BOOK REVIEW

A Dream You Dream Alone Is Only a Dream: The Individual Perspective of Fighting Fake News

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(Rubin, Irene. *Fighting falsehoods: suspicion, analysis, and response*. Routledge, 2022)

The book 'Fighting Falsehoods: Suspicion, Analysis, and Response', by Irene Rubin, published in 2022, provides a unique perspective on a topic that contemporary societies around the world have been concerned about: the spread of fake news and how to fight it. The book adopts a perspective of individual empowerment of citizens and addresses possibilities and strategies to fight this problem individually.

2016 may be the landmark year when the fake news problem gained public notoriety. It was the year when Donald Trump was elected in the United States and also when 'fake news' was named word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary. We may argue that this moment has dramatically changed the overall perspective on the political impacts of digital technologies. Around 2016, there is a decrease in the most enthusiastic views of social media that were mainly based on the possibilities of using these environments to organize protests and challenge established governments and systems, including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the 'Indignados' (Outraged) Movement, and the 2013 protests in Brazil.

More pessimistic views on this issue then started to gain traction, encouraged by Trump's election, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and later the election of Jair Bolsonaro. The conversation in this new moment then becomes centered around the processes of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and the polarization of societies—all of them phenomena that are amplified through digital platforms.

Rubin's book is part of this new moment, aiming to pursue, very pertinently, ways to tackle the problem. The author provides something of a manual with a step-by-step structure of how individuals can understand, identify, discuss, explain, denounce, and counterattack this problematic informational scenario.

The book first aims to assess the extent of the disinformation problem by addressing some of its consequences, including threats to individuals, financial losses, and even some embarrassment for those who cannot tell news stories and advertisements apart, for example. The author not only points out their effects on individual levels, but also collective impacts, including the consequences of low vaccination rates—often motivated by false information—on public health and the damages of climate change denial. "Democracy is threatened by false news when it is used for political advantage" (RUBIN, 2022, p. 4), Rubin argues.

After introducing some initial points, the book moves on to its goal to empower readers in three parts. The first one includes resources for recognizing persuasion mechanisms based on inaccurate elements and it is directly connected to the second chapter of the book, 'Recognizing Exaggerations, Distortions, and Lies'.

In this section, Irene Rubin provides instructive examples of how manipulation usually happens and what should get readers' attention in this sense. The author highlights how evasive statements can be deceiving and how we should be careful with words that stir emotions or biased definitions. Humor and tactics used to delegitimize opponents are also explained through concrete examples from US politics to support understanding.

Tips on how to recognize these contents are also provided in other chapters, where the author describes common characteristics of conspiracy theories or when she addresses the use of numbers to manipulate arguments.

The second part of the book addresses ways to analyze content recognized as suspicious. These tips are concentrated in some chapters and diluted in others. In

'Quick Checks' (Chapter 03), Rubin explores fact-checking websites as a simple way to discover whether content is true, rebutting the main criticism made about this practice.

Adding to this instructional character of the book, the author also makes an effort to introduce readers to major fact-checking initiatives from the United States and provides a list of projects from other countries, including Mexico and Australia, where reliable information can be found. She also highlights the reliability criteria applied to websites, authors, books, and newspapers.

Rubin argues that sometimes the problem of a website will be obvious, as when a it is imitating a traditional outlet, "[...] but even if the site is real, you can do a number of checks yourself to test for bias and for false or distorted information" (RUBIN, 2022, p. 53). With these nuances, Rubin aims to point out how to make logical analyses of arguments and compare claims for and against a given topic to capture its general context. Analyzing and verifying the sources cited in publications is also one of the aspects addressed in depth by Rubin in an attempt to empower readers against poor quality information.

