

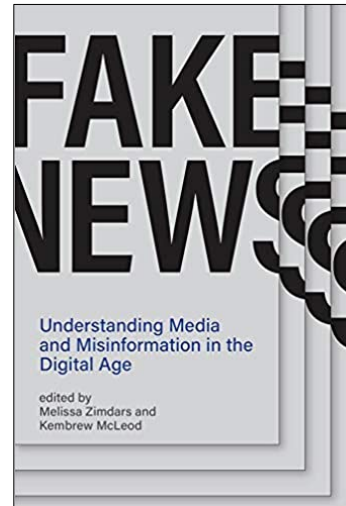
Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew McLeod (Eds.), **Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020, 416 pp., \$38.00 (paperback).

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2020 is poised to be the year of the Fake News edited volume. Joining **Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age** in the coming months is (among others) *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media* from Shu, Wang, Lee, and Liu (2020) and Joshua Grimm's (2020) forthcoming *Fake News! Misinformation in the Media*. Making a substantial contribution within this cacophony requires authors to strike a balance between covering well-tread ground and looking for novel insights. Zimdars and McLeod's "Fake News" volume makes a valiant attempt at this challenge, certainly it contains many noteworthy chapters that push the boundaries of extant theorizing around mis/disinformation. However, the volume's overwhelming limitation is its lack of focus. It is unclear what part of the vast conversation surrounding fake news the editing authors hope to contribute to, and as a consequence, it is hard to pinpoint who this book is aimed at. While its breadth offers up many generative paths for future research and exploration, this breadth also means the book switches between high theorizing—most useful for academics embedded in the field—and explainers on the history and technology behind fake news that would be better geared toward a media literacy primer. To this end, the volume's authors do make significant contributions to understandings of misinformation, but the volume as a whole too often treads on already well-covered ground.



The volume is ambitious in seeking to "map the various kinds of misinformation through several different disciplinary perspectives" (MIT Press, 2020). Indeed, rather than being structured somewhat chronologically around the stages of media production and consumption, the editors choose to organize the volume around different disciplinary lenses. The opening chapters work through the impact and shape of fake news in politics, journalism, and law before moving on to explore in greater depth the intricacies of misinformation through social media and its evolution across time and technology. The main strength of this structure, and of each individual author's contribution, is that it avoids suggesting that information disorder needs to be "fixed" at a certain stage of media production, dissemination, or consumption processes. Instead, the volume provides an intricate picture of the multitude of stakeholders implicated in the causes, effects, and solutions related to mis/disinformation. Several standout sections contribute new ways of understanding the changing problem of information disorder—the chapters included in "Journalism," "Law and Policy," and "Solutions" are particularly excellent and offer up novel sites for future study. However, both the opening section on "Politics" and the penultimate "Media Hoaxes and Satire" feel out of place within the volume. This is either because of structure—the chapters within the "Politics" fit uneasily together—or content—the chapters within "Media Hoaxes and Satire" are shallow in their exploration of the rich topic of news media satire.

The opening section, "Politics," explores how fake news exists as a propagandistic tool for leveraging political power. Whitney Phillips' chapter, "You're Fake News: The Problem with Accusations of Falsehood," is particularly excellent. Phillips explores the utility of folkloric framing in the illumination of fake news, highlighting how "rather than approaching narratives as true/false binaries, it allows observers to peer beyond the memes and identify deeper cultural logics" (pp. 62–63). Given the difficulties of debunking fake news—particularly when it is spread through digital cultural objects—Phillips' folkloric framing provides an interesting avenue for both academic exploration and possible intervention. The following section, "Journalism," is similarly impressive and covers significant ground. While each chapter within the section is a worthwhile read, Dawn R. Gilpin's "The Second Amendment vs The First: The NRA's Constitutional Bias Perspective on Fake News" is noteworthy. Gilpin's chapter looks to address the dearth of research on right-wing media. Gilpin deftly explores the role and consequence of right-wing media as "alternative" media and explores the rhetorical and very real impact of the NRA's media arm. Gilpin argues that the power of the NRA's accusations of "fake news" toward mainstream outlets is significant given its grounding in claims of constitutional bias. By adopting this lens, Gilpin argues, "NRA commentators can position themselves as the leading defenses of all rights and claim moral high ground over their competitors" (p. 102).

