

## Book Review: Moser, K. (2024). *Fake News in Contemporary Science and Politics. A Requiem for the Real?* Palgrave Macmillan

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When the conditions are right, there are ideas and concepts that ignite and burn with such intensity that they outshine any others of the same time period. Fake News in Contemporary Science and Politics presents a very good example of what its author, Keith Moser, describes as infodemic, “or the increasing inability of a large segment of the population to distinguish between reality and its ubiquitous misrepresentation on a plethora of divergent screens.” In this context, the current volume is meant to send a wake-up call regarding the consequences of this constant transmission of information ad infinitum that may affect our existence on this planet and even lead to a misinterpretation of democracy and its basic grasp on reality.

The exhaustive introduction lays out the blueprint of a careful and detailed analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic aftermath whereby the scientific knowledge is being debated by those who are trying to create a “hyperreal edifice that could be easily discredited by decades of empirical research.” It is the author’s strong belief that “trust in scientific explanations of the world has been eroded by far-fetched conspiracy theories that find their origins outside of concrete reality” (p. 3). What we need, therefore, is undeniable facts that validate this point of view and the reader will find them in the narrative that comes in the chapters of the book. In order to effectively combat the infodemic created by “alternative facts,” Keith Moser masterfully delves into the process of discrediting “anti-science, anti-knowledge simulacra, commonly referred to as fake news, before they become firmly entrenched as an alternative (hyper-) reality within information silos” (p. 10).

The chapter dealing with *Climate Change Denial: An Ecocidal, Parallel Universe of Simulation* starts from the premise that the spread of fake news may very well be supported by “the pervasiveness of anti-science, post-factual rhetoric.” However, the general idea of this chapter is that there is a glimmer of hope and optimism based on several facts, including “the success of environmental literacy programs for children,” which in themselves are widely accepted as “competing truth claims within disinformational silos” (p. 15).

Resorting to factual information coming from reputable scientists like Wagler (2011), Williamson (2019), Baudrillard (1998a), and Peters et al. (2020), the author avers that we must challenge “the post-factual rift between evidence and truth” as presented in the hyperreal world that is “beyond truth, beyond reality.” Specifically, a very good explanation is provided when the same chapter argues that “there is a connection between research funding and corporate actors in late-stage capitalism.” Leotard (1984) is adequately quoted to ponder that “knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold.” The same bibliographic source posits that

(C)apitalism solves the scientific problem of research funding in its own way: directly by financing research departments in private companies, in which demands or performativity and re-commercialization orient research first and foremost toward technological applications; and indirectly by creating private, state, or mixed-sector research foundations that grant subsidies to university departments, research laboratories, and independent research groups (p. 45; quoted on p. 19).

On further analysis, such proof can only lead Lyotard to admit his anxiety about “the mercantilization of knowledge” which could be seen being infiltrated in academic in the neoliberal era. Along the same lines, the reader is reminded that there are multinational entities that profit from the blending of the commercial and the real originally coming from “reflecting reality, to masking reality, to masking the absence of reality, to having no relation to reality whatsoever” (Toffoletti, 2011, p. 17; quoted on p. 21).

When the subject of climate change comes to the fore, we are made aware of a wide array of “intertwined hyperreal metanarratives.” According to Cook (2019), there are three types of misinformation categories: “trend (global warming isn’t happening), attribution (humans aren’t causing global warming), and impact (climate impacts aren’t serious)” (p. 4; quoted on p. 21). The author of the book goes even further and claims that fake news might partly come predicated by disinformation based on the false assessment that “scientists are fabricating or exaggerating to procure more research funding.” (p. 21)

As mentioned in this transdisciplinary book, the harsh reality of similar “anti-science filter bubbles” may be caused and supported by the advent of the Internet, which gives everybody a chance and a venue to access various sources of information, most of which are not even vetted by scientists and researchers. In the same vein, we find a plethora of such inexhaustible stories which can be easily debunked by real scientific data. With repeated post-factual meta-narratives, the bias takes root and a considerable chunk of the population will therefore believe almost anything. Neil Postman’s essay entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* clarifies the proliferation of illusory truth based on entertainment when he acknowledges the “increasing need to be amused in all critical aspects of social discourse, political, academic and otherwise” (Quoted on pp. 27-28). Such perceptions can only result, as the researcher opines, in an “emerging apathy for truth” (Lopez & Share, 2020, p. 6; quoted on p. 28).

