A guidebook on fake news and online opinion altering agendas

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Mauro Munafò, *Fake news, hateri şi cyberbullying. Cui servesc şi cum să te fereşti*, Curtea Veche Publishing, Bucureşti, 2021, ISBN: 978-606-44-0974-4, 178 p.

In Mauro Munafò's book *Fake news, hateri şi cyberbullying. Cui servesc şi cum să te fereşti* (the review is based on the 2021 Romanian version, which was made possible by Diana Ilie's translation of the book), the author tries to provide the readers with a manageable outline of the fake news phenomenon, by acquainting them to the terminology which is not so customary to the broader audience. This is not a book that is specifically targeted to people in academia but rather to people who are trying to be more knowledgeable of a phenomenon that is affecting their everyday lives. Representing a good introductory read to people just familiarizing themselves with the wide area of terms surrounding fake news, the book uses a speech that is more readily accessible. Munafò is a journalist since 1986, currently writing for the Italian weekly L'Espresso. He also wrote for La Repubblica, Kataweb and Il Sole 24 Ore. Before publishing *Fake news, haters & cyberbullismo. A chi servono e come difendersi* (original work published in the Italian language in 2020), he previously covered in his journalistic career an array of topics such as politics, with a focus on the digital sphere, or communication in the context of elections with a focus on social media and its use connected to this topic. Apart from his journalistic career, Munafò is a co-founder of the FpS Media Agency which focuses on services in the digital area.

Munafò's opening remarks are straightforward. Fake news is not a new phenomenon, Munafò emphasizes, but a tale as old as time. The author talks about "historical lies" as the evidence of fake news being something rooted in human nature. When it comes to positioning his views regarding the emergence of the fake news era, Munafò strongly argues that fake news is something that has existed long before the media has emerged, so long ago that the author takes us back to Ancient Greece giving us examples of one of Aristotle's disciples that mentions a particular person that was knows as one to figment words and information from his imagination to pass them along as true. After briefing readers with some historical facts, the author tries to then introduce them gradually to ways in which they can perform their own fact-checking process, but there are also strong indicators that make us believe that Munafò sees politics as presumably the most dangerous area to be affected by fake news due to how powerful and path altering it can be for society. Therefore, the approach is somewhat less objective than subjective even when analysing the words Munafò uses compared to the context. He also speaks about journalists in a manner that could be interpreted as a way to clean their reputation, saying that they do their fact-checking with sanctity (p.59), nevertheless, he cannot be blamed for wanting to do so, considering the fact that the literature also mentions that political manipulation can take place with the intervention of corrupt journalists.

Munafò's view over the general subject is that disinformation has a stronger effect than "real news" (even though he shies away from debating what "real news" could be defined as), because of its sensational character that has an amplifying factor attached which contains the "emotional factor" (p. 65). The author has a certain perspective when addressing the meaning of fake news. Munafò defines fake news as being news that is fake, due to being mostly built on lies, which are being spread through different means including messaging apps. Nevertheless, he does not attribute the existence of fake news to the Internet, even though he recognizes that social media and certain websites have acted as a catalyst when it comes to its distribution. He also argues that fake news is meant to have a negative impact because they are created with the sole purpose of affecting opponents. Munafò does not specifically mention

the nature of the opponents, which leaves the readers with an opportunity to assume who these actors might be, in which field this definition would be applicable, or if exceptions exist.

Stripping away the idea that people are helpless in the battle with fake news and disinformation, Munafò argues that the stage that we are at, is only the beginning of the digital war that involves "mis-information, mal-information and disinformation" agreeing to Claire Wardle's theoretical classification of these terms. The author does not shy away from mentioning other terms such as *post-truth*, *debunking*, *deepfake* or even *doxing*. This along with the structure of the chapters shows us that it was important for Munafò to cover as much ground as possible, even going to topics which might not be directly correlated with fake news.

As stated, Munafò's book is organized in chapters, with a structure that contains a mix of chronological and topic sequence. For some chapters it is very easy to predict the content, Chapter 4 – Propaganda and politics; while for other chapters the content is more cryptic when you look at the chapter title, Chapter 5 – Addicted to lies. For example, Munafò begins his efforts to draw the attention to another digital danger, starting from Chapter 12, when he goes to talk about *haters* and *cyberbullying*, also giving advice as to how to handle a situation that involves these acts of either hate or bullying online.

In his work, Munafò used a descriptive approach of both facts and definitions, giving straightforward examples from the United States (which are so often mentioned when it comes to naming fake news, in part due to Donald Trump's presence and speech), Brazil, Kenya, Russia and even North Macedonia (when he analysed which countries' citizens are prone to becoming an accomplice to fabricating false news due to lower income levels). The author strongly argues that there is a financial gain in most cases, when it comes to spreading fake news. Supporting the industry for money, fake news websites mimic real news outlets by name or structure. For instance, in Chapter 3 – Who has to gain from the fabrication of fake news; Munafò shows that fake news articles are used as a manipulation tool even from the very title of the alleged news article "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement" (p. 29). Manipulation in means of gaining exposure to

get ads money or to influence election are just two of the pillars that underlie the post-truth era.

