

9-1-2021

United States of Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America (And What We Can Do About It)

Rachel Guldin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique>

Recommended Citation

Guldin, Rachel (2021) "United States of Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America (And What We Can Do About It)," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/5pm7-z291>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique/vol30/iss1/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Book Review

United States of Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America (And What We Can Do About It)

Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff

248 pp., 0 figs., ISBN 9780872867673 paperback,

US\$16.95, City Lights Books, San Francisco, CA, 2019

United States of *Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America (And What We Can Do About It)* (2019) provides a thoughtful and detailed critical analysis of post-truth America by using history and recent events to examine the roles of news media and education resulting in a social and political milieu that enabled and sustains a Trump presidency.

The book is suited for a general audience. Because it employs a critical perspective and advocates for systemic change, a reader's partisan politics will likely influence how they understand the book. It is hard to imagine it would be well-received by politically conservative readers, despite its critiques of both mainstream U.S. political parties. However, it may be useful for general audience members looking to understand their intuitions about the current political moment through a historical, political, and economic analysis of news and education. This makes it an accessible entry point to political economy of media and communication for undergraduates and a gateway to thinking about structural relationships between social systems at large.

In the prologue, the authors situate issues of truth, media, and education within the post-truth context by identifying three of Trump's tactics: using lies and disinformation, censoring words among government officials, and attacking the press. With this backdrop, the authors put forward three aims. They establish that the purpose of the book is to interrogate the roles of news media in building and maintaining a post-truth moment, as well as to identify how citizens can resist disinformation and manipulation. The second goal is to provide structural evidence of the "invasive corporate algorithm" (p. 35) that resulted in a Trump presidency and its effects on American civil society. The third goal is to provide insight on how education and new approaches to literacy can disrupt the corporate algorithm. The authors meet their objectives through an organized and logical argument laid out in five chapters.

Chapter 1 provides historical analysis and context of corporate news media and education. They argue these institutions, critical for the health of democracy and civil society, were cannibalized through deregulation and privatization for a corporatist political agenda. As such, the focus is no longer on what these institutions provide for citizens, but instead how profit can be generated from them. The chapter highlights four "public vulnerabilities" that result from the degradation of news media and education: a pervasive commercial entertainment culture, hyper-partisanship, a fragmented mediascape, and an ineffective education. The authors might call this a *corporatized* education system instead of an *ineffective* one because they make a clear argument for how the current state of education works very effectively to support corporatist goals.

Chapter 2 addresses the symbiotic relationship between Trump and for-profit news media. Trump, as a celebrity brand, knew how to entertain but needed an audience, whereas corporate media had an audience to sell but needed the entertainment. The authors argue that corporate media lacked critical analysis in coverage of Trump because the profit motive disincentivizes substantive reporting in lieu of spectacle. Thus, corporate news media, specifically Fox News and CNN, acted as megaphones for government propaganda instead of watchdogs. Additionally, social media allowed Trump to simultaneously control and subvert traditional journalism by making his tweets both communication with the public and news stories themselves.

Chapter 3 defines post-truth as a climate in which truth is determined by what people believe or feel is true, not by facts. The authors provide three ways Trump capitalized on this. First, he disseminated disinformation to rally the alt-right, many of whom had been disavowed by Democrats and Republicans. Second, he used spectacle to push far-right talking points into mainstream conversations. These first two points are exemplified in Trump's emphasis on "fake news" and calls for violence against the press. Third, corporate news legitimized alt-right voices by hiring pundits to gain viewers and profits, ignoring journalistic standards and ethics.

In Chapter 4, the authors unpack Trump's ability to redirect the focus of news stories, called a media swerve, with three examples. First, Trump shifted the narrative away from his own weak statements about white supremacy after the violent 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville toward an ahistorical debate over the removal of Confederate statues. Second, after 12 days without publicly commenting on the 2017 ambush on U.S. soldiers in Niger, Trump shifted the conversation to protocol for contacting Gold Star families. Last, hyper-partisan news media used excessive premediated speculation to feed the spectacle by either dismissing or overhyping the investigation on Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, reinforcing Trump's refrain that it was a witch hunt.

Chapter 5 advocates for radical, structural reforms to education and news media. The authors write that education requires civics education, to reinvigorate democratic participation and reduce the influence of corporatism; critical thinking, to reduce hyper partisanship; media literacy, to guard against propaganda and to learn to use media tools for democratic participation; and community engagement and cultural competency, to disrupt the normalcy of incivility and intolerance. News media require broadened framing, local and investigative journalism, educational news media, and a culture receptive to whistleblowing. The authors acknowledge these major reforms will require the work of advocates to change the system. They emphasize the call to action by concluding with an appendix of organizations doing civic and critical media literacy work, and a lengthy suggested reading and viewing list. The book is clearly well-researched, as it wields a hefty number of endnotes. However, its lack of index or reference list make it difficult to easily find specific topics or citations.

United States of Distraction provides historical context in a broad overview, not a deep dive, particularly regarding the rise of corporatism and changes in media policy. While this was likely necessary to reach a broader audience, it is somewhat unfortunate because setting the historical scene makes the present so much clearer, especially in Chapter 1. The authors' skills as historians are evident but not showcased, as the historical analyses were limited yet some of the most compelling passages. The explanations of more recent and Trump-focused current events felt tedious at points, but these examples will certainly become more valuable after the Trump presidency.

The trap of hyper-partisanship that the authors discuss might make this book one that some readers reject. Its orientation as a critical analysis does not align with the expectation of objectivity that is a benchmark for trustworthy research within the dominant paradigm. This becomes a philosophical consideration for the reader: is it the responsibility of the writer to present information without interpretation or values, or is the writer's job to research and advocate? *United States of Distraction* boldly and deftly takes the route of advocacy.

The authors close Chapter 4 and title Chapter 5 with the need to “make America think again,” which references Trump’s “make America great again” slogan. However, this implies that Americans stopped thinking. Throughout Chapters 1-4, the authors dance around the idea of the American audience being duped, a notion for which critical theorists, like the Frankfurt School, are commonly critiqued as deterministic. The limited attention to individual agency and generalized interpretations of how the masses responded to mediated moments are areas for critical consideration when reading this book.

Another criticism may be that the authors are “only” recapitulating what people already sense: that news media amplify politicians and education fails to combat this. But that is not what the authors are doing. They outline the systemic and institutional changes that allowed the U.S. to get to the point where news and education broke down. *United States of Distraction*’s contributions are in making explicit the historical and political shifts that enabled the present moment, drawing out how ideological shifts changed the roles of news media and education, and suggesting action to address the issues we face.

Rachel Guldin (rguldin@uoregon.edu) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication in Eugene, Oregon, United States.