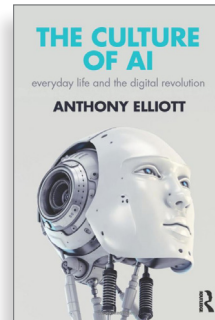# Book Reviews

Editor: Maarit Jaakkola

Anthony Elliot
*The Culture of AI: Everyday Life and the
Digital Revolution*
London: Routledge, 2019, 268 pp.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is coming and we better be prepared.

The subtitle of Anthony Elliot's *The Culture of AI: Everyday Life and the Digital Revolution*, recalls Henry Lefebvre's (1947/2000) *Critique of Everyday Life*, a text which had a subversive impact among critical theorists of the time by bringing to the fore aspects of French society neglected in orthodox Marxism. The similarity, however, is misleading, since Elliot discusses the present as a mere preparation for a future, instead of presenting the future itself as a stake among social forces seeking to control of our daily lives through the digital "revolution".

The main argument of the book is that, as a transformation of unprecedented scale and intensity is about to occur, we must be ready to rethink much of our daily lives, starting by acknowledging that, as the books concludes, "we might have, as it were, simply run out of styles of thinking or frameworks for understanding the impact of such changes" (p. 200).

This argument is a tricky one because it connects the problem of knowledge (how to know) and the problem of power (what to do) in a problematic way. The essence of the question is nicely expressed by the character Tancredi in *The Leopard* when he says, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (di Lampedusa, 1958/1960: 31) (A more literal translation of the Italian text would go as follows: "If we want that everything stays the same, everything has to change"). The main merit and limitation of this book consists of the way its author addresses this problem. The book comprises an introduction and six chapters.

In the introduction, Elliot defines AI:

[The term AI is] encompassing any computational system that *can sense* its relevant context and *react intelligently* to data […] when certain degrees of *self-learning*, *self-awareness* and *sentience* are realized [… and] referring to any computational system which *can sense its environment, think, learn and react in response* (and cope with surprises) to such data-sensing [emphasis original]. (p. 4)

The obvious problem with this definition is that it takes the metaphoric transfer of intel-

ligence from human intelligence to artificial "intelligence" at face value. In other words, we are left wondering what self-awareness – "to sense" or "react intelligently" to data – actually means when applied to non-organic systems. Because the difference between human and artificial intelligence remains unclear, the relative value and limitations of each remain indistinct, leaving no conceptual escape from the "technological tsunami sweeping the globe" (p. 16). The rest of the book describe some features of this tsunami.

In the first chapter, "The digital universe", Elliot summarises the main points of his analysis, arguing that in this "universe", social forms of daily life and "complex digital systems" are interdependent when it comes to issues of "transformation" (p. 26). Elliot grounds his analysis in three traditions: the social theory of Nigel Thrift (p. 43); the study of advanced modernisation and the self (p. 45) in Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck; and what Elliot calls the "critical discourse […] pertaining to reinvention, innovation and experimentation". According to Elliot, the latter "calls our attention to an emerging branch of social ideologies of self-fashioning, in which instantaneity, plurality, plasticity, speed and short-termism grip the imaginations of women and men throughout the digitalized cities of the West who are riding the next wave of innovation" (p. 49). For Elliot, these three traditions, "provide a framework within which it is possible to begin to think critically about the emergence and spread of a *culture of artificial intelligence* [emphasis original]" (p. 51):

> By this I mean the general social process by which everyday life and modern institutions become increasingly influenced and shaped by the digitalized and technical apparatuses of AI. (p. 51)

The second chapter, "The rise of robotics", is about the social, economic and political effects of automated work in the global economy, interpreted through Marx's theory of technology, the arguments of "sceptics" and "transformationalists" about the "fourth industrial revolution", the influence of globalisation, and offshoring of automation and the resulting disruptions.

