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## Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare

Thomas Rid | Reviewed by Zac Rogers

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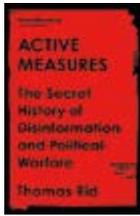
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# Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare

*Thomas Rid*

Profile Books, London, 2020.

Reviewed by Zac Rogers



Few subjects seem more central to our current condition than disinformation. Media of various types repeat familiar tropes – we are suffering a crisis of truth – the once purportedly distinct line between fact and fiction has been blurred indefinitely. Our capacity to navigate the information environment and discern truth from lie has been breached, and the very fabric of democracy is imperilled.

Thomas Rid's excellent *Active Measures* offers readers a trove of meticulously researched historical examples of modern disinformation operations – active interventions in the information environment intended to deceive, distort and disorient the

political community at which they are targeted.

*Active Measures*'s most important contribution, however, is in how it frames the subject. Rid has a warning about the history of disinformation for open democratic societies worth repeating here. He notes with curiosity that, aside from a handful of infamous examples, much of this rich history has been ignored. He warns that 'Ignoring the rich and disturbing lessons of industrial-scale Cold War disinformation campaigns risks repeating mid-century errors that are already weakening liberal democracy in the digital age.'<sup>1</sup>

Usefully, Rid structures his historical sweep by way of four waves. Modern disinformation began in the 1920s. The interwar years saw the first wave of disinformation emerging from the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, leveraging the popularity of journalism and radio as amplifying agents. New media and mediums, and their role in the subject at hand, is a central theme throughout the book. The second wave emerged after the Second World War – the CIA professionalised what it labelled 'political warfare' while the Eastern bloc before the Wall was rife with disinformation. (Notably, Rid considers this period the only time the West has been in the disinformation ascendancy.)

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Rid, *Active Measures*, Profile Books, London, 2020, pp 8–9.

The third wave rose in the late 1970s, which Rid describes as the time when ‘active measures’ were at their most active *and* most measured. Disinformation was refined into an operational art as the nascent digital revolution, driven by advances in solid-state electronics, brought computational power and with it the prospect of more raw fuel – information – to the fore. The fourth wave was defined by the rise of the internet and brings us to our present moment. Here we discover how quickly the assumptions of the Information Age have turned inward. Rid argues the Internet Era has put a question mark over the very concept of disinformation operations. Internet-era operations are increasingly active while becoming markedly less measured and measurable – a conundrum that opens the way to some of the book’s core insights. The art and science of disinformation are disintegrating just as it becomes more dangerous.

If we are falling into error as we contend with contemporary disinformation, what is the error? Rid flags a pervasive presentism – ‘The sense of novelty is a fallacy, a trap’ – as the chief obstacle preventing clearer understanding of the nature, threat and opportunities to counter disinformation. Rid reminds us of a crucial axiom. Disinformation – at least of the most effective kind – has never been merely a bunch of lies masquerading as facts, cleverly deceiving the

unwitting victim or victims. Rather, effective disinformation has always been a weaving of *fact and fiction together*, a way of making the two categories indiscernible from one another and deploying that amalgam against the already existing binaries and fissures every society accommodates. Here, Rid rightly identifies the ultimate target of active measures as an attack on the ‘epistemic order of liberal society,’ which is based on openness, convention and trust. An unutterable truth may follow. The internet, which Rid rightly identifies as a machine optimised for mass disinformation, may simply be incompatible with such an order.

Tropes about fake news and post-truth are therefore not merely descriptions of disinformation but are *themselves affectations*, obscuring a more nuanced and perhaps dissonant situation. Better fact-checkers and devoted truth-stewards will not stave off the effects of disinformation. This expresses another of the book’s most important insights: disinformation can be most effective when it self-perpetuates and takes on a life of its own. In other words, disinformation *about* disinformation may now be the ultimate active measure. Rid explains:

What made an active measure active was not whether a construction resonated with reality, but whether it resonated with emotions, with collectively held views in the targeted community, and whether it managed to exacerbate

existing tensions – or, in the jargon of Cold War operators, whether it succeeded to strengthen existing contradictions.<sup>2</sup>

The internet may be one such contradiction. True, the epistemological foundations of open democratic societies have themselves been destabilised for some time, a discussion Rid enters at the conclusion of the book that is arguably its most consequential. The source of instability in western societies is not chiefly the work of foreign agents, nor is it in the familiar can-carrier of post-modernity. It is not simply a product of post-structuralism or the social justice theory it elevates and propels – nor the sometimes spoiled and myopic woke-warriors who seem to carry it forward.