Finally, the final section of the book addresses how to fight misinformation with practical actions. The author emphasizes that it is necessary to 'take on' this responsibility and spread information that has been checked, whether by commenting on social networking sites, creating your own blogs, taking part in protests, or working with activist groups. Rubin also lists forms of rapprochement and dialogue with people who share misleading information. The author's proposed counterattack is generally driven by a very positivity-filled, individual interpretation, as the excerpt below exemplifies:

> You may feel that the task is too big and that you cannot reach the real opponents, that no one will listen, that money and power are all on the other side. If that kind of thinking prevents you from acting, you will have disempowered yourself. Just getting a counternarrative out is important. If you put your argument up on the web, search engines may find it and make it available to others. Not everyone will respond to an evidence-based argument, even if it is convincingly stated, but some will. More importantly, you will not be alone. There will be others alongside you doing the same thing, convincing others. (RUBIN, 2022, p. 09)

While the book successfully and comprehensively addresses crucial aspects of the structuring of and strategies for the spread of fake news, it is limited to an

individual perspective on the matter. In other words, its main goal seems to be limited to how each one, individually, can tackle this issue. And, in fact, it seems to us that it does move forward in this aspect.

According to a systematic review carried out by the International Panel on the Information Environment (2023), the four measures most often explored in the literature on measures to fight disinformation include the production of informative materials, media education, content moderation, and post labeling. In this scenario, the approach proposed by the book provides important contributions to propose a different pathway to face the problem, using strategies that foster critical reading.

However, a question ultimately remains: if all citizens know the characteristics, strategies, possibilities, and ways Rubin points out to fight fake news, would we be able to solve or make substantial progress in fighting disinformation? It seems to us that the answer is no.

An individual perspective is only the tip of the iceberg

The general scenario of the communication environment, with rampant processes of disinformation directly impacting electoral processes and people's daily lives, certainly spreads a feeling of powerlessness. It is therefore absolutely understandable and praiseworthy to seek to understand how each of us can act in the face of this problem.

We must understand, however, that little progress will be possible without structured actions to fight disinformation and its causes. Fake news is not just the result of people's lack of information or knowledge. And, therefore, fake news cannot be combated only with measures of education and knowledge sharing.

As Mendonça et al. (2023) argue, it is not only about people not knowing how to recognize what is false, but what changes is the very grounds that allow us to tell truth and falsehood apart. It does not seem to make much sense then to expect citizens to wonder if they are sharing falsehoods or to be too concerned about sharing something that is not 'completely true'. It is actually the communication and political scenario that allows and encourages this kind of behavior.

There is, therefore, an essential dimension to this phenomenon related to political battles and, when this element is not taken into consideration, an individual

approach becomes largely insufficient. The rise of the far right and the use of digital platforms, including for disinformation processes, can't be seen as unrelated elements. As Gomes and Dourado argue, "the key to understanding the correlation (between the rise of the far right and fake news) lies in the topic of the so-called 'epistemic crisis', intentionally produced by the new right for its own benefit, and which consists of disqualifying all institutions that are traditionally endowed with credibility to arbitrate on socially accepted knowledge about facts, namely, science, universities, and journalism" (GOMES and DOURADO, 2019, p. 07).

Politically weaponizing fake news is therefore part of a broader puzzle, and not an isolated element on the board.

Its general formula disregards local specificities

By looking into the topic through very individual glasses, the broad context where disinformation lies is ultimately overlooked. It disregards its political use, the role of digital platform algorithms, the forms of information consumption, the multiple-platform nature of the discussion, the specific characteristics of each digital environment, and the local characteristics that prevent, however well-meaning, the effectiveness of an individual-centered approach.

One of the first solutions presented by Rubin, for example, is fact-checking. Its relevance as one of the solutions to the problem is undeniable, as is the need to consider its limits and caveats (NÓBREGA, 2021). It is however necessary to go further and analyze access as well.

