Gabriele Cosentino, **The Infodemic: Disinformation, Geopolitics and the COVID-19 Pandemic,** London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2023, 224 pp., $29.95 (paperback).

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Numerous books and articles have been published on misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic from a global perspective (e.g., Horton, 2020). Gabriele Cosentino, assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, at the time of publication, participates in the conversation on the dark side of globalization in his work, ***The Infodemic: Disinformation, Geopolitics and the COVID-19 Pandemic***. Drawing on the concepts of post-truth and geopolitics, this book illuminates critical aspects of the pandemic through three distinct global case studies.

In the Introduction, Cosentino sets the stage for the book by highlighting the role of WeChat and recounting how, on December 30, 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Wuhan Central Hospital and a whistle-blower who later succumbed to the new virus, used the multifunction instant messaging app to alert a private group of his former medical school classmates. In doing so, the author emphasizes how urgent and critical scientific truths were obscured by misinformation due to the Chinese government's censorship and information policing in the social media age. Cosentino details the extensive discussion of the COVID-19 outbreak and Dr. Li's death within China's 2020 cultural and technical landscape, alongside the Chinese government's response through campaigns to suppress information and manage narratives, which set a precedent for other authoritarian regimes around the globe. Ultimately, Cosentino refers to COVID-19 as infodemic characterized by "a disorienting amount of unreliable, contradictory and often patently false information on the new disease, which spread as fast, and in some cases faster, than the virus itself" (p. 11). With this characterization, the author portrays the pandemic as a complex phenomenon by situating it not only within the context of post-truth but also within the shifting global power dynamics between Western democratic and non-Western authoritarian nations competing for control in the geopolitical arena.

In chapter 1, Cosentino further elaborates on COVID-19 as an infodemic by focusing on the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in addressing the pandemic. He notes that the WHO's efforts were constrained by its status as an agency of the United Nations amid tense diplomatic relations between the United States and China. However, Cosentino critiques the WHO's "uncritical support for China's response, especially at the beginning of the pandemic" (p.27), arguing that its communication mismanagement contributed to undermining the political neutrality and scientific authority of the international organization.
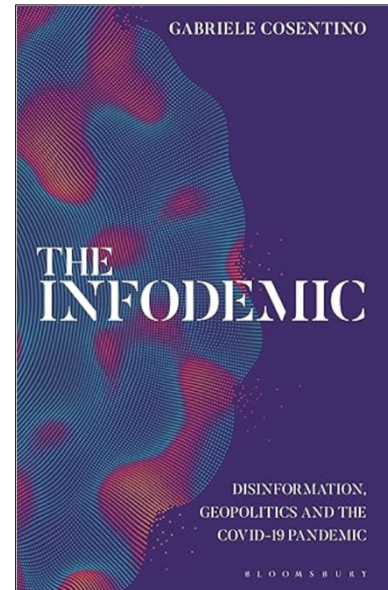
Compared with the SARS epidemic in 2003, the author ultimately asserted that the Covid-19 infodemic could be understood as a post-truth phenomenon where truths are essentially contested.

To further discuss the notion of post-truth, Cosentino borrows from Harsin's (2018) distinction between misinformation and disinformation, noting that the former "can be described as 'the spreading of inaccurate or false information while mistakenly thinking one is sharing accurate information,' while disinformation is based on 'deliberately spreading false or inaccurate information'" (p. 38). In doing so, the author refers to post-truth as "a political and cultural environment created by the interplay between top-down disinformation and organic, bottom-up misinformation" (p. 39), framing it as a global condition shaped by technological and cultural transformations, political grievance to American-led Western hegemony, crisis of authority in Western countries, and the neoliberal consensus around the world.