In the third chapter, "Digital life and the self", Elliot discusses the impact of new technologies on the production of the self "and the daily lives of individuals", arguing that, rather than producing "an enforced solitude", "new technology creates both new opportunities and new burdens for the self." (p. 19.) Adopting a psychoanalytical approach, Elliot argues the case for considering the self as an "information processing system" and "construct[ing] our lives as portable selves, moving across society (online and offline) as if the self is an information processor" (p. 84). The grounds for this suggestion is that, "in this age of smart machines, the key psychoanalytic question is not so much how do we connect but what does it mean for the self when we connect" (p. 84). Elliot dismisses Sherry Turkle's concerns about the new solitude and alienation of the digital age, arguing that digital objects such as social media and "robotic pets" contribute to a "transitional space", offering people opportunities for "engagement with the wider world rather than a defensive reduction of it" (p. 94). For Elliot, the inability to take advantage of these opportunities should not be blamed on new technologies, but on an individual's life conditions, such as "debilitating emotional imprints from their past or because of the impairment or corrosion of their capacity for processing unthought emotion" (p. 102).

In the fourth chapter, "Digital technologies and social interaction", attention shifts from the individual to the collective impact of new technologies, and Elliot applies Goffman's "action framework" to the analysis of the institutional organisation of social interaction, the role of chatbots, the impact of copresence, mobility, desynchronisation, and individualisation on social relationship and Michael Harri's "eclipse of silence".

The fifth chapter, "Modern societies, mobility and artificial intelligence", discusses the impact of automation on mobility, as this no-

tion applies to its civilian and military dimensions, such as the "Google car" and "drones and killer robots".

In the final chapter, "AI and social futures", Elliot addresses the future of intimacy, healthcare, and democracy in order to argue for the necessity of public policy to develop adequate strategies to handle the complex matrix of risks and opportunities associated with transformations in these domains. As intimacy is not limited to "interpersonal relationships", but includes also "impersonal objects" and "the cultivation of our connection to technology itself" (p. 162), in healthcare the pace of transformation opens up questions only partially addressed by the debate between "technologists" versus "traditionalists", and democracy is facing "benefits and burdens" that "question liberal, individualist conceptions of democracy" (p. 184). For Elliot, public policy can address these challenges through three main strategies based on the "digital tooling up of an active and engaged citizenry" (p. 195), the role of government, and the role of the markets. The viability of market solutions, however, requires "systemic corrections" or "structural change" towards "greater transparency and accountability" of the companies involved (p. 197), to avoid the risk that "the transformative potential of complex algorithm" would "reproduce and amplify the biases and other human failings to which some critics argue it is ostensibly resistant" (p. 199).

The culture of AI is a useful book for at least two groups of people: those who are not aware of the transformative potential of AI and related technologies, and those inclined to believe the many promises associated with the corporate marketing of this new "revolution". Elliot's analysis should open the eyes of these people to the complexities, the uncertainties, and ultimately the serious risks associated with the uncritical embrace of these technologies.

For an audience more experienced with a critical intake of the social glitches of technological development, however, Elliot's analysis contains at least a few limitations. The first, as mentioned earlier, is Elliot's definition of AI and the blurring of the difference between human and artificial, life and digital life, and so on.

The second limitation consists of the narrative representation of technological development as an independent variable. Maybe it was a choice to focus on and discuss social implications. But this choice becomes problematic when we discuss the nature of this development – the forces and ideolgies supporting it, the practices legitimising it, and so forth – because the nature of this develepment itself is put outside the range of critical scrutiny. Resistance is futile and compliant adaptation is the only choice. Elliot accurately describes the extension and intensity of the transformative power of new technologies but neglects to identify the sources of this power: the social forces, the ideological myths, and ultimately the nature of the interests that feed the seemingly irresistible penetration of new technologies in our lives.

These two limitations have at least three implications on the discussion about the "culture of AI". First, this seems a "culture" in which AI is an independent variable of the equation that generates social change. In discursive terms, this brings about the naturalisation of technological development, that is, the interpretation of technological development as a natural phenomenon – a tsunami – that we can deal with only as far as the effects, but not the causes, are concerned.

Second, social conflict and the role of social structure in shaping technological development – a core tenet in the critical theory of technology – are neglected. The "culture of AI" results from technological development construed as a process independent from social forces and impacts a notion of society purged of social conflict. In a critical perspective, this conflict – and not technology per se – is the real engine of social change.

