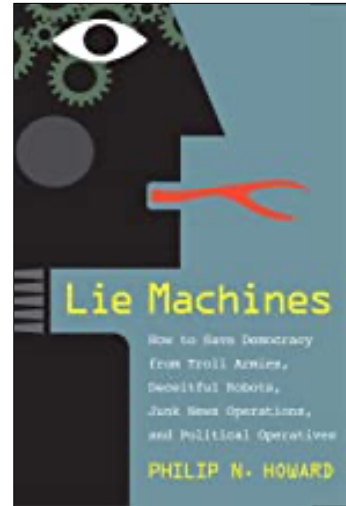


Philip N. Howard, **Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020, 240 pp., \$26.00 (hardcover).

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Once celebrated for their transformative impact on the contemporary political and economic global order (legacy of the Arab Spring and #Occupy), digital networks may actually pose an existential threat to the very foundations of Western liberal democracies. Particularly in the wake of impactful events such as the Brexit vote in the UK and the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, a critical debate that argues for the detrimental impact of social media platforms on the democratic process has grown exponentially among a diverse audience of scholars and policy makers. To make things worse, social media users, governments, and tech industry do not seem to ascertain clear or tangible solutions to best remedy this sociopolitical upheaval and techno-legal chaos we seem beset by as citizens in this digital age.



In a new book intended for a wide readership, Oxford professor Philip N. Howard joins this prevalent debate, siding with those who believe that there is valid cause for concern. In their current state, social media sites are complicit mechanisms for producing, distributing, and marketing “political lies”—a practical term Howard uses to capture a plethora of existing terminology and varying definitions of fake news and other forms of misleading content and false information. Going beyond merely identifying or condemning them while positioning himself as a “positivist,” he studies the anatomy of these political lies, the internal structure and position of their various interrelated parts. If we can understand and expose the logic of the assemblage and operation of the political lies, the author argues, we can dismantle, rebuild, and reimagine our sociopolitical order.

Howard’s broader argument that people and their technologies make politics is consistent with his previous books, maintaining that any sensible causal explanation for modern politics that does not probe beneath the fast-evolving mixture of technical and human practices will not get very far. Just before the Arab Spring, he argued that, depending on technology infrastructure and social dynamics, digital media had been either a necessary or a sufficient cause for various political outcomes in the Middle East: social uprising, regime change, or democratization. His examination of other events across the globe, such as the Rohingya refugee crises, Syria’s protracted civil war and Hong Kong’s protests, indicated how surprisingly malleable authoritarian rulers can be in adapting the same social media strategies that tested their durability and reapplying them for the political and social control of their societies. Most recently and to Howard’s surprise, significant developments in established democracies (the Brexit vote and 2016 U.S. presidential election in particular) revealed how the political communication techniques of dictatorships had now been diffused and upscaled into established democracies and how the political power is shifting from the organizations of

government to the technology giants of Silicon Valley. Howard's infusion of the sociotechnical perspective in the democratic debate invites the reader to focus on people and technology as conjoined, key agents that have altered the structural dynamics of the public sphere and civic debate.

The primary title, *Lie Machines*, is the book's linchpin that identifies and holds these two deeply intertwined dimensions together: first, people in various roles and positions who produce and spread lies to other people or social groups; and second, social media platforms, or machines, which efficiently disseminate these lies around to multitudes of social media users. From a historical perspective, a complex combination of a good lie with a superb propaganda machine is not a new development. However, digital affordances of the new technologies (the low cost of production, the speed of dissemination, and the networked structure of social media sites) help amplify their impact in unprecedented ways. These two dimensions intersect in complex ways with a third and critical underlying factor, the "click economy," or advertisement-based business models, which monetize user's attention, causing a profound impact on our politics.

Overall, the book's six chapters achieve two main objectives. First, it dissects the structures buttressing the scaffolding upon which political lies thrive: troll armies, bot networks, and fake news operations. Second, it delves more deeply into the mechanics of computational propaganda as the ultimate determinant of the impact and influence of social media disinformation campaigns across several sociopolitical contexts.