The three following chapters are dedicated to case studies that explore various aspects of the infodemic across different regions. In chapter 2, Cosentino discusses the controversies over the origin of COVID-19 by introducing two detailed hypotheses: the zoonotic spillover hypothesis and the laboratory accident hypothesis. He illustrates how these hypotheses emerged and became entangled in misinformation, disinformation, and political polarization within the shifting geopolitical context. Focusing on the tensions between conspiracy theories and fact-checking during the infodemic, Cosentino critiques the mainstream media's failure to report both hypotheses fairly, describing it as "one of the most critical aspects of the broader infodemic" (pp. 97–98). Additionally, the author highlights the role of social media in facilitating collaborations among researchers investigating the laboratory accident hypothesis. Ultimately, Cosentino suggests the need to rethink the notion of conspiracy theories, noting that "conspiracy theories do hint at suppressed truths" (p. 101).

Chapter 3 focuses on QAnon and its online conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. Cosentino describes the role of conspiracy theories in offering "people the ability to substitute complex scientific explanations with more familiar and gratifying narratives of villains scheming against innocent people, which served the psychological and cultural function of giving meaning to an unexpected and unfathomable threat" (p. 106). During the COVID-19 pandemic, QAnon played a significant role in spreading conspiracy theories in the United States and other parts of the world. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for accelerating their view of a global conspiracy in which powerful leaders fabricated a health emergency to dominate the world by subjugating innocent victims. Analyzing QAnon's narratives, Cosentino argues that while conspiracy theories can empower people to "process their grievances against scandals and illicit activities that media and judicial institutions failed to challenge" (p. 120), they ultimately do not challenge power structures inherent in Western society.

In chapter 4, Cosentino discusses the Egyptian government's response to COVID-19, using it as an example of how authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North African region have handled the pandemic. He argues that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues related to freedom of expression and media manipulation in Egypt. Drawing on two in-depth interviews, Cosentino illustrates how the Egyptian government exploited the pandemic to police and crack down on critical journalists who questioned the official narratives, tactically employing the rhetoric of "fake news" to silence dissent.

In the Conclusion, Cosentino reflects on the process of writing this book and discusses the state of the post-COVID world. He emphasizes his efforts to maintain a centered position to "convey a bird's eye view" (p. 155) of the pandemic. In doing so, Cosentino notes that his experiences in Lebanon and Egypt amid the pandemic provided him with insights into both democratic and authoritarian approaches to managing the pandemic. He concludes that while both models achieved significant accomplishments, they also exhibited critical flaws. Casentino predicts that the post-COVID world will differ from the Western-led globalization era of the post–Cold War period.

While Casentino describes that the COVID-19 pandemic "can be regarded as the first public health crisis of the post-truth era" (p. 41), understanding the COVID-19 infodemic could be further enriched by contextualizing it with the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. For example, much research has documented the recurring challenges of disinformation and misinformation about the health effects of radioactive materials after the disaster (e.g., Abe, 2015). The Fukushima disaster witnessed the emergence of what Casentino describes as post-truth communications, such as narrative wars and conspiracy theories (e.g., Hayashi, 2022). Drawing parallels between these events could further offer insight to understand "the infodemic as a post-truth phenomenon" (p. 13).

Perhaps more importantly, Cosentino's argument could have been strengthened with more data to support his claims. For example, Cosentino notes that "China's response to Covid-19 became a template for other authoritarian or autocratic countries around the world" (p. 134), but to what extent? Including more specific examples and evidence would bolster his critical claim and offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the global impact of China's approach. While my critique might seem demanding for a short and readable book, this additional depth would not only enhance the credibility of his argument but also provide more valuable insights for his readers.

Finally, the book would benefit from a more comprehensive index. Although there is an entry for "disinformation," a key term in this book, there are no corresponding entries for "misinformation" and "geopolitics." Including such critical terms would enhance the book's utility as a reference, ensuring readers can easily locate and explore all relevant discussions.

That being said, *The Infodemic: Disinformation, Geopolitics, and the COVID-19 Pandemic* certainly offers a unique perspective for communication scholars and practitioners to understand the COVID-19 pandemic as a global post-truth phenomenon. This work provides valuable insights that will empower us to better prepare for the next global infodemic.

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