The third section, "Law and Policy," is the strongest within the volume and by far the most radical. Each chapter offers a different perspective on the puzzle of attacking fake news through legislative means. Victor Pickard's chapter, "Confronting the Misinformation Society: Facebook's 'Fake News' Is a Symptom of Unaccountable Monopoly Power," dissects the market failure that has laid the groundwork for a proliferation of profitable "fake news." Pickard is straightforward in his call to hold Facebook accountable to the norms of social responsibility attached to news media. Building on this, he makes a convincing and radical argument to compel social networking sites to financially offset the damage their platforms are causing. Notably, Pickard's chapter asks readers to reimagine the regulative possibilities associated with fake news, arguing that "governance over communication infrastructure is a political decision that all societies must face" (p. 130). This call to reimagine regulation is echoed by Stephanie Ricker Schulte in her chapter on self-regulation and technological solutionism. Schulte argues that the current (and insufficient) technological solutions to mis/disinformation should be seen as a function of the history of self-regulation of media in the United States. Properly "fixing" information disorder therefore entails a recasting of regulation, not simply a technological quick-fix. Cherian George's contribution also seeks to expand conversations around regulating against "fake news" by prompting readers to consider the ways in which disinformation aids hate campaigns. Similar to Schulte, George argues that treating disinformation as "discrete messages" that can be picked off by technological agents or moderators is ineffectual. Instead, George posits a more holistic social understanding of the motivations behind disinformation-assisted hate propaganda, arguing that it can be attributed to a "lag in societal conscience" as individuals seek to extend ideas of a duty of care beyond familial units (p. 150).

Conversations around fake news are most often centered on social media, meaning making a substantive contribution in this area can be difficult. The fourth section, "Social Media," however, highlights several interesting theoretical discussions. Benjamin Burroughs' chapter, "Fake Memetics: Popular Rhetoric and Circulation in Political Campaigns," is especially pertinent. Burroughs explores how memes "make salient and intensify political discourse" (p.193) and highlights the power of humor to accelerate the spread of misinformation. Burroughs' exploration is both theoretically grounded and empirically rich, giving great

insight into the importance of paying attention to digital culture within conversations of information disorder. The fifth and sixth sections, "Reception" and "History," are thorough overviews of research associated with the themes but provide little groundbreaking observation. However, both chapters would serve as excellent teaching materials for media literacy lessons or primers for those unfamiliar with research in the area. In particular, Kembrew McLeod's "A Prehistory of Fake News" is a succinct overview of the historical basis for the current crisis of dis/misinformation and would serve as useful foundational reading. The penultimate section, "Media Hoaxes and Satire," is by far the weakest. Sophia A. McClennen's exploration of the differences within the broad label of "fake news" is interesting but covers much of the same ground of the earlier chapter by Claire Wardle, with some additional exploration of satire. In addition, the two chapters exploring the Yes Men, while entertaining, seem out of place within the wider volume and would have benefitted from a more explicit exploration of how the empirical examples provided by the case study relate to the broader themes of the volume. Finally, the last section, "Solutions," does an excellent job of picking up many of the themes that are shared across contributors—notably a need for solutions to be less technodeterministic, the historically-embedded nature of fake news, the financial imperatives that underpin mis/disinformation, and the psychological difficulties involved in overcoming information biases. The contributors each explore different routes to solving the problem of fake news without advocating for a singular, superior solution. Accordingly, the section is a robust conversation that outlines the future research needed and the structural hurdles involved in improving current information environments.

The chapters' high-level theoretical, legislative, and technological contributions make it difficult to recommend the volume as a primer for understanding fake news. Conversely, a number of its chapters exist as accessible overviews of extant research that best serve as tools in media literacy education but would feel overly repetitive to those embedded in the field. Consequently, the volume is limited by its desire for breadth and it is unclear what kind of reader it serves. However, its stellar line up of contributors provide rigor and clarity to a subject that is often misrepresented in common conversation. As such, it does contain several novel insights into mis/disinformation that make it a worthwhile and enjoyable read.

### References

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- MIT Press. (2020). Overview of Fake News. Retrieved from <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/fake-news>
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