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It was only after the 2016 "Brexit referendum" in the UK and the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency that public and published opinions in Europe and the United States turned their attention to the threats associated with the dissemination of false information. Although fabricating stories for political and economic gain is old news, the conspiratorial overtones of both campaigns caught many by surprise. What people across the world had already witnessed— from India to the Philippines and Hungary—was happening "here". It can happen here. Since then, research on previously fringe topics, such as conspiracy theories, went from the margins (Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas, "'What about Building 7?' A Social Psychological Study of Online Discussion of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 2013) to the mainstream (Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology*, 40, 2019).

To their credit, some scholars had been tracking the phenomenon all along. Adam J. Berinsky is one of the few (see also James Kuklinski et al., "Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship," *The Journal of Politics*, 62(3), 2000; Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done*, 2010) who didn't simply follow an increasingly popular academic trend but has been at the forefront of empirical research on popular beliefs in false information. The wealth of data collected between 2010 and 2018 underlies *Political Rumors.* More than espousing a central thesis about the dynamics of misinformation, the book proposes to explore the stickiness of political rumors. The subtitle doubles as a research question and normative quest: "Why do we accept misinformation and how can we fight it?"

Throughout the book, we learn that both question and quest have several limitations: "We" means Americans, "misinformation" is problematically equated with political rumors and the "fight" is circumscribed to the United States. Despite these limitations, the study remains a valuable addition to the debates over the pervasiveness of misinformation in the public (anglo)sphere. Amidst the burgeoning scholarship looking at intentional deception and reproduction of false information (see Stephan Lewandowsky et al., "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping With The "Post-Truth" Era," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6(4), 2017; Soroush Vosoughi et al., "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science*, 359(6380), 2018), Berinsky redirects our attention to the production and reception of political rumors. The research is complemented with

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valuable empirical data on the effectiveness of various strategies to correct false information (Chapters 5 and 6). Spoiler alert: beliefs in false narratives tend to outlast the effects of the remedies we currently have to correct them (see p. 79ff).

The book combines the empirical examination of political behaviour with echoes of classic Elite Theory. As such, it elects U.S. partisan elites (see the definition on p. 188 n1), as both the problem and the solution to most-things-misinformation for "members of the mass public are only as competent and wise as their leaders give them the resources to be" (p. 129). The normative commitment to counter "political rumors" exhibits a similar top-down perspective, even when the findings do not support the commitment: "the absence of evidence of a direct causal link between elite rhetoric and mass opinion is not evidence of the link's absence" (p. 157).

This attempt or temptation to simplify complex phenomena through linear models of understanding and explanation is, arguably, a noteworthy shortcoming of the book that permeates some of its building blocks, including 1) adopted terminology; 2) scope; and 3) analytical scale. I will address these, while stressing the importance of further research on the complex dynamics of mis/disinformation diffusion

1) The attempt to simplify the conceptual framework of the book using "political rumor" as a synecdoche for all types of false information fuses and confuses correlated but different concepts, chief amongst which are misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation designates incorrect information unwittingly (re) produced, whereas disinformation refers to the deliberate dissemination of incorrect information. While the former is related to inauthentic content, the latter refers to inauthentic contexts. Resorting to the author's terminology, disinformation is a "rumor" with an agenda intentionally promoted by social actors, whose goals can range from simple deception to political and economic gains. The difference is not a detail but a crucial element to understanding and countering the dynamics of the current "information disorder" (Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking," *Council of Europe*, 2017).

2) This leads us to the narrow scope of the book. If the U.S.-centric perspective could be construed as a generalizable case study, the division of false information into "political" and "non-political" creates an artificial thematic boundary *within* an inherently porous reality. Is misinformation about vaccines a "political rumor"? The answer to this question is less relevant than the demonstrable fact that vaccine misinformation content is being intentionally spread thus creating disinformation contexts for economic or political gain (Julie

Ricard and Juliano Medeiros, "Using Misinformation as a Political Weapon: COVID-19 and Bolsonaro in Brazil," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(3), 2020). A coarse content analysis of the book also shows that other themes important to situate the problem, such as the rise of the "attention economy" (Michael H. Goldhaber, "The Attention Economy and the Net," 1997), "information empires" *(Tim Wu, The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*, 2012), "digital enclosures" (Mark Andrejevic, "Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure," in *The New Media of Surveillance*, ed. Shoshana Magnet and Kelly Gates,, 2013) or "surveillance capitalism" (Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, 2020) are not discussed. This leaves little space to address vital topics in the sphere of mis/disinformation studies, like the transformation of the traditional media ecosystem into a new media echo-system that encloses publics in individualized filter-bubbles (Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, 2011) and groups them in echo-chambers (Kelly Garrett, "Echo Chambers Online? Politically Motivated Selective Exposure among Internet News Users," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(2), 2009).

3) As a result, the book's analytical scale excludes some critical territories from its map. The (de)formative information, it is claimed (see, e.g., p. 137ff), always travels from the political elites, the creative producers, to the "citizenry", the created believers, through simple processes of mediation. Consequently, the analysis presents social transmission as a linear process using the "pebble in the pond" metaphor (p. 28ff) to depict how rumors ripple from the core to the periphery "as a series of circles of dwindling strength" (p. 28). The fundamental problem with this theory lies in the fact that a "pebble in the pond" cannot explain information cascades (see Duncan J. Watts, "A Simple Model of Global Cascades on Random Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 99(9), 2002).

What changed? Misinformation was never disseminated in a vacuum, but the media ecosystem went through profound transformations. Social Media Platforms (SMPs) acquired centrality and have become a main source of information for both producers and consumers. In this context, "rumors" do not matter as much as rumor mills. The medium matters. We must account for the dynamics of disinformation diffusion that take place in sociotechnical networks, such as SMPs. More specifically, we should look at social influence as processes of complex contagion (see Damon Centola and Michael Macy, "Complex Contagions and the Weakness of Long

Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(3), 2007). Beliefs do not trickle down from the elites to the populace but through a complex mix of organic and algorithmic reinforcement (Florian Saurwein and Charlotte Spencer-Smith, "Automated Trouble: The Role of Algorithmic Selection in Harms on Social Media Platforms," *Media and Communication*, 9(4), 2021). When these beliefs happen to be deliberately disseminated misinformation that percolates through large social networks, we have moved past the pond and are now facing a disinformation deluge. How do we contain it?

Here is a radical proposal, partially seconded in the book's post scriptum (see pp. 158-60): rather than trying to move the people away from misinformation, we should strive to move misinformation away from the people: "Free speech is not the same as free reach" (Renee DiResta, "Free Speech Is Not the Same As Free Reach," *Wired*, 2018). The best way of stopping "playing Whac-A-Mole, batting down rumors as they pop up on the political landscape" (p. 18) is to concentrate our attention and resources not on single rumors and individual contagion but on the networked contexts of mis/disinformation diffusion.