

From Epistemic to Identity Crisis: Perspectives on the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 472 pp. \$99.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780190923624

Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 336 pp. \$24.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780190915810

John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 352 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780691174198

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Academics across the globe have actively sought to explain the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Donald Trump's unlikely rise through the Republican primaries and victory over Hillary Clinton in the general election surprised many scholars, forcing them to reexamine their understandings of political communication, the role of the press in democracy, the reliability of polling, and the nature of the American public. While every U.S. presidential election is an event to be pored over and ultimately explained, the 2016 election is unique because the outcome was so surprising to many academics and Trump's rise coincided with the global growth of social media platforms, state disinformation campaigns, economic inequality, and populist movements.

Three recent books by eminent scholars explore the contours of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Cyberwar* takes up the question of Russian interference in the election. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts's *Network Propaganda* offers a sweeping view of the dynamics of the networked public sphere in the United States. While these books analyze the structure and content of political communication in the public sphere, John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck's *Identity Crisis* details how elite communication intersects with an American public

beset by sharp divisions in race, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation. Taken together, all three make contributions to a body of political communication and political science literature.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson's task in *Cyberwar* is to analyze and document how "Russian hacking and social media messaging altered the content of the electoral dialogue and contributed to Donald Trump's victory" (p. 3). The central concern for Jamieson is whether Russian interference was decisive enough to *likely* have swung the election for Trump in the absence of absolute proof. It is ultimately a narrow question, although undoubtedly an important one. *Cyberwar* is not interested in analyzing the vast majority of partisan Republicans who seemingly happily pulled the lever for Trump; the concern is with those citizens who were swayed from their true interests to vote Trump or stay home. In focusing on these people, Jamieson argues that five actors are essential to safeguarding U.S. elections from foreign interference and securing more normative democratic procedures and outcomes: "The press. The platforms. The citizenry. Past and prospective candidates. And the polarizers who have created a climate conducive to distrust and discord" (p. 216).

Jamieson brings communication theory and different forms of evidence to the table in arguing for the likely ways that Russian hackers and trolls decisively influenced the election. *Cyberwar* is most convincing when detailing the potential influence of hackers on setting the agenda of the national press and its subsequent effects on the public. In all the hagiographies of the press produced in the United States during the 2016 cycle and its aftermath, undoubtedly with an eye to shoring up its legitimacy, there has been little systematic research or sustained public attention paid to the ways the press was all-to-willing to fall victim to illegal hacking and foreign influence campaigns. Jamieson clearly shows how journalistic practices and norms made the press such as easy target for foreign actors seeking to influence the election. Ultimately, Jamieson is convincing that the incessant reporting on the hacked Democratic National Committee emails and drawn out media narrative about Hillary Clinton's email server worked to lead voters to question the candidate's integrity and veracity, and that this had a significant effect on the election. Especially, as Jamieson notes, given that communication scholars have long found the strongest likelihood of mass media effects on those who lack strong party attachments, are undecided, or truly independent—those most likely to break late for Trump or simply stay home.

Cyberwar less clearly conceptualizes the effects of Russian trolling on the election—those attempts to shape social media discourse around the election through messaging aligned with Trump, the production of content to mobilize and demobilize key segments of the electorate, and targeted content purchased through digital advertising. In focusing on trolls, Jamieson says very little systematically about the messaging, content, and digital ads produced by the candidates, campaigns, parties, ideological media, and thousands of other legitimate political actors, such as the National Rifle Association of America (NRA) or evangelical and right-to-life groups. Jamieson acknowledges that it is impossible to separate out the effects of troll messaging that was consonant with the Trump campaign and its allies, but the reader is still left wondering about the comparative impact of Russian trolls on the election against the more

than a billion dollars spent by the two campaigns and their allies themselves and the far greater communicative resources they brought to bear to influence the professional press, mobilize and demobilize electorates, and tilt the discourse of the public sphere in their favor.

