

BOOK REVIEW

Alberto Acerbi. Tecnopanico: Media digitali, tra ragionevoli cautele e paure ingiustificate [Technopanic: Digital media, between reasonable precautions and unjustified fears]. Il Mulino, 2025. pp. 192. ISBN 978-88-15-39147-6

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Should we succumb to *technopanic* or embrace *techno-optimism* in this so-called *post-truth* era? In his latest book, *Technopanic* (currently available only in Italian), Alberto Acerbi, Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Trento, suggests a cautious middle path. Drawing on his background at the interface of cultural evolution, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, Acerbi provides a timely and, one might argue, much-needed, empirically grounded reflection on the contemporary anxieties surrounding digital technologies. Although some examples refer to the Italian sociopolitical context, the book's arguments are highly transferable to broader international debates.

In general, the book strikes a rare balance between accessible introductions to topics and scholarly rigor, making it suitable for both general readers and academic audiences. As a researcher in the field of mental health misinformation, with a background in psychology and communication, I found his sociological lens enlightening and encouraging interdisciplinary reflection.

Technopanic is rich with historical and cultural references, from Orson Welles' 1938 *War of the Worlds* broadcast (Pooley & Socolow, 2013) to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, while maintaining a light ironic tone that renders complex issues more digestible.

The first seven chapters of the book systematically dismantle what Acerbi calls "*technopanics*", alarmist narratives in contemporary digital discourse. He demonstrates how these concerns echo historical cycles of moral panic, such as those sparked by the advent of radio and television. Topics range from conspiracy theories, to the intellectual traps of

casting digital *folk devils* like Mark Zuckerberg or Jeff Bezos, to the supposed negative impact of social media on mental health. A significant portion of the book also focuses on misinformation, a subject central to Acerbi's research.

Rather than portraying the public as helpless victims of manipulation, Acerbi reminds readers that persuasion, particularly online, is far more difficult than we tend to assume. He also highlights that the proportion of misinformation compared to accurate information is often overstated. In doing so, he emphasizes the need to contextualize the susceptibility to misleading information within broader psychological and social processes. As he notes, for instance, content virality is not driven by falsehood per se, but by emotional salience. One particularly compelling argument is Acerbi's framing of misinformation as a *symptom*, thus reflecting underlying needs rather than being purely the result of gullibility or manipulation.

Acerbi also critiques methodological limitations, such as the *file-drawer problem* (i.e., the tendency to publish only significant results), and conceptual ambiguities, particularly the often-overlooked distinction between being *uninformed* and being *misinformed*, with profound implications for empirical interpretation.

The eighth and final chapter, focusing on so-called *technosolutions*, is especially interesting for Acerbi's *positionality*, which encourages scholars to a shift in perspective: rather than considering individuals as passive "users" vulnerable to manipulation, he frames them as *agents* capable of discernment. This argument aligns with recent findings by Acerbi himself and his colleague Altay (2024), who demonstrated that the strongest predictor of



perceived danger of misinformation is the *third-person effect* (i.e., the perception that others are more vulnerable to misinformation than the self). Researchers themselves may also overestimate the vulnerability of the general population. Acerbi cautions that in our eagerness to combat misinformation, we may unintentionally increase public distrust even toward accurate information, thus exacerbating a broader climate of epistemic uncertainty. In addition, while there is a strong focus on decreasing belief in falsehoods, comparatively little attention is paid to how we can increase belief in truth.

One particularly effective rhetorical strategy in the book is Acerbi's use of analogies between online and offline behaviour. For example, he questions why we are so alarmed by ideological isolation in online *echo chambers* when we routinely seek out like-minded communities in offline contexts. These comparisons serve as a reminder to approach the panic surrounding digital phenomena *cum grano salis*, as they often mirror long-standing human predispositions.

One limitation of the book, more terminological than substantive, concerns the use of the term *disinformation* (Italian: *disinformazione*). Acerbi uses this term to refer to misinformation, reflecting the absence of a lexical distinction between the two concepts in Italian. This differs from the standard in English-language scholarship, where *disinformation* implies deliberate deception intent and *misinformation* does not (Aïmeur et al., 2023), and might introduce potential ambiguities for scholarly readers.

Additionally, the book does not address more recent forms of misleading content, such as visual misinformation (e.g., deep-fakes), and frames online misinformation primarily as generalized media content. However, misinformation can also be tailored, for instance, within online health communities. Given the book's concise scope, these omissions are understandable and point to promising directions for future publications.

In conclusion, as Acerbi aptly reminds us, there are no simple solutions to complex problems. Yet *Technopanic* offers an empirically grounded roadmap for navigating today's digital landscape, making a strong case for scientific reflexivity.

References

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