Third, the concept of "revolution" is construed to describe a radical change of established ways of life, conventions, institutions, and even ways of knowing, but not a radical subversion of relations of power. This is

important because this kind of technological "revolution" ends up not challenging, but strengthening, existing relations of power.

Elliot's book is useful reading, however, because it reflects an approach or a culture of AI that is influential among corporate and political elites. Students with critical ambitions should familiarise themselves with it if they want to defend the idea (and its implications!) that technological development and other processes apparently "irresistible" – such as globalisation – are not independent from, but dependent on, social structures, relations of power, and ultimately the competition for control over the distribution of values in society.

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Johan Farkas & Jannick Schou
Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood
New York: Routledge, 2020, 178 pp.
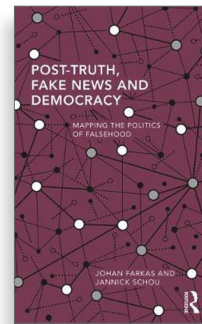
Post-truth, fake news, alternative facts. Terms like these have circulated in public debates, particularly in the last five years, raising concerns about the state of the digital public sphere in many countries. Fundamental epistemological questions such as what is a fact and how can we know if something is true have been given renewed attention. For everyone who has taken an introduction to philosophy of science course when entering the university, these questions are (oddly) familiar.

The book *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*, by John Farkas and Jannick Schou, raises these and a host of other, similar questions: Why are contemporary democratic states and societies said to be facing an immense political crisis? How has the seemingly unstoppable barrage of fake news and alternative facts, flooding the gates of democracy and inaugurating an era of post-truth politics, been conceptualised, throughout and linked to wider political issues? What are the dominant normative ideas that continue to inform our current ways of thinking and acting upon questions of truth, democracy, and politics? In short, the book is examining the current discourses on truth.

Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy is arriving on a wave of books about this topic (one committed by the writer of this review), and Farkas and Schou acknowledge and recognise the abundance of books, articles, and reports trying to decipher the social, political, and economical implications of digital falsehood. The authors also give a nod to "the Sisyphean task of following the shifting boundaries of a continuously moving field" (p. x), and I could not agree more. Since the manuscript was sent to the publisher, several of the trends in the book have developed and evolved. First, the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of disinformation during the global health crisis has impacted the language used to describe disinformation, such as the tendency to describe the abundance of fake news and disinformation as an "infodemic" –

a virus attack that should be wiped out with a "vaccine" to protect us from falsehood. Second, the term information pollution is also used to describe the same phenomena, and just as the world is going through a global environmental crisis, information needs to be "cleaned up" in order to improve the state of the public sphere. Lastly, like in most other books about post-truth and fake news, it is impossible not to mention Donald Trump, the candidate and later president who put the term fake news on the international news agenda and turned it into a strategic weapon against the news media. Politicians' role in spreading disinformation – and particularly President Donald Trump's as a super spreader of disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic – has become even more firmly documented by researchers and journalists (Brennen et al., 2020). This development has culminated with Donald Trump's refusal to acknowledge his campaign's electoral defeat. In short, the attention towards the problems of post-truth, fake news, and disinformation has only increased after the authors finished their manuscript.

Nevertheless, Farkas and Schou have succeeded in positioning the book in a more philosophical part of the current debate about digital truth and falsehood, which can ensure this conceptually interesting book a longer shelf life. By applying discourse theory – mainly inspired by Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Oliver Marchart from what has been called the Essex School of Discourse Analysis – the authors describe their approach as a post-foundational political thought. This approach is supposed to grasp "the political signification of meaning without relying on essentialist and universalistic assumptions about the constitution of society, humanity, nature or truth" (p. 15). From this position, the authors lay out a theoretical foundation to explain why some discourse and social constructs are more dominant than others. The dominance of specific discourse should be seen as an accomplishment established through ongoing processes of hegemony. Thus, social reality can be seen as a battleground between opposing attempts to impose and fixate particular discourse as dominant, self-evident, and natural. Farkas and Schou argue that this is not a defence of relativism – nothing is true and everything is possible. Rather, the book encourages us to juggle many thoughts simultaneously, instead of only dealing with typical dichotomies such as true/false. Yesterday's misinformation is not necessarily today's misinformation, as we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic when cumulative insights from research have expanded our knowledge of the virus.