Further elucidation comes from Weiskel (2005), who argues that

(I)f Americans were to perceive clearly the cost and potentially disastrous shifts in climate that are likely to result from [...] carbon-intensive, [...] citizens would demand that their government focus its effort and their tax dollars on working cooperatively with the rest of the world’s governments to engineer a safe and stable transition to a post-carbon fuel world. But as it is, the politics of distraction have succeeded in shifting people’s attention away from these sobering realities, diverting them instead to the sideshow that the national political arena has become (p. 400; quoted on p. 28).

We then segue to reliable mass media sources and their overwhelming power and control. According to Lutz (212), “six multinational entities now control ninety percent of American news channels.” That is one of the main reasons which explains why coverage of climate change science is still sparse, because the powers that be “unintentionally send the wrong message about the seriousness of the ecological predicament” (p. 29). Their main purpose is, we are led to believe, to expand and increase profit and consequently climate change coverage is bad for business in terms of ratings. The best way to approach topics like climate change is skillfully presented in such a way that what viewers’ experience only casts doubt on the scientific consensus. This is also augmented by corporations and their hegemonic role in making rational real truth appear “to be irrelevant” (Gross 2017). Names of former and current politicians and government heads are brought into the frame, only to elucidate the obvious reality that “post-truth discourse concerning global warming coalesces as a hegemonic effort to bypass rational thought through the proliferation of another (hyper-) reality through signs in information silos” (p. 34).

The second chapter also includes a brief but relevant addition to the above-mentioned hot topics, when the reader is presented facts and statistics referring to religious groups like evangelical Protestants and similar Christian views, whereby, instead of focusing on and dealing with ontological notions, some Christian environmentalists still believe that “evolution is a made-up political thing, and climate change isn’t changing.” Such opinions only support a “line of reasoning to dislodge post-truth metanarratives regarding human-induced climate change” (Ehrenfeld, 1978, p. 207; quoted on p. 39).

According to the author and his references, there is still a ray of hope when we analyze inoculation and its much-needed assets. A perfect example would be the *Bad News* game developed by scientists at the University of Cambridge. “This educational, online game has been studied by many researchers as a way to help people from being sucked into a hyperreal, dis-informational vortex in the first place. Or to help victims of simulated reality find the proverbial exit door” (p. 42). In the words of van der Linden (2022),

We [...] refuted the actual misinformation in advance. To do that, we had to expose people to a weakened dose of the false claim and then ‘pre-bunk’ it. We told our participants that they may come across a false petition, but did not tell them in advance which one. After that, we told them that many signatories of the actual petition were fake, like Charles Darwin and the Spice Girls. We also pointed out that most of the 31,000 signatories were not scientists with PhDs and we put the false claim in context. Even if all the signatories had been scientists, that would have accounted for 0.1% of the US science graduates (Quoted on p.42).

In other words, although global *infodemic* is real, “resistance is still possible” in the world of alternative facts. In this vein, the author postulates that “the present human induced crisis is far more complicated than the ozone layer and acid rain.” (p. 44) To conclude the chapter, Keith Moser rallies the well-intended readers and mobilizes them to overcome the epidemic of fake news and conspiracy theories by being aware and duly informed.

