Book Review: What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Fake News? by Nick Anstead

In **What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Fake News?***, Nick Anstead* *explores what we mean by fake news and possible ways to address it. Situating fake news in its historical context and providing clear and brief summaries of the current scholarly work on the subject, this concise book will provide a solid touchpoint for people looking to understand one of the most pressing issues of our time, writes* **Matt Bluemink***.*

This review originally appeared on [LSE Review of Books](). If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the managing editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at [lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk]()

What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Fake News? Nick Anstead. SAGE. 2021.

Since the rise of Donald Trump and the global populist movements emboldened by his success, there has been one term that has seemingly become ubiquitous when discussing the role of media in contemporary society: fake news. The term may have been bandied around recklessly by both politicians and news outlets, but [this slim volume from Nick Anstead](), Associate Professor in the LSE Department of Media and Communications, attempts to answer the questions: what exactly do we mean by fake news? And is there anything we can do about it?

One of the issues that arises when discussing fake news is the difficulty of defining it. Throughout the book, Anstead summarises a number of academic analyses of the phenomenon, whilst highlighting difficulties researchers face when confronted with an institutional definition of fake news. For example, how can we distinguish satire and parody from intentionally misleading fabricated stories? These issues lead him to adopt a multi-faceted approach which ranges from historical to statistical analysis. He aims to show how fake news highlights the fact that 'our ideas of both truthfulness and falsehood are inherently bound up in questions of power, trust and authority, and the institutions and people on which they are bestowed' (2).

The first half of the book is spent situating fake news within its historical context, looking at examples of misinformation from medieval times through to the twentieth century. But is there something radically different about fake news in the age of digital technologies? In the twenty-first century, our media consumption has changed drastically. Most importantly, for Anstead, we have moved from an era of mass media to an age of *fragmented* media in which our news has become individualised, with citizens choosing what information they will consume from a wide variety of sources. This can be seen particularly in [the rise of social media as a trusted source of news]() across the world (36-37).
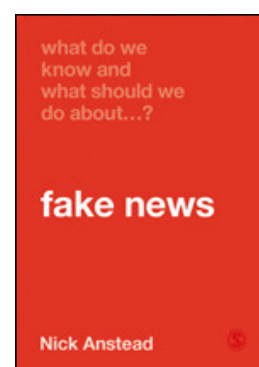
The trend of increasing news consumption through social media brings to light important questions about our relationship with politics in the digital age. The ease at which information can be shared through social media gives rise to a number of potential reasons for the proliferation of fake news. The three main motives given are: profit; geo-politics; and partisanship/ideology (44). From Macedonian teenagers sharing fake news online for Google Adsense revenue to Russian state-affiliated technology companies spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to advertise politically divisive content on Facebook, it's undoubtable that spreading this kind of intentionally misleading content is easier than ever before.

Indeed, due to the destabilisation of the traditional 'technocratic liberal order' and the rise of populist politics, fake news only needs to have a minimal effect on particular voters to have a large impact on democratic elections. As Anstead summarises:

> When wielded as an ideological or geo-political weapon, fake news is designed to amplify pre-existing divisions within a society. In so doing, it undermines public confidence in political institutions, and decreases the possibility of consensus building, making it harder to have robust but civil disagreement (51).

Accepting this conclusion necessarily leads to the question: what should we do about fake news? Anstead argues that there are two types of solutions to this question. The first are policy-based solutions which involve identifying and removing fake news, along with improving the digital literacy of the population to help identify it. The second are discursive solutions (based on the idea of discursive internationalism), which involve rethinking our relationship with democratic institutions.

This section of the book is arguably the most important, but also the most problematic. Anstead shows the growing trend amongst social media companies to ban users for breaking their fake news or incitement to violence rules, which culminated most notably in the banning of Donald Trump's private Facebook and Twitter accounts earlier this year. However, Anstead notes that putting our faith in large data-mining corporations to be bastions of moral judgement is extremely short-sighted. Instead, he asks, would it be wiser to rely on government intervention to stop the spread of fake news? The Network Enforcement Act in Germany does precisely this. It gives social media companies from one to seven days to remove 'obviously illegal' content before being fined up to 50 million Euros. Yet, the German law has also been severely criticised for limiting free speech, and has been under review. A law such as this would be untenable in a country such as the United States where the constitution makes it much more difficult to limit free speech rights (60-61).

One criticism that might be raised here relates to the policy-based solutions proposed by Anstead. The one that is given the least amount of attention is arguably the most important: improving media literacy. Here the author seems to breeze past this idea, dedicating only a single page to it. Granted, Anstead covers a lot of ground in this chapter, but if we are to think seriously about how we can go about countering the severe political consequences of misinformation, a progressive system of digital education would be a necessary step. Whereas governmental and corporate solutions provide a retroactive cure to the problem of fake news (whilst also causing a whole host of potential criticisms in relation to rights and freedoms), pre-emptive education can give citizens the tools they need to distinguish fact from fiction in a constantly evolving media environment. Anstead does note this point briefly, but if it was expanded, it would certainly strengthen the overall argument of the book.

Conversely, Anstead spends more time reviewing the criticisms directed at postmodernism, asking if we should 'stop being postmodern (or possibly be more postmodern?)' (65). Here this section of the chapter becomes a little confused. In trying to give a balanced critique of postmodernism and its relevance to fake news, Anstead risks falling into the trap of overemphasising the 'postmodern bogeyman' rather than the ideas themselves. To the reader who is unfamiliar with this subject matter, it may be initially unclear whether Anstead is defending or attacking postmodernism. Nevertheless, after a brief discussion of Jean-François Lyotard's _The Postmodern Condition_ (1984), he comes to a salient conclusion:

> postmodernism should not be taken as an attack on the idea of truth. Rather, it is an account of how truth is constructed and how, in an increasingly complex world, these processes have become destabilized. […] Furthermore, in their focus on narratives, postmodernists point towards a vital ingredient in constructing successful democratic institutions. Citizens need to have a common belief in their worth and fairness of these institutions (68).

This leads Anstead to an important closing statement: 'Fake news thrives in environments where citizens feel excluded from political and democratic processes' (70). In other words, fake news itself does not create divides, but catalyses pre-existing divisions in society. If we are to tackle fake news, we cannot do so without tackling these divisions (whether they be social, religious or racial) first. Our political future is dependent on constructing a new pluralistic and empathetic form of debate that is suited to our modern technological society. We must also move away from thinking about fake news in terms of specific content and instead 'think more broadly about how we build democratic institutions that are capable of withstanding an age where information and the authority to share information are more diffusely distributed' (75).

In conclusion, although there are flaws in the book, these can mostly be attributed to the breadth of information that Anstead tries to cover in the short space he is given. Situating fake news in its historical context and providing clear and brief summaries of the current scholarly work on the subject, Anstead's book will provide a solid touchpoint for people looking to understand one of the most pressing issues of our time.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Adapted from Mika via Unsplash.