Paradoxically, the most destabilising forces undermining the episteme of open democratic society have come, rather, from its very successes. Postwar science, in particular the cognitive neurosciences, have delivered multiple blows against the epistemological foundations of the modern western settlement. Cognitive science shatters the Aristotelian mirage of the unitary and continuing Self – yet our social and political systems labour under full-scale assault from a heavily manipulated internet – a business model designed specifically to turn neuro-chemical addiction triggers against this Aristotelian ‘person’

– in order to predict, shape and nudge behaviour for commercial or political gain. The very concept of free will and its corollary – agency – has been scattered against the gale of an increasingly manipulation-based society. These are the true ‘existing contradictions’ the adversaries of open society have succeeded in targeting, and will continue to.

In short, the increasingly insecure cognitive environment – and our vulnerability to unsophisticated but high-volume disinformation – is a symptom of our cultural-political malaise, *before* it is the work of Machiavellian operatives lurking in cyberspace. The undercurrent of Rid’s history of disinformation suggests an uncomfortable truth. It has been the inability of open, rule-of-law, democratic societies to process and incorporate these existential blows emerging from the very forces modernity was so successful at propelling – science and technology – that has led to our current perilous condition. The status and function of truth and falsehood is just one of high modernity’s many casualties. Adversarial operations have simply ‘nudged’ open society towards a more acute awareness of its own contradictions. Disinformation about disinformation does the rest, closing the loop on unreality and thus closing off the means by which open societies mediate conflict and change.

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<sup>2</sup> Rid, *Active Measures*.

It does not take a scholar of Sun Tzu to recognise that our strengths have been deployed against us. Compounding the problem, the insights of postwar science have been directed against the citizen/consumer in open society, largely in the form of tools and methodologies developed in the private sector for ostensibly commercial objectives, absent any meaningful democratic oversight. Worse again, when the state agencies which govern open society feel compelled to engage in mass manipulation – to game the gamers, as it were – Rid’s warning about the protean nature of disinformation in the digital age resonates. Accidents and side effects abound on the back of hubris about the boundaries, both spatial and temporal, of unrestricted manipulation.

This risk is summed up in the book’s most evocative and important passage: *‘It is impossible to excel at disinformation and at democracy at the same time.’* Let that stand as a crystal-clear warning to Australia’s national security community. As Rid explains:

Disinformation operations, in essence, erode the very foundation of open societies – not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator. When vast, secretive bureaucracies engage in systematic deception, at large scale and over a long time, they will optimize their own

organisational culture for this purpose, and undermine the legitimacy of public administration at home... being at the receiving end of active measures will undermine democratic institutions – *giving in to the temptation to design and deploy them will have the same result.*<sup>3</sup>

*Active Measures* also leaves us with some much-needed clarity in terms of the techno-political trajectory open societies have taken to this point. The national security state in the US, while often seed-funding the tools and methods of dual-use manipulation, has lost control in terms of its capacity to bend those instruments towards the greater social good. As the 21st century dawned, libertarian crypto-anarchist subculture combined with myopic Silicon Valley utopianism to produce ideal conditions for the active measures of foreign adversaries, whose chief strategic aim was to thwart the generation of strategic value that the US expected to accrue from the its multi-decade investment in digital technologies. The fact that these communities were then, and remain today, the chief locus of tech innovation is a paradox the US polity is struggling to deal with effectively, as China’s authoritarian model of tech innovation gathers momentum and, among autocratic like-minds, admirers.

On the commercial abuse of the information environment by Big Tech, and

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<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added. Rid, *Active Measures* p 10.

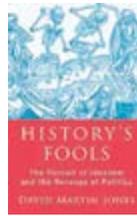
the relationship with the absence of political will to erect corporate guard rails as custodians of democracy, *Active Measures* is largely silent. This leaves an important question hanging if we are to begin the gigantic task of recovering the capacity to restore a semblance of coherence to our sociopolitical fabric in the digital age. Thankfully, other works fill this gap successfully, such as Zuboff's *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Sadowski's *Too Smart*, Foer's *World Without Mind*,<sup>4</sup> and a litany of others. Alongside *Active Measures*, these works make required reading for practitioners, elected officials, industry and citizens interested in arresting the slide of democratic society further into incoherence and, ultimately, into strategic peril.

## History's Fools: The Pursuit of Idealism and the Revenge of Politics

*David Martin Jones*

Hurst & Company, Oxford, 2020

Reviewed by Mark Beeson



Realists have never had it so good; or, perhaps that should be, so bad. However we describe the relationship between scholars of a realist bent and the times they inhabit, many of their central arguments and assumptions about the world look alarmingly persuasive, even prescient. By contrast, this is not a good time to be a cosmopolitan or an idealist. Indeed, it may never be so again. The world seems more troubled and disorderly than it has for decades, and this provides the backdrop for David Martin Jones's timely tome, *History's Fools*.

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4 See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Profile Books, London, 2019; Jathan Sadowski, *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA USA, 2020; Franklin Foer, *World Without Mind: Why Google, Amazon and Apple Threaten Our Future*, Vintage, 2018.