On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy
Lee McIntyre

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Abstract

In On Disinformation, Lee McIntyre takes on what is potentially the greatest threat to democracy in our world today—truth denial. McIntrye lays out a concise argument in which he outlines the threat of "post-truth" epistemology, discusses the history of "strategic denialism," identifies the "creators," "amplifiers," and "believers" of disinformation, and then provides strategies for "how to win the war on truth." Summarizing the stakes involved, McIntrye argues that those who look to undermine truth in the media work to undermine our democracy with the end goal of establishing an electoral dictatorship. The reviewer argues that if we are to heed McIntyre's warning, officials must establish education policy designed to inoculate citizens against the ill effects of disinformation.

Keywords: Disinformation, propaganda, media literacy, epistemology, truth, Big Lie, news media, social media

*O*n Disinformation is Lee McIntyre's (2023) latest attempt to combat what is potentially the greatest threat to democracy in our world today—truth denial. In 133 pages, McIntrye lays out a concise argument in which he outlines the threat of "post-truth" epistemology (chapter 1), discusses the history of "strategic denialism" (chapter 2), identifies the "creators" (chapter 3), "amplifiers" (chapter 4), and "believers" (chapter 5) of disinformation, and then provides strategies for "how to win the war on truth" (chapter 6).

In explaining the strategies employed by "truth killers" (p. 5), McIntyre (2023) dissects the "post-truth playbook;" strategies that include 1) cherry-picking evidence, 2) promoting belief in conspiracy theories, 3) engaging in illogical reasoning, 4) relying on fake experts, and 5) having impossible expectations for what the other side must achieve to prove the facts (p. 15). To illustrate how this "post-truth playbook" has been employed, the author gives examples of how it has been used to "undermine Americans' trust in science" (p. 37), specifically science concerning tobacco use (p. 8), climate change (p. 11), and vaccines (p. 39), and how it has been used to undermine American's trust in the electoral system, specifically Donald Trump's "Big Lie" after the 2020 election (p. 41).

While those who create disinformation are a clear and present danger to our democracy, for McIntyre (2023), those who spread false information, and those who are "bystanders who refuse to render aid when the truth is dying" (p. 57) are also threats worth attention. In our digital world, these "amplifiers" include not only partisan broadcasters such as Fox News (p. 46), but also social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (p. 60). The author attacks social media executives' claims that their platforms are just forums for public discourse, citing the use of complex algorithms in the dissemination of false information (p. 62). McIntyre writes, "even if no human being actually intends it, automated algorithms at virtually all social media companies seem primed to spread false information and incendiary rhetoric because they are formulated to maximize engagement, clicks, and time spent on the site" (p. 59). Even for traditional "objective" news organizations, "the importance of a story can sometimes take a back seat to viewer engagement" (p. 60) and McIntrye argues that this "horse race" for ratings, clicks, and their associated revenue streams leads both traditional broadcasters and social media companies to favor viewers confirmation bias over any search for truth, which breads "hatred, polarization, and the potential for violence" (p. 66).

McIntrye (2023) lays out a four-part solution for how governments may deal with modern media companies that seem unwilling to police the content on their platforms. His recommendations include, 1) restoring the "Fairness Doctrine" employed by the FCC from 1949 until 1987 (p. 74), 2) revising Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (p. 78), 3) policing false content amplified by media companies (p. 79), and 4) focusing attention on internet service providers that host these platforms (p. 81). He follows these recommendations by echoing "information warfare" experts' calls for governments to confront disinformation with a firehose of truth, increasing the "messengers of truth" (p. 108), targeting truthful messages to those susceptible to disinformation (p. 108), and repeating the truth more often (p. 110). In short, those who look to usurp our democracy have employed a well-organized, multi-billion-dollar disinformation campaign for decades, and democracies must fight back by spreading truth with as much intensity as they spread lies.

McIntyre (2023) uses his final chapter to articulate a ten-point guide for what "ordinary citizens" can do to fight back against disinformation (p. 119). These steps include tuning out the "bullshit" (p. 123), heeding the history of autocrats who wish to distort the truth (p. 120), and engaging in political activism to try to get government institutions to regulate social media (p. 125).

In his list of actions for "ordinary citizens," McIntyre (2023) emphasizes the need to "teach better critical thinking skills to our children," but he warns, "we can't wait for them to grow up to save us" (p. 124). McIntyre states directly, "don't fall for the sop that this can all be solved by 'better education'" (p. 123). However, the author's vision falls short here. Yes, the immediacy of the threat requires fast action; however, McIntyre's suggestion that fair-minded citizens "confront the liars" (p. 119), resist polarization (p. 121), and recognize that "in a sense deniers are victims" (p. 122), implies the need for an educational intervention aimed at educating adults into the dispositions necessary for carrying out these actions. If these skills are necessary in the fight against disinformation, then they must be taught, regardless of the age of the citizen. And if the problem of disinformation is a clear and present danger for our democracy, those efforts must happen now.

If democratic societies are to win the "war over knowledge" (Rauch, 2021), if we are to treat citizens who have succumbed to disinformation, and inoculate future generations against further damage, governments must expand educational opportunities for adult learners (Bunch, 2022),

and provide all citizens with a curriculum designed to teach citizens media literacy, critical thinking, and the skill of establishing caring relationships as a first principle of democratic citizenship (Noddings, 2013).

McIntyre (2023) reminds us, "deniers weren't born, they were made. And if they've changed their minds once, they can change them again" (p. 101). *On Disinformation* is a needed call to action for those who wish to protect democracy, and it reminds us that if we wish to preserve the truth, elected officials and ordinary citizens must work together to change minds.

References

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