lethargy. That is why the solutions he offers, which lay the burden of dealing with fake news on individuals for the most part, may not always succeed. The challenge of fake news, as evident from his own analysis, is systemic in nature.

The systemic nature of fake news also stands out in the short essays comprising Jayakumar, Ang, and Anwar’s edited volume. Jayakumar heads the Center of Excellence for National Security at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University, where Ang is a senior fellow and Anwar is a doctoral student. The book is refreshingly international in scope, with an emphasis on Southeast Asia.
The strength of this volume lies in the contextual nuance that some of its chapters add to our understanding of fake news. Richard Fletcher draws upon a survey carried out across 37 countries to shed light on public perceptions of news and fake news. His chapter shows sharp differences in public concern over fake news globally, oscillating from 85% in Brazil to 30% in the Netherlands. It also suggests that people around the world are nearly as concerned about media bias and poor journalism as they are about completely made-up news—a point that fake news research often disregards.

Ross Tapsell and Alan Davis’s chapters are eye-opening. Both assert that Facebook has become synonymous with the internet in Southeast Asia: indeed, some survey respondents say “yes” when asked about Facebook access but “no” for internet access. This gives the social media behemoth unrivaled influence over what people in the region know and how they think. Davis connects rapid digitization and ability to speak “freely” with an explosion in disinformation and interethnic hate speech online in Myanmar, culminating in the genocide of Rohingya Muslims.

Unfortunately, the book suffers from selection bias, which is itself a form of disinformation. Multiple contributors adopt a NATO-centric worldview and present an intellectually constrained perspective on fake news. Chapters by Janis Sarts and Barbora Maronkova, who are both NATO officials, blame Russia for spreading disinformation and highlight the security challenges it raises. But they have little to say about disinformation campaigns run by leading NATO members to rationalize unending wars around the world or the lies that caused a U.S. President to be deplatformed by Twitter. The final chapter, penned by the editors, ironically eulogizes NATO even as it encourages readers to practice “critical thinking” to avoid disinformation.

Together, these two books show us the direction that the scholarship on fake news and disinformation should move in as well as the pitfalls it needs to sidestep. Although western academia came to view fake news as a “crisis” following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it is in fact a global concern that predates the political ascendancy of Donald Trump. And while social media, and digital technology broadly, have much to do with the current crisis, an array of actors needs to share the blame. Media scholars should pay greater attention to how partisan news organizations, in their pursuit of profit, eroded trust in journalism as a public institution, and how an increasingly partisan audience now actively seeks and redistributes partisan news as a form of partisan identity performance, perpetuating the cycle of polarization. Finally, scholarship on fake news, whether focused on one country or comparative/transnational in scope, itself needs to steer clear of political and ideological agendas to remain meaningful.

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