In Brazil, most news access happens via mobile phone; 75 percent of Brazilians consume information on their smartphones (NEWMAN et al., 2022). While there is this prevalence, access remains unequal. A survey showed that 45 percent of lower-middle and lower class internet users have had no data plan on their phones for at least part of the previous month (INSTITUTO LOCOMOTIVA, 2021), which significantly prevents users from accessing fact-checking websites or even checking facts themselves. The practice of zero-rating in many mobile plans— in which users can access certain applications without using data from their contracted plans—also significantly limits the access to quality information, making it impossible to exercise many of the tips Rubin's book provides.

> The mobile access scenario in Brazil, with its different pricing practices, turns most users into receivers of all kinds of misleading messages. A relevant part of the population, who can only afford this kind of access to the internet, has reduced options in terms of websites and information services, as they are conscientious about not running out of data and most often use apps exempted from their data allowance, which are mostly the platforms where a lot of the misinformation circulates in our country. (IDEC, 2021, p. 34).

Moreover, we should highlight the role of messaging apps (MELLO, 2020) and digital platforms themselves in the circulation of disinformation, as they often make it impossible to identify the authors and strengthen the sense of being close to content shared through groups. Research shows that, in groups of messaging services, trust in who is in the group influences the decision to click or not click on links, play videos, or share news pieces (INTERNETLAB and REDE CONHECIMENTO SOCIAL , 2022).

Polarization is also a very common factor when sharing false information and considering it as truth, which makes it difficult to adopt the pathways presented by Rubin without demobilization. A study showed how sources of information vary according to each person's political spectrum, sometimes making it impossible to create common grounds on certain topics, such as COVID-19 (SANTOS, 2021).

Collectively building a regulatory pathway and the Brazilian case

The book's afterword is called 'The Responsibility is Ours' and starts by highlighting that "expectations are too high about what can be done by others" (RUBIN, 2022, p. 176). Rubin points out that digital platforms themselves have argued that it is very difficult to keep track of disinformation, while regulations related to digital platforms could represent threats to the freedom of expression.

This section then aims to provide an overview of legislation related to digital platforms around the world. Given the individualistic perspective of the book, we should bear in mind that more collective and structural solutions are not really its focus, and this is clear from the beginning of the book. There is, however, some information and interpretations of regulatory processes that can be seen as problematic.

First of all, the author argues that, "after one extensive study, the European Commission recommended *against* taking regulatory action. Despite such advice, some governments have passed laws prohibiting false or misleading stories"

(RUBIN, 2022, p. 177). It is not possible to know exactly to what decision Rubin is referring, but in 2022, when the book was published, Europe passed the Digital Services Act (DSA), a very robust law that advances several regulatory aspects for digital platforms. The DSA establishes rules for transparency reporting, use of data in advertising, and content removal, among other issues. The fact is that there seems to have been an understanding, at the European level, that without the regulatory route, other types of action, such as those proposed in the book, hardly would have sufficient consequences to solve the problem.

Also in the final part of the book, the author mentions the Brazilian law on freedom, responsibility, and transparency on the internet, popularly known as the Fake News Bill. Rubin is right to point out that this legislation would have little chance of move forward under the Bolsonaro administration, but once his term was over, the demands for digital media regulation in Brazil have become significantly stronger. The draft of the aforementioned bill has been significantly modified in 2023, which evidently makes the description provided in the book obsolete; above all, a view has been consolidated among several civil society organizations that advancing in regulation is necessary and that this bill can be a first step in this direction.

From our perspective, the book 'Fighting Falsehoods: Suspicion, Analysis, and Response' by Irene Rubin certainly provides an important contribution to consider possibilities of individual reaction to the disinformation phenomenon. The book contributes to tackling the feeling of powerlessness and inaction that sometimes affects citizens who see the problem as too big to be addressed.

That said, it is important to place this individual perspective within a larger scope of necessary actions and perspectives to address the disinformation problem as something structural, social, cultural, political, and, therefore, collective. This is the only way to make it possible to find fruitful and effectively consistent ways to solve the issue.

Translated by Aline Scátola

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