

**Amina Vatreš**

Teaching Assistant and PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, Department for Communication Studies and Journalism

**Drowning the Truth in the Sea of Lies: Unveiling the Infodemic and Modern Censorship in the Post-truth Era**

Joel Simon and Robert Mahoney, *The Infodemic: How Censorship and Lies Made the World Sicker and Less Free* (e-book: Columbia Global Reports, New York, 2022, 192 pages)

The work entitled “The Infodemic: How Censorship and Lies Made the World Sick and Less Free”, authored by journalists and press freedom advocates, Joel Simon and Robert Mahoney, presents a profound and insightful inquiry of some of the crucial aspects that resonate with the contemporary information landscape. Divided into seven main chapters, this scholarly work critically examines several topics, including the phenomenon of *infodemic*, the multiangled dimensions of *censorship*, and the dynamic intersection of *technology and surveillance* intertwined with the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being published in the period characterized by hyperproduction of literature addressing the pandemic and the fact that the narrative surrounding COVID-19 may seem a bit outdated from the current standpoint, the overall contribution of this publication is still fashionable. Among others, its relevance can be seen in introducing a phenomenon the authors identify as *censorship through noise*. This conceptual framework, with the capacity for a broader and universally relevant interpretation, especially when considering enduring global conflicts like the Ukraine-Russia war or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, positions the book as a noteworthy and indispensable academic contribution in the field of Communication studies.

While illuminating the issues with privacy and ethical dilemmas associated with the collection of personal data in the name of public health, the book also emphasizes the paradoxical relationship between movement restrictions and the increased reliance on technology. This wide-ranging analysis demonstrates how states utilize digital tools to control information and obstruct the free flow of information, challenging modern information governance.

It is particularly significant to emphasize that the term *infodemic*, as defined in the book, primarily pertains not to the abundance of information in the public discourse but rather signifies an inundation of a unique combination of both accurate and entirely false information in the digital age. The key importance and contribution of this book to the academic debate manifest itself in questioning how this phenomenon has led not only to the exacerbation of public health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to the reduction and endangerment of societal freedoms and the eroding of public trust. Furthermore, within a broader societal context, this work contemplates the implications of various modes of information governance and censorship, elucidating their long-term consequences and the transformation of the media ecosystem.

The publication adeptly employs a systematic approach to scrutinize the pervasive effects of censorship, misinformation, and propaganda across a spectrum of global contexts, avoiding the confinement of discourse to specific geographic areas or ideological paradigms. This unbiased reflection lends itself to a broader understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in the contemporary information landscape. The authors also engage in a comprehensive examination of the conduct of governmental entities, media institutions, and technology conglomerates, thereby offering thus a holistic, comprehensive and well-rounded perspective on the multifaceted dimensions of the infodemic.

The explication of complex concepts presented in the book is accomplished through the meticulous synthesis of vivid real-world samples, supported by the analysis and interpretation of statistical data and case studies across various countries while referring to relevant both academic and journalistic inquiry. Such a methodology significantly serves to unmask the intricate nexus between the phenomena of information overload, censorship, and, ultimately, often entirely latent - *state surveillance*, while involving a thorough assessment of the mechanisms by which disinformation is spread and perpetuated.



The introductory chapter starts focusing on the exploration of the Chinese media and information ecosystem, an environment predominantly marked by a mechanism of suppression and an extensive regime of stringent censorship. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors observe a notable redirection of the primary emphasis towards the censorship of virus-related information, rather than a concerted response to combat the virus itself. A similar consistent pattern emerges in the second chapter entitled *The Authoritarian Playground*, where the authors investigate authoritarian regimes marked by intricate security and religious structures. Through the analysis of case studies encompassing Russia, Egypt, Iran, and Nicaragua, these regimes are found to utilize the management of information dissemination as a central instrument within their governance strategies leading to a distorted perception of reality. As the authors stated, „[t]he game plan was remarkably similar: suppress, marginalize, minimize, undermine, deny, and confuse“ (Introduction section, para. 4).

Within the framework of the third chapter, the discussion revolves around *Democratic Populism* and the disparities between authoritarian and democratic social systems concerning information control: „In many autocratic countries, as outlined, governments used repressive measures to suppress critical information about the spread of COVID-19 and to cover up their own incompetence. (...) In populist-led democracies - notably Brazil, the US, and India, which are the focus of this chapter - leaders relied on new forms of censorship to achieve a similar result. Since jailing critics and blocking websites were generally off the table, their strategy was to attack and undermine independent sources of information, unleash harassing trolls on their critics, and spew out misinformation to confuse the public“ (Democratic Populism section, para. 3). In this regard, the authors introduce a novel and pertinent concept referred to as *censorship through noise*. This concept could be closely intertwined with another phenomenon known as *information overload*, which serves as one of the hallmarks of contemporary democracies aimed at controlling the information landscape. Hence, the idea of censorship through noise entails an overwhelming influx of information, misinformation, and conspiracy theories, exacerbated by logical inconsistency, entropy, and an *information clash* of contradictory and mutually exclusive data, thus obfuscating the distinction between factual-based reporting and utter fabrication by *drowning the truth in the sea of lies* (Introduction section, para. 2).