Throughout the book, Munafò demonstrates that nothing is infallible and if there is something that the digital media has allowed is the fact of altering reality not only through text, images but even through realistic looking videos which involve artificial intelligence and advanced software to put someone's face on someone else's body. Munafò admits that "the precision of this process makes it almost impossible to detect a fake with the naked eye" (p.70), thus emitting a warning supported by a 2019 study (run by Deeptrace) that showed the existence of at least 15000 deepfake videos, with a volume of falsified videos that multiply with a very fast pace.

While Munafò does not necessarily fill existing gaps in research and literature, but rather brings the connected concepts together in order to be discussed on a surface level, his book was needed, considering the amount of false information circulating especially after the pandemic years.

In contrast to the claim that he made in the introduction ("I wish to examine through information, data, studies and facts, some obscure sides" (p. 10), it seems that while the examples he gave throughout the book might be shocking, going over the subject of deaths caused by fake news (see pages 47-49), a more thorough analysis would have certainly brought added value to the existing literature. With this being said, Munafò managed to get a very varied amount of information in just 178 pages. After the final chapter, Munafò made sure to include a brief dictionary of terms that were mentioned all through the book, but also a section of recommended literature. "The best way to confront the dark side of the network is to have in depth knowledge about it, because we have to know how to act alone in front of it" (p. 11), says Munafò, while he provides the readers with the resources to increase comprehension on these overgrowing challenges to which he attributes to the social media and to the digital world expansion. Munafò is not afraid to share his opinions even though they might not be the popular "choice", but rather acts as a guide for his readers, by using verbs such as "we will deal with" (p.64). Munafò feels that we are dealing with a level of toxicity that can only be counteracted with knowledge and resourcefulness.

Fake news is currently a topic that needs to be heavily researched for the reason that raising the awareness level on the phenomenon would have a great impact on the society. With that being said, even people that are not specialized in the field could benefit to read Munafò's *Fake news, hateri și cyberbullying. Cui servesc și cum să te ferești* book, in order to get a brief overview over the most popular terms circulating in the realm of fake news, disinformation, digital media, social media and the dangers that we are exposed to when it comes to political choice, free speech, right to be informed and protecting ourselves and others from online bullies or "haters", how Munafò calls them. The book is a synthesis of recent developments in the area of fake news and disinformation, but it could have went into more depth when it comes to defining the terms that he found appropriate to mention as being related to the main theme of this publication. On one hand, this book is an engaging read, even though for scholars it might seem as if it is overly simplifying the huge issue that we face in the post-truth era. Munafò's book is very well suited to the general audience that might not feel as intimidated by the book that features colourful illustrations and that does have fewer pages than most of the books that are written around the main topic. First year students could also benefit from the "friendly" introduction to a research area that is as challenging as it is, opening up new chance of convincing the new generations to dive deeper and try to do their own research on the subject. On the other hand, the title feels slightly misleading because out of the 178 pages, less than half of the pages are actually about fake news, while the remaining pages cover the topic of cyberbullying and haters, which should have been a secondary preoccupation. The contribution in the field, especially giving the topic of fake news will hopefully be a nod for other authors to publish books on the subject of disinformation, malinformation and misinformation in the near future. The author is demystifying the idea that we can truly rely on our perceptions due to the "echo chamber" effect. Explaining what the "echo chamber" is, Munafò claims that "our convictions and ideas and constantly supported by friends that think alike and therefore we rarely get to deal with alternative visions" (p. 65). In other words, the echo chamber would act as to fundamentally altering our choices which are in fact, not ours, at least not in the proportion that we think they are.

With Munafò recognizing the importance of debunking, acknowledging the "echo chamber" effect and the differences between the terms related to the fake news phenomenon (such as fact-checking, clickbait, propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, etc.), that yet lack the much needed attention, we can recognize that this book is a step forward in the field, regardless of the bits of (constructive) critique that can be brought up when discussing his work. Munafò's approach is understandably, to some degree subjective. It is noticeable that the author tries to defend journalists in the already existing debate, in which many claim that fake news begins with those writing the news. When it comes to the topics that were approached, Munafò could have gone into more depth when he initiated the discussion about post-truth, misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. The concepts he used were sometimes poorly explained, thus, even though the book might have been written with a broader audience in mind, the majority might have found tackling with unfamiliar terms more than challenging. Then again, Munafò could have brought up more studies to support his statements. In the area of fake news dispute and research, showing up and starting a debate with a great database of examples seems to work best when it comes to shedding light over the thus far complicated phenomenon. Overall, *Fake news, hateri și cyberbullying. Cui servesc și cum să te ferești,* represents a good read for those looking for an introduction into fake news and cyberbullying which have occurred after the digital revolution.