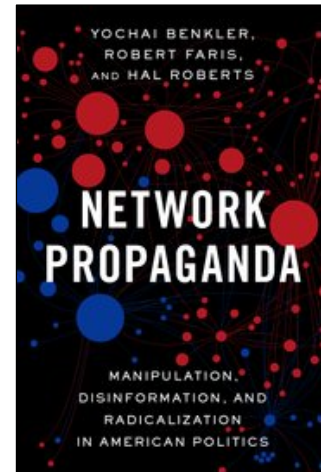


Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, **Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 472 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

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Have new digital technologies fundamentally changed our society and democracy? When talking about fake news, Russian propaganda, or political polarization, social media are always the first to be blamed. Authors of **Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics** contest the common belief that current epistemic crisis of democracy and truth started with the heightened use of social media in Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016. On the other hand, Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts propose that the current crisis is more deeply rooted: the structure of American politics and media ecosystem that has persisted since the 1970s. The authors are not arguing that technology does not matter; rather, this timely book is important for understanding how technological adoption is rooted in the institutional and political-cultural fabric. This book is also highly useful to those who wish to understand the architecture of American political communication empirically, as it provides rich analysis and case studies of news stories and coverage, along with social media data.

Network propaganda is defined as the ways in which the architecture of a media ecosystem contributes to wider dissemination of propaganda. As the book’s title suggests, the book’s goal is to show that the already-present asymmetry in the American news media ecosystem and political partisanship created an environment susceptible to propaganda. The book is comprised of four parts in which the authors trace the “usual suspects” (p. 21) that created the asymmetric partisan media ecosystem. The four parts are constructed coherently so as to argue that the decade-long media ecosystem, not some novel technology, can be held accountable for the current information crisis.

The first part is dedicated to describing the asymmetry of the American news media ecosystem and how two fundamentally different media ecosystems came to coexist. The division is not between the left and the right, but is a “division between the right and the rest of the media ecosystem” (p.73). While the rest of the media ecosystem is an interconnected network that adheres to professional journalistic norms, the right-wing media is highly disconnected from others and dominated by partisan media outlets. This asymmetry is noticeable among both media producers and social media users, in their practices of sharing news. The insularity of the right-wing creates a different network dynamic that is subject to the propaganda feedback loop, in which falsehood and identity-confirming information spreads more easily. On the other hand, the reality-check dynamic rules the ecosystem of the center and the left media, constraining disinformation. This explains why conspiracy theories from the right were shared more widely.

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Part 2's focus is on the "who" and "how" of network propaganda. In terms of "who," the main actors that spread disinformation and propaganda include Breitbart, Fox News, and mainstream media. In terms of "how," the authors discuss three main mechanisms that political communication uses to affect politics, such as agenda setting, priming, and framing, and show how these mechanisms were used to spread propaganda. Chapters of part 2 are mostly comprised of textual analysis and case studies, which allude to the authors' initial observation regarding the right-wing media ecosystem's insularity and the existence of the propaganda feedback loop. Readers get to understand how Trump and the right-wing media worked together to set immigration as the core agenda and frame it in Islamophobic terms (chapter 4), how Fox News reemerged as a major player in the right-wing media ecosystem in amplifying the "deep state" frame (chapter 5), and how mainstream media also participated in creating a propaganda-rich environment by emphasizing Hillary Clinton's e-mail scandal, with its traditional professional journalistic norm (chapter 6).

Part 3 presents an interesting counter-narrative about actors who have usually received more spotlights as the culprits of spreading disinformation, such as alt-rights (chapter 7), Russian bots or hackers (chapter 8), and Facebook-based commercial operators (chapter 9). While the authors acknowledge their impact, the authors are cautious not to exaggerate their actual effect. In describing each actor, they show great consistency in validating their argument: be it alt-right groups, or Russians, or clickbait political sites, "their efforts must flow through the media ecosystem Americans inhabit" (p. 267). The asymmetric media ecosystem plays a larger role: the fact that the right-wing media ecosystem has more incentives to spread identity-confirming disinformation accounts for the fact that conspiracy theories gained greater traction among right-wing media and Trump's supporters.

Part 4 takes a further step to argue that the asymmetric architecture existed far before the Internet. In terms of media history, the propaganda feedback loop in the right wing has formed since 1988 with talk radio and 1996 with Fox News, which worked to confirm Republican partisan identity. Politically, polarization among political elites and animosity within the public toward the opposing party started to grow; it was amid this baseline asymmetric structure that Internet technology was adopted. Hence, the Internet was grafted on the already asymmetric media ecosystem, and online media and social media users followed different information dynamics of the propaganda feedback loop and the reality-check principle accordingly. Following the diagnosis, a solution is suggested, such as changes in journalism practices, regulation of Internet platforms, increasing media literacy, and more fundamentally, political-institutional changes on the right.

To readers who initially aimed to find out how social media, Russian trolls, or bots might have made Trump the president of the United States, this book might be a disappointment. However, this is exactly the authors' intention: They are trying to reroute our attention from technology to the institutional, political, and historical conditions that surround technology. The gist of the book's argument is that contrary to the widely held belief, a surge of disinformation is not a simple result of fake news being circulated on Facebook, Twitter, or far-right news organizations, because more than half of Americans still get news from television or radio. Rather, the asymmetric media ecosystem created a propaganda network where manipulative information could easily be spread and amplified, particularly among the right wing. Here, partisan right-wing politicians and media outlets that published bias-

confirming beliefs are at fault. Likewise, traditional journalists who performed demonstrative neutrality rather than accountable verifiability are also responsible.

When we focus on political and institutional fabric and media practices, we can move away from universalizing the power and effect of technology on our democracy and society. Hence, a contextualized diagnosis of the problem becomes possible. Precisely, the authors note that based on a country's media ecosystem and its overall trust in media, some countries may be more resilient to manipulation. This approach is particularly meaningful as it understands the importance of contextualization, which has often been neglected in analyzing the information crisis. That being said, although the assessment is based on the U.S. context, this book opens up the possibility for scholars of global communication to engage in the dialogue, discussing how each country's case differs and how different efforts will have to be made. Taking locality and historicity into account, the solutions suggested in this book should not be taken as a panacea.

While the bulk of the authors' criticisms are geared toward the asymmetric media ecosystem (especially Fox News), many of the diagnoses and solutions presented in part 4 are about the online sphere. Readers might anticipate how the fundamental problems of the insular right-wing media, with its agenda setting and framing practices that create the propaganda feedback loop, can be solved. Given that the authors emphasize that television and talk radio are still the most influential sources of information for most Americans, a more down-to-earth prescription about the right-wing media would be helpful. Although a call for change in professional journalism is presented, only the rest of the media system other than the right-wing will likely implement a new journalistic norm, which may create greater asymmetry. Similarly, other journalism scholars have problematized the norm of professional journalism and called for a change (Zelizer, 2018). The questions still remain as to how media practices from the right-wing can be changed so that the propaganda feedback loop does not further solidify.

Uprooting the decade-long problem of partisan polarization that resulted in the asymmetrical media ecosystem is not an easy task. Nonetheless, painfully realistic diagnoses that let us accept the fact that we live in an extremely partisan society can be the first crucial step. In this way, *Network Propaganda* presents a great comprehensive overview of the architecture of the U.S. media ecosystem, using various methods such as data analysis, case studies, and textual analysis. With ample data and insightful analysis, this book is an important guide to seek ways to make democracy survive the current epistemic crisis.

Reference

Zelizer, B. (2018). Resetting journalism in the aftermath of Brexit and Trump. *European Journal of Communication, 33*(2), 140–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760318>