

Lee McIntyre, **On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 182 pp., \$21.10 (paperback).

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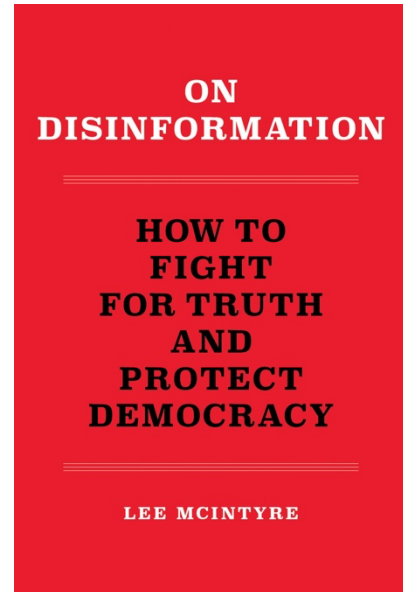
In the debate on the origins and spread of disinformation, roughly two camps can be distinguished. On the one hand, the spread of disinformation can be seen primarily as the consequence of structural developments, in particular political polarization and growing social inequality and isolation. On the other hand, it can be viewed as the result of deliberate actions by malicious actors who deceive audiences by spreading false claims and undermining the truth.

McIntyre's book, ***On Disinformation: How to Fight For Truth and Protect Democracy***, makes a clear case for the latter. Written in the run-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, the book describes how Donald Trump, supported by "co-opted" Republicans and amplified by antidemocratic interest groups, takes advantage of the current media environment by applying strategies from science denials and Russian-style disinformation campaigns to spread doubt and disinformation. This short book is, above all, a call to action, as it finishes with a number of concrete steps that readers can take to counteract these threats to democracy.

The central thesis of the book is laid out in the first chapter, titled "Truth Killers." This chapter argues that politicians spread disinformation and cultivate doubt with the aim of making people question whether it still makes sense to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The introduction does not beat around the bush about the dangers of this development. The deliberate spread of disinformation and erosion of truth will be an irreversible step toward the collapse of democracy. Thus, the book is intended to serve as a wake-up call for all readers before the presidential elections: "We've got less than one year to figure this out" (p. 4). Given that the 2024 election has now passed, the appropriateness of this urgency will be considered further in the course of this review.

In chapter 2, the strategies used to create doubt and undermine the truth are traced back to tobacco companies in the 1950s, which successfully manufactured doubt about scientific evidence linking smoking to lung cancer. Similar tactics were later used to spread doubt about climate change. The book argues that these strategies provided a blueprint for reality denial by politicians.

Chapter 3 lays bare the parallels between the science denial playbook on the one hand, and Donald Trump and MAGA election denial on the other hand. Their rhetoric around the 2020 election and #StopTheSteal echoes at least five well-known forms of flawed reasoning: cherry-picking, conspiracy



thinking, illogical reasoning, fake experts, and setting unrealistic standards for others to prove them wrong. As the chapter argues, the goal of such denialism goes beyond simply spreading a lie. Its ultimate aim is to create distrust and undermine belief in institutions with epistemic authority. These disinformation tactics have long been used in Russia and have now been adopted by Trump (with or without direct inspiration from Russia). While Trump is highly skilled in such tactics, his sowing of distrust would have had limited effect without the support from other Republicans.

Chapter 4 turns the focus to those who amplify the denialists' messages, some intentionally and others unintentionally (or at least less intentionally). In the first group, we find partisan news organizations (with Fox News serving as case in point) as well as conservative interest groups that financially support actions that undermine trust in legitimate institutions and democratic processes. McIntyre goes on to argue that mainstream media also play an amplifying role because their journalistic norms, such as striving for balance, contribute to a misrepresentation of reality. A significant amount of disinformation and denialism is spread on social media platforms. The book argues that while these platforms do not amplify misinformation intentionally, they certainly could have done much more to counteract its spread.

Chapter 5 examines the believers of disinformation, starting with the observation that belief in conspiracy theories among the American population is on the rise. As the chapter argues, such beliefs are often closely tied to people's values and identity, which makes disinformation difficult to correct. Effective methods for correcting disinformation are time-consuming and not easily scalable. Education is an important part of the solution, but its effects will likely not be seen in the near future. What is needed, McIntyre argues, is immediate action before it is too late.

In the sixth and final chapter, McIntyre's language becomes increasingly direct and alarming. Strategic denialism is here described as a "carefully orchestrated disinformation campaign" (p. 103) and references are made to war. This sense of urgency leads to a direct appeal to the reader to act before the 2024 elections. The book finishes with ten concrete points of action that the reader can take, such as speaking up against liars, resisting polarization, and urging media outlets to improve their reporting. This sense of agency and encouragement is emphasized in the final words of the book: "We are born into an age in which science and reason—indeed truth and reality itself—once again need defending. Embrace that. Don't give up in despair. There is something you can do today to fight back against the truth killers. Now go out and find it" (p. 133).

When discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the book, it is important to consider its objectives and context. This is a short book of around 25,000 words, written in the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential elections. At its core, the book aims to raise alarm about the dangers of disinformation while providing readers with encouragement and concrete advice on how to act. In this respect, it shares similarities to Timothy Snyder's (2017) *On Tyranny*.

One of the strengths of the book, given its purpose, is that it leaves the reader with a sense of agency. While raising alarm about the dangers of disinformation and antidemocratic movement could potentially diminish the reader's sense of self-efficacy, the book instead instills a belief that action is possible. The writing stands out for its conciseness and directness. For the purpose of such a book, a more academic

style would probably have missed the target. More nuanced discussions, greater definitional clarity, and stronger empirical evidence would probably have undermined the sense of urgency that shines through every page of the book.

Still, a reader reading this book out of academic interest might wish for more nuanced discussions and stronger evidence. At times, the book seems to suggest connections that are only implied (such as Trump being inspired by Russian-style disinformation campaigns) or supported primarily with reference to newspaper articles (for example, conservative interest groups funding campaigns undermining trust in institutions). In an academic peer-review process, reviewers would probably have requested more robust evidence to support the conclusion that what we are observing is a "carefully orchestrated disinformation campaign" (p. 103).

A longer book could have gone more in-depth with the role of structural factors in shaping people's beliefs in disinformation. This might have provided readers with more insight into how everybody can, to some degree, be susceptible to believing or spreading disinformation. Instead, the book urges the reader to see believers in disinformation primarily as victims. A perspective that moves beyond reinforcing us-them thinking might be a better ground for the empathy that is needed to help restore trust in the truth and epistemic authorities among those who lost it.

Reading the book after the 2024 elections, the reader will find ample justification for its alarming tone. Several of the predictions made in the book have come true. Indeed, voters did not punish Republicans for their denial of the results of the 2020 elections. Moreover, the new presidency has contributed to the undermining of institutions with epistemic authority, such as defunding institutions monitoring foreign disinformation threats (E. Wong, 2025). The book argues that "we need to create more reason for both partisan and social media outlets to curb the role that they play in propagating polluted content" (p. 74). Yet, after the 2024 election, the opposite has occurred, as social media outlets in the United States rolled back collaborations with fact-checkers in the country (Q. Wong, 2025).

In hindsight, while the book's appeal to academic audiences may be somewhat limited by its polemical style, subsequent developments clearly justify the sense of urgency that underpinned McIntyre's writing in the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. Presidential elections.

References

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