One example of computational propaganda and diffusion of political lies from authoritarian regimes into established democracies are the multitude and far-reaching operations of troll armies (organized and paid teams of people dedicated to social media manipulation under the direction of various state and nonstate actors). The author immerses the reader into the intriguing accounts and contradictory stories around the politically motivated 2015 murder of Boris Nemtov in Russia.

This detailed account about how the IRA (Russia's Internet Research Agency) trained Kremlin trolls to produce and push out waves of disinformation and multiple conspiratorial theories around Nemtov's murder achieves two analytical functions. First, it uncovers the structure of crafting and distributing a political lie in a country where troll armies had been long in use from its authoritarian state structures. Second, the author's analysis is particularly useful in revealing the strategies and troll techniques applied by the IRA to target multiple U.S. publics, disseminate politically polarizing content, generate high user engagement level and thus interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

The data analytics and rare evidence that Howard employs to back up this point represent a distinct contribution to the ever-growing debate on data mining and computational propaganda. In a time where academic research on such topics is vital for public involvement and understanding, researchers rarely have a chance to engage meaningfully due to the ownership of online data by private social media companies. Howard's book makes public to a broad audience the conclusions of *The computational Propaganda Project*—a research project that began when Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Google provided a large pool of data on Russia's IRA to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which turned it over for analysis to an Oxford Internet Institute's team lead by the author. As a result, the book evaluates extensive evidence and brings comprehensive analysis of the IRA's activity across multiple platforms over five years (2013–2018).

In order to fully display the marketing logic of the political lies, Howard triangulates big data analysis with interviews and aggregated observations from two social media companies based in Poland and Brazil, for which the author uses the pseudonyms Imitacia Consulting (Poland) and Imitacao Services (Brazil). These data sources are more effective for illustrating the global reach of the click economy, fueled by the profiteering motives of such hidden organizations that market junk news and derive data-driven revenue through their labyrinthine operations. The true significance of such systems and people that generate political lies is evident when the author states that as of 2020, around 70 countries have engaged in trolls, bots, and computational propaganda—with both democracies and dictatorships alike using such strategies frequently.

Howard's deconstructing approach of political lie machines is welcome in a debate primarily focused on the differences between one variety of misleading news from another or on the immediate consequences of such people-machine concoctions. His warning that the real threats to democracy lie ahead of us (AI and device data applied to the production of political messages) feels eminent. Particularly so, when after finishing the book, we realize that as Internet users and consumers, we do not fully grasp the real cost of our online lives and have no knowledge or say on who uses and distributes the traces of our behavior online (our data).

With his accurate analytical diagnosis of political lie machines, and as stated in the subtitle of his book, Howard surely elevates his audience's expectations about what to do about these challenges. It is here, however, where a reader, while aware of the dangers that lie ahead, is left a bit overwhelmed and alone toward the uncertain quest for a future-proof democracy. The book does not venture far enough beyond recasting familiar broad ideas for regulating the public/private sphere through a raft of measures and reforms. Like most research on this topic, Howard concludes that a democratic redress depends on a broad overhaul of systems that produce power and knowledge: increased digital literacy among citizens; better laws that protect our rights as Internet users; and social media platforms that highlight consensus about facts rather exacerbate heated conflict. The author for example does not engage with emerging regulatory policies from other countries (like Germany, Brazil, or India) and their tested strategies to combat political lies.

Finally, when reading his conclusions on the impact of political lie machines on the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as well as the Vote Leave Campaign in the UK, I wonder whether Howard intended this book as a critique directed solely at right-wing politics and their media platforms in democracies. One might argue that establishing fake news as merely a technical fix used by fringe groups with particular ideological inclinations may diminish the focus on the social aspect of a much deeper problem: Are lie machines merely reproducing existing feelings of distrust in today's politics among groups or individuals vulnerable to selective exposure and political redlining, or do social problems such as economic inequality, the growing learning gap, and environmental crises resonate with and speak to a deeper-seated need for a fundamental change facing our contemporary society? This question is perhaps indicative of the need for future research on political lies to be fully addressed.