



PROJECT MUSE®

Disinformation Disorientation

Laura Rosenberger

Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 203-207 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0017>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/745966>

BOOKS IN
REVIEW

DISINFORMATION DISORIENTATION

Laura Rosenberger

This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality. By Peter Pomerantsev. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019. 236 pp.

If one word defines our contemporary information environment, it is disorientation. Our exposure to information continues to grow, and with it, our confusion. Peter Pomerantsev uses his family's story as a backdrop to trace how the digital information age has overturned assumptions that more information and digital connectivity will empower citizens and give them an edge over repressive forces. He begins with his family's flight from the Soviet Union to England in the late 1970s, a time when information abundance was seen as an empowering force. He then moves through his experiences watching the post-truth era first take hold in Russia and then push outward into the democratic world.

The vignettes in this book show with disturbing clarity how a range of actors manipulate the online information space to distort reality, spread extremism, undermine democratic institutions, empower authoritarians, and upend free societies. Brave journalists and activists such as Maria Ressa from the Philippines and Srdja Popović from Serbia tell the tale, but so do figures such as the Austrian ethnonationalist Martin Sellner, the psychological-manipulation expert and founder of Cambridge Analytica's parent company Nigel Oakes, and the Russian internet strategist Igor Ashmanov. We also hear from those who have been on both sides of the information war: Lyudmila Savchuk infiltrated and then exposed the "troll farm" of Russia's Internet Research Agency; Rashad Ali, who was once a revolutionary extremist with Hizb ut-Tahrir, now works as a

counterradicalization expert. Pomerantsev's stories underscore that this problem is not confined to the online space—this distorted reality carries over into the physical world, dislocating identity and sowing confusion at the individual, political, and societal levels.

Today, democratic policy makers around the world are wrestling with concerns about disinformation, online radicalization, and hate speech. But discussions of these problems are too often reductionist, framing the issue of information manipulation as a tactical one driven by conspiracy theories, false content, or divisive narratives. Pomerantsev refreshingly acknowledges the depth and complexity of the challenge. As he explains, "It is not that one online account changes someone's mind; it's that en masse they create an ersatz normality" (p. 58). The contest for the digital information space is strategic, not tactical—and requires new frameworks both to understand it and to address the challenges to democracy that come with it.

Reviewing the evolution of the information space from Soviet times to the present, Pomerantsev explains how today's information operations are different from those of the past. The core difference, he argues, is that ideology is no longer a guiding force. Rather, information war itself has become the goal, with ideology just a tactical and flexible instrument employed in battle. This means that the idea of truth itself has become a target. Pomerantsev recounts his father's time working for the BBC World Service after fleeing Soviet Ukraine, when he used impartial information to pierce the veil of the Iron Curtain. While Russia at that time attacked the idea that the BBC was impartial, today they attack "the very idea that there is such a thing as impartiality" (p. 121). When winning the battle of ideas is no longer the objective, and truth is an object of attack, disorientation becomes the defining characteristic of the information environment.

The role of data in today's information ecosystem has also changed the nature of the challenge. During the Cold War, "extreme individualism" was often equated with citizen empowerment. Today's media environment, however, not only facilitates wholly new and unlimited forms of self-expression, but that expression is now translated into data. As the amount of data about us grows exponentially, it is being collected and fed into a digital information ecosystem that silos and invisibly shapes our information reality. Pomerantsev argues that "this is the potential nightmare of the new media: the idea that our data might know more about us than we do, and that this is then being used to influence us without our knowledge" (p. 183). This will become even more problematic as the number of connected devices in our lives grows, and as surveillance technology becomes more prevalent.

Pomerantsev discusses numerous ways in which the online information space affects democracy. An especially important dimension has to do with the complex impact of digital information on activism. Activ-

ists are newly empowered, but so are those who seek to suppress them. Alberto Escorcía is a Mexican graphic designer who became an online transparency activist in 2009, when he caught his country's government trying to shield itself from blame by lying about the origin and severity of a swine-flu outbreak. He views protests analytically through an online prism as "little throbbing lines and dots" on a screen, setting aside an older concept of activism epitomized by "images of passionate people, slogans, speeches, stories, history" (p. 53). This digital worldview not only creates new ways of organizing, but also changes the nature of democratic movements themselves, separating them

Pomerantsev argues that "this is the potential nightmare of the new media: the idea that our data might know more about us than we do."

from democratic institutions that anchored them in the past.

Authoritarian regimes, however, can also use this new activism for their own ends. Pomerantsev looks at how Russia has created its own protests using these tools, often harnessing nationalism to mobilize individuals to attack democratic institutions and to subvert the rights of others. While many academics focus on measuring the impact of Russia's information operations targeting the 2016 U.S. election, Pomerantsev suggests the need to look more broadly at the impact of these tactics on democratic societies. The digital world's weakening of the physical connection of movements has both changed the nature of activism and created new opportunities for authoritarians to target democratic movements, including by hijacking existing protests for authoritarian ends. He argues that over time the "very notion of genuine protest starts to be eroded, making it easier for the Kremlin to argue that all protests everywhere are just covert foreign influence operations" (p. 64).