In the end, in locating the source of the messages of consequence outside the body politic, *Cyberwar* creates a narrative that the public went astray through no fault of its own. It was the Russians and their inadvertent enablers in the press and among elites that brought the election to an antidemocratic outcome. In contrast, Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts's *Network Propaganda* is oriented toward a home-grown source of misinformation, radicalization, and social division: the right-wing media ecosystem. As *Network Propaganda* argues, "Fake news entrepreneurs, Russians, the Facebook algorithm, and online echo chambers provide normatively unproblematic, nonpartisan explanations to the current epistemic crisis" (p. 11, emphasis added). The arguments in *Network Propaganda* are predicated on an analysis of data from the Media Cloud platform that includes approximately four million political stories from more than 40,000 news sources and how they were linked, tweeted, and shared over a three-year period. The book is important in empirically detailing how a network of right-wing "extreme" (p. 14) sites such as *Breitbart* worked to produce content that radicalized the Republican Party in the electorate. And this content was accredited and amplified by Fox News. *Network Propaganda* has a strong relational view of the dynamics of the networked public sphere, and the authors do not shy from laying responsibility for the "crisis of disinformation and misinformation" (p. 15) on the right-wing media ecosystem, not the Russians or Facebook.

The authors identify clear differences between the left and right media ecosystems. While the left has similar patterns of supply and demand of false partisan narratives, the ideological left-oriented media ecosystem also includes sites from the center (both traditional journalistic outlets and Internet native ones) in addition to ideological media that adhere to journalistic norms. These sites check the veracity of information and limit its dissemination and, ultimately, exposure to less ideologically motivated voters. In contrast, on the right the ecosystem is both more isolated from the center and there are few journalistic breaks on falsity. *Network Propaganda* reveals the existence of a "propaganda feedback loop" where conservative media outlets work to undermine trust in other sources of information, audiences are insulated from information that cuts against their political identities and predilections, and right voices are amplified and provide a steady stream of cues as to what to believe. These dynamics make individuals on the ideological right more vulnerable to mis- and dis-information.

Importantly, *Network Propaganda* puts all this in the perspective of a forty-year history of conservative media infrastructure, revealing that right-wing media did not originate with the Internet, nor was the Internet the most important factor in the 2016 election. While much scholarly attention during and after the presidential election focused on Facebook, *Network Propaganda* makes the convincing case that Fox News was the far more important driver of contemporary right radicalization and the dynamics on display in 2016. In sum, *Network Propaganda* shows how the right has developed ecosystems over the past forty years that "reinforce partisan statements,

irrespective of their truth, and to punish actors—be they media outlets or politicians and pundits—who insist on speaking truths that are inconsistent with partisan frames and narratives dominant within the ecosystem” (p. 75). While this looked different in different eras, the authors chart this evolution over time, showing how over the course of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a series of technological, institutional, and political changes removed each of the structural barriers that had contained the first generation of right-wing media and created the conditions for the emergence and dramatic success of the second generation right-wing media system that undergirds today’s asymmetric architecture, anchored by Fox News and talk radio. (p. 319)

Network Propaganda offers a sweeping historical look at these dynamics, and it is refreshing in its engagement with political, media, economic, and technological history to put the 2016 U.S. presidential election in deeper context. The book lacks, however, a detailed empirical consideration of the nature of the U.S. public. While it considers a range of contemporary research and theory on social identity and polarization, at the end of the day it is primarily a supply, or production, side empirical account of the contemporary public sphere that offers little discussion of citizens and the history of U.S. racial politics and party realignment.

Where Benkler, Feris, and Roberts posit an “epistemic crisis,” political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck instead see an “identity crisis.” As Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck show clearly and forcefully, many white Americans responded favorably to Trump’s explicit racial appeals. Others were responding to his party label. This has much more to do with identity than the quality or veracity of information in the public sphere. Russian trolls might have amplified these things, but whites embracing their group identity as whites, anxious about the changing demographics of American society, or racially prejudiced did not need Russians to come home to Trump. The president told a simple story about the election regardless of how it was disseminated: whites are under threat in America. In contrast to accounts of the election that focus on epistemology, Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck show convincingly how Trump helped racialize the election—the candidate “activated” “ethnic identities and attitudes, thereby making them more strongly related to what ordinary Americans thought and how they voted” (p. 7). What is important is that white attitudes toward members of other racial groups did not change appreciably before the 2016 election. Trump made these attitudes actionable in explicitly appealing to Americans with reservations about immigration, racial grievances, and negative attitudes toward people of color, as well as those who saw economics through the lens of whites losing ground to other demographic groups.