This book can be read as a complicated balancing act which argues that truth, evidence-based policy, and informed decisions are conditions for democracy, but at the same time, not *sufficient* conditions for democracy. By choosing to address the term truth, the authors have given themselves a more complicated task than if they have chosen the term fact. Fact can come from the cumulative compilation of evidence from research, which in the long term can be turned into knowledge. But facts can also be falsified, disapproved, and rejected based on new evidences. What is true might change over time, in different contexts, and based on new evidences. Truth can be hard to define, but is often understood as something that is in accordance with fact or reality.

Still, Farkas and Schou argue that today's situation is less a crisis of truth, and more a crisis of democracy. It is maintained that contemporary democratic states need to create spaces for politics that allow for contestation, disagreement, and pluralism. Instead of glorifying past periods of proclaimed consensus, more should be done to increase representation and participation. The authors outline how rationality has replaced popular sovereignty, consensus has replaced conflict, and the needs of the capitalist market have replaced the will of the political people – all of which are all valuable and worthwhile concerns.

Nevertheless, even though it is necessary to problematise observations such as those presented by French President Emanuel Macron – who indirectly said that truth is democracy and democracy is truth – the book could be

clearer on how disinformation, fake news, and alternative facts impact democracy. "Defactualisation" can have dramatic consequences for democracy and is a term used by Hannah Arendt, but also by Natalia Roudakova, who has written the book *Losing Pravda: Ethics and The Press in Post-Truth Russia*. Roudakova uses defactualisation to refer to "the world where the disregard of factual truths leads to the suspension of reality" (2017: 217–224).

This affects not just the public sphere, but also the institutions tasked with producing public facts, such as journalism, governmental agencies, scientific organisations, and academic institutions. The undermining of the legitimacy of institutions can potentially undermine a shared reality among the public. In turn, this undermines the possibility for democratic accountability, especially through public opinion and the press. In short, information disorder can create democratic decay.

Even though the book is upfront about not aiming to address whether democracies are facing a deep-seated "crisis of facts", or how accurate current debates around truth, deception, and democracy are, it would have strengthened the book if it had this empirical perspective.

Nevertheless, Farkas and Schou have brought a barrage of intellectual ammunition to readers who are interested and concerned about the current state of truth in liberal democracies. The conceptual framework of *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy* will be valuable for readers looking for a more critical reading and understanding – maybe even a diagnosis – of what is called a post-truth world.

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Arjen van Dalen, Helle Svensson, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Erik Albæk, & Claes H. de Vreese
Economic News: Informing the Inattentive Audience
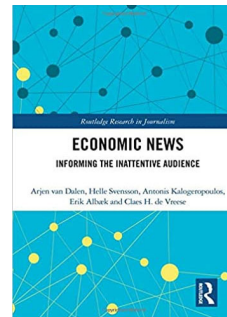**New York: Routledge, 2019, 214 pp.**

Economic News: Informing the Inattentive Audience is a highly interesting book that covers an underresearched area. Despite the fact that numerous analyses have already been made of the media coverage of the economy (for an excellent review, see Damstra et al., 2018), the audience – or the media users of economic news – does in general, however, receive far too little attention in research, as already observed by Parker (1997). Essentially, things haven't changed since 1997, but van

Dalen and his colleagues have made a brave attempt to close this gap by introducing and investigating the interesting phenomena of the inattentive audience to economic news – meaning neither the elite nor the opt-outs, but what in Danish is called 'the grey mass'.

The book consists of eleven chapters, most of which have already been published in leading journals on media and journalism. According to the authors, however, there is a need for tying together these articles into

a whole, in order to be "able to articulate the surprising finding of how mainstream media help the inattentive citizen in an economized world" (p. ix). By "economized world", the authors refer to the fact that economy has a larger say than ever before on society at large, hence increasing the need for following and understanding the general development of the economy in order to be a competent voter, employee, and consumer.