In a smooth transition, we find Chapter 3 entitled *COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy: The Ongoing, Hyperreal Saga of a Deadly Epidemic and Infodemic* built on theories presented in the previous chapters, drawing our attention to the pervasiveness of uninformed opinions versus scientific data in a “pandemic within a pandemic.” The reality of the ecological crisis, as well as

the increasing intensity and frequency of disease outbreaks, is depicted in facts and numbers that may continue to threaten our civilization and is deemed as a “soft rehearsal” for future repeats of possible challenges that we might have to face if we are not fully prepared.

A quick but necessary detour takes the reader to the dawn of modern science and its implications in the fight against the anti-vaccination approaches. The schism between reality and opinions comes back in full circle. The discovery of antibiotics by Alexander Fleming in 1928 and the development of vaccines have definitely proved the validity of medical treatments that have counter-acted the deleterious effects of various maladies and diseases. Nevertheless, we learn that hesitancy has built over time against such valuable tools that can save lives. It is true, as asserted by the author, that “well before the digital revolution, albeit on a smaller scale, physicians and other medical practitioners were already dealing with anti-science fake news stories” (p. 58).

According to Moser, when even media, for various reasons, distorts reality, it is only to be expected that passive consumers of the “nectar of simulation” spend hours using their TV sets, computers, tablets, smartphone screens absorbing seemingly debatable news without really understanding the substance of the covered events. Such sources of information become, in the author’s view, “merely a cog in the machinery of the hyperreal” (p. 63). And many politicians, pundits, and social influencers only benefited from these “metanarratives within post-factual vectors that superseded scientific knowledge” (p. 68).

Interestingly enough, the current study has found that social media is the biggest attraction for a large proportion of the population, a fact that clearly explains how people depending on “news” (please read “gossip”) automatically believe the advertisement and the version of events that are available on major TV stations, Facebook, or any other type of post-truth metanarratives. When analyzing the abysmal situation, Numerato et al., (2019) comes to the following assessment:

According to Pew Research Center (2017), two thirds (67%) of American adults get their news from social media, and 45 percent of Facebook users say that they get their news from this platform (p. 83; quoted on p. 70).

As such, the author acknowledges that “uprooting fake news stories on social media is like trying to find a needle in a haystack.” Furthermore, the same post-truth discourse promulgated by religious communities like the fundamentalists can only proliferate when we trace their history of ingrained beliefs that have fostered a culture of scientific illiteracy and skepticism. As the author points out, “research suggests that persuading fundamentalists to consider evidence that conflicts with dominant hyperreal metanarratives is a daunting task” (p. 74). The perversion of reality has become so deep, as touted by factual data, that the whole myth might be re-appear in the near future with other disease outbreaks.

A way out is highlighted in the same context when the author refers to viable solutions like online fake news games “based on the inoculation theory, applicable to the pandemic context, and aimed at enhancing misinformation discrimination” (Ma et al., 2023; quoted on p. 82). Better yet, if outsiders are usually viewed with suspicion, strategic partnerships in the medical community might be the ones to “facilitate a meaningful dialogue that deconstructs anti-science knowledge claims” (p. 83).

The chapter summarizes the obvious results of “the pandemic within a pandemic” with effects and unabated struggle to follow in the near future and concludes that “inoculation theory, community-based initiatives, and media literacy training programs in schools offer a ray of hope” (p. 85).

Chapter 4, *Alternative Facts Trump Reality: The Spectacular Anatomy of an Insurrection*, explores the first intended overthrow of a democratically elected government of the United States and its “culmination of four years of purely simulacral governing style” (p. 95). The chapter investigates the plague of post-truth politics “revealed its true nature in a failed coup d’etat attempt on January 6, 2021. What is evident from the first pages of the chapter is the focus on the real danger of the former president’s disrespect of one of our fundamentals of our democratic society. In this vein, we read that “As a television star on *The Apprentice*, Trump learned how to take advantage of the gap between appearance and reality to breathe life into a hyperreal persona that could be packaged for mass consumption” (p. 97). To this the author adds a factual statement that cannot be ignored: Trump’s mastery of social media, although ridiculed by many journalists and commentators, provided the former president with a wide access to a parallel universe. “Aware that the Twittersphere is the ideal environment in which to generate a hyperreal spectacle that has no connection to evidence, logic, or common sense, Trump would sometimes tweet for hours at a time shunning conventional forms of political communication” (p. 121). To clarify the situation, Moser argues that there is a problem with Twitter (X), which lies in “is very structure of this social media network itself whose limitations serve to bypass critical thinking” (p. 122).

