

'Epistemic homicide'

On Disinformation

How to fight for truth and protect democracy

Lee McIntyre

Cambridge (Mass.) and London: MIT Press, 2023, (p/b) \$14.95/£10.99

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This is a short book of about 24,000 words on a very important and complex subject from an American perspective. So much of it is quotable, what follows is mostly just quotations.

'The truth isn't dying – it's being killed.'

People do not wake up one day and spontaneously wonder if the California wildfires were caused by a Jewish space laser or if the COVID-19 vaccines might contain microchips. Those are instead the result of a propaganda campaign that was deliberately engineered to raise doubt where there was none, because it served the interests of the people who invented it. These sorts of interests can be economic, political, or ideological, but the point is that denialism is intended to benefit the people who *create* the lies, not the people who believe them.' (p. 8)

The author dates the beginning of all this to:

' . . . December 15, 1953, when the heads of four of the largest US tobacco companies gathered at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, along with a public relations specialist to advise them on what to do about a forthcoming scientific study that drew a link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer. His advice? Fight the science.' (p. 8)

Fast forward forty years or so and the executives at Motorola, faced with research from scientists (Lai and Singh) showing that radiation from mobile phones damaged DNA, discussed discrediting the research with their PR company. In their memo, which was leaked, they wrote 'I think we have

sufficiently war-gamed the Lai-Singh issue. . . .'¹

Fast forward another 30 years or so and Trump's sometime ally Steve Bannon memorably told Michael Lewis: 'The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.'² And they really did, didn't they?

'Why do people deny reality?'

Denialist beliefs are not based on facts in the first place; they are rooted in identity. Hundreds of experiments have been performed by social psychologists over the last seventy years that demonstrate the social nature of belief. The evidence for conformity and even 'tribalism' in belief is rock solid . . . a strategic denialist campaign like the one against climate change became so much more effective once it was politicized, because then it could exploit partisan enmity and not just doubt.' (p. 23)

'In my 2018 book *Post-Truth*, I defined this notion as the 'political subordination of reality' and argued that science denial is one of its precursors. That there is a straight line between the manufacture of doubt about whether cigarettes cause lung cancer and today's conspiracy-fueled dumpster fire of disbelief about any facts that conflict with one's political agenda. . . What began with a few tobacco executives at the Plaza Hotel culminated seventy years later on the steps of the US Capitol. Denialism has now become a political litmus test for the Republican Party. And its highest expression is MAGA.' (p. 27)

Among the players in the great game of making Americans believe stupid shit have been the Russians:

'Evidence for [Russian disinformation] was first reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, which explained that Russian intelligence had been deliberately creating and pushing anti-Western vaccine stories through four of its English-language propaganda arms. In April 2020, for instance, the *Oriental Review* published a story claiming that any forthcoming Western vaccines were likely to contain biometric microchips, courtesy of Bill Gates, who had allegedly taken out patent

¹ Discussed at <<https://tinyurl.com/2tm585b6>> or <<https://ehtrust.org/cell-phone-industry-wargame-memo-the-disinformation-campaign-to-confuse-the-public/>>. The wider aspects of the issue is discussed at <<https://tinyurl.com/yc8mebd8>> or <<https://thewalrus.ca/cellphone-games/?ref=2008.09-health-cellphone-brain-tumour-melinda-wenner&page=>>>.

² <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/16/media/steve-bannon-reliable-sources/index.html>>

number 060606 on this technology. Near the bottom of the article were buttons to make it easier for readers to share this story on Facebook and Twitter, which they did. Only a month later, CBS News reported on a poll that found that 44 percent of Republicans thought that the microchip story was true.’ (p. 38)

And Fox News:

‘The ‘Fox News Effect’ was discovered in 2012, when academic researchers at Fairleigh Dickinson University found that regular viewers of Fox’s highly partisan, selectively biased ‘news’ coverage *were less well informed than if they had watched no news at all.*’ (p. 46)
(emphasis in the original)

Curiously, the author does not make the point that the fact that more than half the US population hold religious beliefs for which there is no evidence, must have made it easier to persuade them to adopt other beliefs for which there is no evidence.

‘In her 2021 article ‘The Big Money behind the Big Lie’, Jane Mayer provides the evidence to conclude that a tide of money – mostly funneled through conservative interest groups such as the Bradley Foundation, Turning Point USA, True the Vote, the Heritage Foundation, the Federalist Society, and others – are doing for election denial what the tobacco and fossil fuel industries did for science denial. She traces the origin and spending of millions of dollars that have funded dozens of antidemocratic ‘election integrity’ projects (and also litigation), the support of conservative anti-vote candidates, and the Arizona recount itself. Mayer quotes US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, who says, ‘It’s a massive covert operation run by a small group of billionaire elites. These are powerful interests with practically unlimited resources who have moved on to manipulating that most precious of American gifts—the vote.’ (pp. 49/50)

‘In Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang’s 2021 book *An Ugly Truth*, they detail how profit-driven decisions by top Facebook executives have facilitated and enabled a cover-up of the company’s harms in the interest of making a buck, even at the cost of promoting hate speech, lies, and disinformation.’ (p. 65)

‘Even if no human being actually intends it, automated algorithms at virtually all the 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. Rather than

promote truth, they are engineered for profit.’ (p. 69)

All of which is undeniably true, I suggest. So does Mr McIntyre see a way out? He does – at least in theory.

‘What is to be done?’

A first step might be to restore the ‘Fairness Doctrine’. From 1949 until 1987, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) repealed it, the Fairness Doctrine had dictated that all news outlets that used the public airwaves must give equal time to opposing viewpoints. This forestalled the possibility of completely partisan editorializing and guaranteed at least some balance in broadcasting, probably in part by keeping extremist shows off the air, because the network would then be required to provide time for rebuttal. After the Fairness Doctrine was repealed, one of the most popular radio shows to enjoy its new freedom was Rush Limbaugh in 1988. This opened the floodgates for the first broadcast of Fox News on television in 1996, and all that followed.’ (pp. 74/75)

But no Republican-controlled Senate or Congress would vote for this, so it won’t happen until there is Democratic control of both houses; and maybe not even then, given the amount of money that will be thrown at the politicians in attempts to prevent it.

‘A second idea might be to revise Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which gives immunity to website platforms for any liability damages that may arise from third-party content on their pages. In contrast to book, magazine, and newspaper publishers in the United States – which can be sued if they intentionally provide false information – the big tech companies are exempt.’ (p. 78)

It was Bill Clinton’s administration which gave the techies the legal immunity they wanted back in the early days of the Net. Any attempt to revoke this would be met with vast hostile political expenditure by some of the richest people on the planet and would thus fail. In other words, for the foreseeable future there is nothing that can be done in America. Outside the USA, as various dictatorships have shown, the Net can be controlled but no-one of any significance in the Western democracies is currently willing to contemplate state control of the Net.

After laying out the scale of this enormous problem the author tries to end on a positive note:

‘We have been born into an age in which science and reason – indeed truth and reality itself – once again need defending. Embrace that.

Don't give in to despair. There is something you can do today to fight back against the truth killers.

Now go out and find it.' (p. 133)