The main result in the book is that media helps inattentive media users to form a "correct" perception of the performance of the economy. This causality seems to be even stronger when the economy is doing fine than when it is doing less well. This is a surprising result, as the main result in previous research has been to demonstrate a "bad-new-bias" (Kollmeyer, 2014) in how the media cover the economy, suggesting that media considers bad news to be the best news stories.

Another interesting result is that what matters is not whether media actually helps users understand details of the general economic development or tricky concepts like structural unemployment or labour supply. Rather, it is more important to the inattentive audience that they get a general feeling of the general state of the economy they live in: is it going up or down? This result suggests – much to the surprise of this reader – that the media is doing a pretty good job at equipping weaker media users with adequate knowledge to navigate in an ever more complex society.

The authors suggest a couple of possible explanations for this surprising result. First of all, it does not require that much to sense the general state of the economy. Second, what the authors baptize the "mainstreaming" of economic news gives news consumers easier access than previously to create their own feeling of the state of the economy.

By "mainstreaming", the authors imply that economic news stories become part of the general news stream by using the normal criteria of news value (identification and domestication, according to the authors; p. 2). This leads us to a third and complementary explanation: the financial crisis has accelerated the mainstreaming of economic news stories because it has increased the general interest in the state of the economy – even for the inattentive audience. And the mainstreaming has increased the interest of the public in economic news.

However, according to the authors, another interesting result contradicts this overall positive message: The media also makes media users more aware of how uncertain the current and future economic development is and will be. It is also shown that a sense of uncertainty makes the expectations of media users to the performance of the economy take a negative turn. As we might expect the future economy to become ever more uncertain, we might also expect the media to report this and, hence, become a current drag on the economy.

One of the strengths of the book is that the authors, in the conclusion, make a pressure test ("tryktest" in Danish) of their results. They admit – and try to defend – why social media has been invisible throughout the book. They even raise the discussion of whether a correct picture of how the economy is performing even exists.

This last point also indicates a main weakness of the book: In essence, its ontology and epistemology are positivist, as it is essentially assumed that economists understand the economy, and as a consequence, it is also possible for media to present a "correct" picture of the state of the economy. And economists do not disagree or belong to different economic paradigms.

How we interpret the economy does, however, depend very much on the economic paradigm applied when the discussion comes to understanding the underlying reasons for the economic development, pinpointing problems or suggesting solutions to remedy these problems. Implicitly, the authors rely on the dominant New Keynesian economic paradigm without ever telling the readers about it. But the state of the economy is not just something factual – it has to be interpreted: which facts should be highlighted? Which should be ignored? What constitutes a major or a minor problem? When is something a possibility or a threat? Economics is not and will never become an objective science.

The other main weakness is that the reader is given the impression that, after having read the book, we now know something about the actual consumption of economic news. However, the evidence is at best flimsy. The empirical evidence of actual and individual consumption of economic news is, as in previous research, indicative. We know very little about which economic news stories are actually read, understood, and processed by individual news consumers. Hence, further research on a much more detailed and qualitative level is needed. One possible avenue of research is to use social media to gather data on the actual consumption of mainstream economic news by actual social media users of, for example, Twitter (Soroka et al., 2017) or Facebook (Madsen, 2018). Another possible avenue would be to observe individual consumption of economic news combined with qualitative in-depth interviews.

As it is now, research is too focused on content analysis of the media coverage of the economy and has an arm's length approach to the individual and actual consumption of economic news and the consequent and actual behaviour of individuals as voters, consumers, employees, and even employers. Nevertheless, by reading this book, one gets an excellent view of the state of art within this field and in addition, a lot of new empirical knowledge on the issues is presented to the reader.

Finally, due to my vanity and the fact that we as researchers all too often draw on the work of others in a very superficial and even misleading way, which hinders progress in our joint knowledge of different societal phenomena, let me as an example note that my own work (Madsen, 2018) is briefly mentioned in the conclusion (p. 157). According to van Dalen and colleagues, my paper apparently demonstrates that Facebook changes economic news. It would be more accurate to say that it describes and analyses which type of mainstream economics news Facebook users share, like, and comment upon. It is, furthmore, demonstrated that news about the business cycle does not attract much attention on Facebook. This result actually substantiates the notion of the inattentive audience.

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