This is not a merely theoretical concern. In the United States, Russian information operations hijacked the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, creating fake BLM groups on Facebook and other social-media platforms and using legitimate concerns about police brutality and criminal justice as a way to suppress the black vote. In France, evidence that Russian information agitators were exploiting the Yellow Vest movement to fan the flames of division and undermine President Emmanuel Macron allowed some to dismiss the entire movement as Russian-supported and therefore illegitimate. The accusation of being a "Russian bot" is now thrown around online to discredit voices on the opposing side of issues.

Looking to the future, Pomerantsev briefly examines the information environment in China and the efforts of Chinese activists to pierce the regime's infamous Great Firewall. His discussion of the party-state's information control just scratches the surface of this looming and unique challenge. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has directly spoken about the

importance of “discourse power”—shaping narratives to “tell China’s story well,” making coherence and in some cases ideology a larger part of Beijing’s information-manipulation strategy. Analysts and policy makers in the democratic world need to develop a deeper understanding of China’s strategy and tactics, as well as how they differ from Russia’s.

Just as Pomerantsev embraces the complexity of the challenge of digital information manipulation, he declines to provide simplistic solutions. Noting some recommendations, Pomerantsev suggests that democracies work to protect against coordinated disinformation campaigns and to secure privacy. Interestingly, he also proposes that users “have a stake in the decision-making process through which the information all around us becomes shaped, with public input into the internet companies who currently lord over how we perceive the world in darkness” (p. 187). Providing users with more transparency and context to understand the algorithms that recommend content is a common and important recommendation for countering information manipulation. Yet, one senses that Pomerantsev is thinking beyond that, and I hope he will develop this idea in future work.

His analysis implicitly challenges the idea that democratic governments simply need to produce their own narratives, an approach that would be insufficient to the complexity of the challenge. And he explicitly argues that controlling content in response is a harmful approach that would play into the hands of democracy’s opponents. Fighting fire with fire, he argues, is not the answer. This is the critical paradox of fighting information warfare. Pomerantsev cites the example of activists in Ukraine who have adopted the Kremlin’s tactics to fight them, only to find themselves often bolstering the Kremlin narrative. The danger is that, “if all information is seen as part of a war, out go any dreams of a global information space where ideas flow freely, bolstering deliberative democracy. Instead, the best future one can hope for is an ‘information peace’ in which each side respects the other’s information sovereignty: a favored concept of both Beijing and Moscow, and essentially a cover for censorship” (p. 85).

This leads Pomerantsev to his book’s most important question: “How can one fight an information war where the most dangerous part could be the idea of information war itself?” (p. 86). This is the conversation policy makers and strategists need to be having. At present, policy debates are mired in narrow, tactical discussions that are often shaped by partisan politics. Worse, democracies find themselves fighting on a battlefield defined by authoritarians. A focus on control and manipulation dominates this space, creating an ethos fundamentally at odds with democratic institutions and values.

With data and information abundance creating new domains for competition, it is essential that democracies engage in this contest to ensure that the information space remains on a democratic trajectory. But how do democracies do so in a way that does not degrade the very space we

seek to defend? Pomerantsev does not pretend to have all the answers, but he has done an important service by raising and clarifying this question.

Laura Rosenberger is director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund. She serves with Peter Pomerantsev on the Transatlantic High Level Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The books listed below were recently received by the editors. A listing here does not preclude a review in a future issue.

Advanced Democracies

American Justice 2019: The Roberts Court Arrives. By Mark Joseph Stern. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 188 pp.

Civic Power: Rebuilding American Democracy in an Era of Crisis. By K. Sabeel Rahman and Hollie Russon Gilman. Cambridge University Press, 2019. 280 pp.

Congress: The First Branch. By Benjamin Ginsberg and Kathryn Wagner Hill. Yale University Press, 2019. 368 pp.

Democracy in Crisis: the Neoliberal Roots of Popular Unrest. By Boris Vormann and Christian Lammert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 196 pp.

Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain: From Attlee to Brexit. By Adrian Williamson. Boydell, 2019. 368 pp.

Gerrymanders: How Redistricting Has Protected Slavery, White Supremacy, and Partisan Minorities in Virginia. By Brent Tarter. University of Virginia Press, 2019. 130 pp.

In All Fairness: Equality, Liberty, and the Quest for Human Dignity. Edited by Robert M. Whaples, Michael C. Munger, and Christopher J. Coyne. Independent Institute, 2019. 309 pp.

Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History. By Randall G. Holcombe. Independent Institute, 2019. 243 pp.

The Long War over Party Structure: Democratic Representation and Policy Responsiveness in American Politics. By Byron E. Shafer and Regina L. Wagner. Cambridge University Press, 2019. 188 pp.

On the Freedom Side: How Five Decades of Youth Activists Have Remixed American History. By Wesley C. Hogan. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 354 pp.