Speaking in the context the examination of how governments exert their authority to manipulate and control the flow of information, a critical focus emerges on the consolidation of state power and its corrosive impact on the information and media environment. Additionally, the corrosive influence of governments over information can extend to the digital domain, where the manipulation of online spaces, social media platforms, and surveillance technologies can further impede the free flow of information.

The central thesis proposed by the authors is primarily concerned with presenting the embodiment of a contemporary form of censorship that essentially achieves identical final objectives as traditional censorship but through different means. This scholarly pursuit involved a meticulous assessment of the emerging mechanisms employed to manipulate information, shedding light on their inherent interrelation with state power. Emphasizing the critical significance of this introduced form of censorship is imperative, as it poses a more insidious threat compared to its conventional understanding. Captured in an *information storm*, recipients often remain unaware that, instead of overtly limiting access to information, they are inundated with its abundance which consequently impairs their ability to discern falsehoods from truths. The authors note such a phenomenon precisely in the context of the global lockdown: „Throughout the pandemic, many people felt as if they were drowning in information. In fact, they were being censored“ (The Meaning of Freedom section, para. 34).

*Censorship through noise* henceforth can be implicitly associated with the concept of state surveillance, particularly in the light of emerging digital technologies which played a crucial role in responding to the pandemic. Expanding on the underlying premise, the thorough analysis of the privacy and data security concerns is being conducted in the chapter on *State Surveillance*, raising questions about ethical boundaries of monitoring and collecting personal information in the name of public health. As the authors pointed out, movement restrictions during the pandemic, paradoxically, forced people even further into the embrace of technology. When considering the foundational principles governing applications like *Trace Together* in Singapore or *The Tool* in Israel, which involve gathering location data and cross-referencing it with confirmed COVID cases, a key emphasis is placed on the materialization of *digital authoritarianism* and the utilization of *pandemic biopower*.

The authors assert the viewpoint that the pandemic has resulted in what can arguably be characterized as the most extensive relinquishment of individual data in human history. „This data is harvested and used by autocracies like China, by partially free countries like Singapore, and by full democracies such as Israel and Norway“ (State Surveillance section, para. 8). The authors' analysis centres on evaluating how various nations have responded to the pandemic and measuring public perceptions and feedback. They employ a conceptual differentiation between positive and negative freedom, specifically, *freedom to act* and *freedom from* constraints. The overarching inference drawn by the authors accentuates a distinct emphasis on prioritizing the notion of negative freedom, focusing on the removal and problematization of constraints such as mask mandates, lockdowns, and restrictions. This emphasis takes precedence over the aspect of positive freedom, which involves the *freedom to engage* in public discourse, participate in political processes, and hold political leaders and governments accountable for their decisions and strategies in the context of pandemic management.

Within the sixth chapter *Trust me*, the debate is based on the impact of group membership, or community identity, which results in diametrically opposed perceptions within a polarized public, contingent upon the sources they place their trust in. Taking this into consideration, a higher significance is attributed to community-related information compared to scientifically grounded data from authoritative sources, a trend closely associated with the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The authors contend that this phenomenon is notably pronounced when examining the distinctions between the pandemic perspectives of Republicans and Democrats in the US, underscoring the direct impact of political or ideological affiliations on the selection of information sources, consequently shaping individual behaviours and orientations.

In the realm of public trust and information dissemination, recent research has consistently indicated that local journalists and local news outlets stand out as the most trusted sources of information among a global audience. The following chapter, entitled *The Local Angle*, expounds the deliberate pandemic-related decline of local news sources, which is observed as a recurring and systematic pattern adopted by governments worldwide. This chapter places a particular emphasis on the pivotal role played by local journalists in maintaining the flow

of credible information. Furthermore, it conducts a comprehensive case study of *Zeta*, an esteemed news outlet in Mexico, illustrating how local journalism serves as a critical bastion against *information vacuums* and how it responds to concerted attacks from state officials aimed at suppressing alternative voices. This in-depth analysis sheds light on the crucial role of local journalism as watchdog in upholding not only the veracity of information but also the plurality of voices in the face of governmental attempts to stifle dissent and manipulate the prevailing narrative. Moreover, the authors propose an intriguing thesis highlighting the potential redirection of algorithmic classification. The proposed shift would diverge from a sole reliance on content personalization based on recipients' previous interactions. Instead, it would be rooted in a principle of curating and providing high-quality content that is pertinent to the recipient's geographical location. This novel approach to algorithmic classification seeks to prioritize content selection based on the recipient's local context and relevant societal concerns, thereby broadening the scope of information dissemination strategies in the digital era.

While the book refrains from offering explicit strategies to tackle the intricate challenges inherent to the contemporary new media information and communication landscape, its analysis, underpinned by tangible illustrations, opens new horizons towards an enhanced comprehension and interpretation of latent manifestations of modern censorship frequently imperceptible in the wider public discourse. Fortified by concrete examples and real-world cases, this analytical journey, in turn, establishes a solid empirical basis for further scientific research on ongoing challenges concerning the circulation of information, mechanisms of control, and difficulties that arise from the frequent suppression of human rights.

*Drowning the Truth in a Sea of Lies* transcends conventional notions of explicit censorship. It captivates recipients with the illusion of boundless access and information saturation, blurring the distinctive line between fact and fiction, leaving them adrift in a turbulent sea of deceit.