In this argument, *Identity Crisis* joins a spate of excellent recent books with identity at their core, such as Lilliana Mason’s (2018) *Uncivil Agreement* that shows how partisanship is increasingly mapped onto other forms of social division such as race and ethnicity, religion, and geography and Ashley Jardina’s (2019) work on the contemporary rise of white identity politics and racial solidarity. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck argue that identity mattered in 2016 in a few central ways. First, the election unfolded against the backdrop of a changing America in terms of its demographics and the alignment of parties and group identities. Second, identity mattered because Trump

placed race at the center of his campaign while Clinton opposed him on the grounds of different identities, namely gender and people of color and youth. Third, the identity of the Republican Party was fractured, which led to a crowded field and elites that failed to coalesce around an institutional candidate, opening the space for Trump to appeal to whites that saw their group losing ground to people of color. Indeed, a core point in *Identity Crisis* is not that whites changed fundamentally in terms of their racial attitudes, but that they had a clear *choice* to vote for a candidate who held their views on immigration, blacks, and Muslims. As Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck argue, Trump “capitalized on an existing reservoir of discontent about a changing American society and culture” (p. 71).

Finally, the authors posit that American identity is in crisis. As Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck conclude, “The election was also symptomatic of a broader American identity crisis. Issues like immigration, racial discrimination, and the integration of Muslims boil down to competing visions of American identity and inclusiveness” (p. 10). This is not an informational problem, or an issue of epistemology. Often lost in the fallout of the 2016 election and in debates about mis- and dis-information, fake news, and propaganda is the basic fact that American identity has *always* been in crisis, and a dominant thread in the nation’s history is how far whites will extend the rights and privileges of citizenship beyond their social group. As scholars such as Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal (2017), Danielle Allen (2006), Rogers Smith (1999), and Jill Lepore (2018) have documented, the history of the United States is animated with whites’ power to determine who a citizen is and should be, even as political, social, economic, and cultural advantages flowed to their group. What makes this moment different, Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck argue, is that while Americans’ views toward racial, ethnic, and religious difference are growing more inclusive overall, this is mostly accounted for by Democrats. In other words, racial attitudes are now mapped onto partisan divides, and that provides incentives for Democrats to mobilize a multi-ethnic coalition and Republicans to appeal to whites.

In the end, based on their differing analyses of the problems with American democracy, these three books provide us with very different normative prescriptions. *Cyberwar* seeks to strengthen our defenses against Russian tactics by having the press adopt new practices toward propaganda and platform companies strengthen their regulation of content and provide greater transparency and disclosure. Citizens, meanwhile, should become more information literate, in part, through schools and platforms, and candidates should pledge not to seek advantage in foreign meddling. Meanwhile, elites and the public should seek to mitigate the polarization which trolls exploit. In keeping with the diagnosis of epistemic crisis, *Network Propaganda* outlines the need to reconstruct center-right media to uphold journalistic values and safeguard veracity and for professional journalists to become more savvy at understanding the dynamics of the new public sphere and eschew false equivalence and neutrality in favor of “accountable verifiability” (p. 357) that is transparent about journalistic practices and sources. It also calls for things such as increased transparency and disclosure around political ads, expanded access to platform data for researchers, greater self- and potentially public-regulation of platforms, and improved media literacy.

Identity Crisis ends on a more pessimistic note. The authors note that “public opinion” “contains reservoirs of sentiment that can serve both to unify and divide” (p. 220). As such, given a fragmented and pluralistic public, with fundamental debates not over epistemology but civic incorporation, what often matters is what candidates and political elites do. That ultimately provides few clear or easy ways forward. It also makes clear the futility of wishing that a better informed and more deliberative public will resolve the question of American identity.

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