Interesting, but hardly surprising, according to Ott (2017), is the fact that “Twitter undermines our capacity to discuss and, subsequently, to think about issues and events in more complex ways [...] In short, people across the political spectrum (the right and the left) are being fed a steady diet of what they want to hear. The result is the creation of ideological silos, powerful echo chambers of misinformation that, thanks to confirmation bias, reaffirm our existing beliefs” (p. 61, p. 65; quoted on p. 122).

As the author elucidates in the following pages, there is an obvious urgency to contest alt-right and post-truth politics mainly because of “the severity of the post-truth *infodemic* in which any external reference to a concrete reality outside of the universe of simulation is hanging on by a thread” (p. 125). While it is more difficult to debunk conspiracies and fake news stories in the political arena than alternative facts about climate change and vaccinations, research and factual data both prove that the implementation of inoculation theory and critical visual media literacy in education may very well be our best bet.

That being said, we further read that the reader is also made aware of the possibility that, albeit certain strategies for infiltrating disinformation will further beat the same drums, we definitely need “to promote the kind of evidence-based knowledge claims upon which our republic depends for survival in the coming years” (p. 131).

Circling back to the main issues presented in the preceding chapters, the present research project continues and duly reiterates the gravity of the current situation within the hyperreal world of ubiquitous conspiracy theories and fake news increasingly pumped up by an incessant widespread and exchange of misinformation and disinformation simultaneously. We are reminded that the dissemination of “alternative facts” perpetuated – accidentally or purposefully – by social media and mass media only half explains why “(T)he harrowing postmodern vision of a consumer society in which millions of people spend nearly every waking moment within dis-informational echo chambers in which an alternate form of (hyper-) reality manufactures its own type of (post-) truth that has supplanted the real no longer seems far-fetched at all” (p. 176). When people cannot make meaningful distinctions between evidence-based facts and anti-science, anti-intellectual simulacra, what is left is daunting and be expressed in the words of Samuels (2021), who rightfully asserts that “the fake news battle is a dire struggle against the ‘loss of our cultural immune systems’ that are constantly being assailed by screen-based images bearing little to no connection to the real” (quoted on p. 176).

When all the relevant pieces of information based on sound research come together, we inevitably need to look for relevant resources in the political discourse that can help pre-bunk and de-bunk destabilizing forms of political rhetoric that find their origins outside of concrete reality” (p. 190). If we carefully filter through the biased political propaganda multiplied indefinitely by the likes of Twitter (X), as well as other propagators of fake “truth-telling” compounded by flimsy advertising coming from “unreliable narrators,” (Bachratá, 2019, p. 75) what is crystallized is a much-needed approach to dislodge post-factual truth claims before they turn out to be too dangerous to contemplate.

A special touch is added when the author, as well as the avid reader, revisits *The Myth of Sisyphus* through the eyes of the famous author Albert Camus, who acknowledged that “Even if ‘One always finds one’s burden again,’ ‘The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy’” (Camus, 1942, p. 112; quoted on p. 193). We might go further and remind ourselves that, even though the boulder comes crashing down every time we manage to push it up the mountain, before we make the next attempt – like Sisyphus – we can think (please read: spare a couple of minutes to reminisce, sift through and learn from our mistakes, but never give up). The lesson we learn from Camus is just one of the many other convincing hopes for a cure that the book is meant to provide, filter, analyze, and finally display in front of our eyes.

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