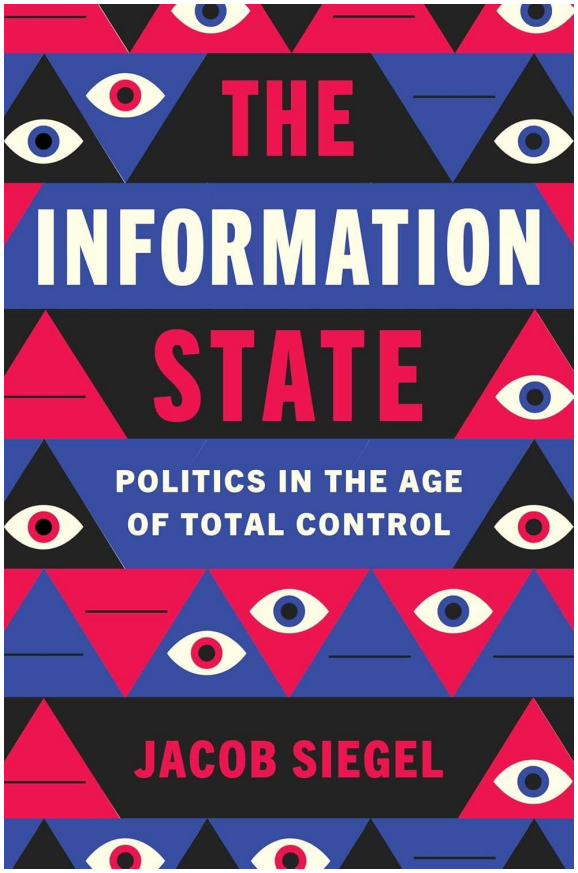
BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

Jacob Siegel explores the threat of information state in new book

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"The Information State: Politics in the Age of Total Control" by Jacob Siegel. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2026, 336 pages, $29.99 (hardcover).



"What I call the 'information state 'refers to a form of government that replaces the democratic principle of consent with control," Jacob Siegel explains near the beginning of "The Information State: Politics in the Age of Total Control," his mesmerizing new treatise on perhaps the greatest threat to our continued existence as a free society. "Most of us are familiar with the distinction between authoritarian regimes that impose their will by force and democracies that govern through the consent of their citizens."

"The information state represents a third form of political regime," the author continues. "It governs by controlling the codes and protocols of the digital public arena, which it uses to engineer the public's compliance with its programs. Such a state rules by monopolizing attention. In the place of the cinematic spectacles of twentieth-century propaganda, it dictates the parameters of user experience on social media and other shared online domains to fractionally adjust the public's perceptions and condition people to see certain outcomes as inevitable."

Finally, someone who is able to explain, in terms that are understandable to the masses, what is currently going on in our society. We've all had our suspicions that something is not quite right in our collective dialog. Siegel takes that feeling of uneasiness and translates it into a narrative that concisely and powerfully illuminates perhaps the greatest plague of the 21st century. When you can manipulate people without their even realizing they are being influenced, you can obviously exercise immense power over them – and accomplish your own self-serving agenda with much less resistance than would otherwise be the case.

Extensively researched, with 38 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and 14 chapters arranged in three major sections, "The Information State" is one of the more credible essays on the subject at hand I have had occasion to peruse in quite some time. Structurally, the book is comprised of "Part I: Origins," the first five chapters, "Part II: Conquest," the next five chapters, and "Part III: Revolt," the final four chapters. The writing style is authoritative yet accessible and the argument Siegel makes is compelling. It would be hard to come away from this one without the undeniable sense we are at a crossroads with respect to how we pursue the truth. Those in control are attempting to shape the narrative to fit their own ends in ways that really have no precedent.

It is challenging to assign "The Information State" to a particular genre of literature. Siegel delves deeply into communication theory, sociology, psychology, and political science, with everything he posits cast against a technological framework that both facilitates as well as shapes the arguably inevitable outcome. Witness the following from "Whole of Society," the ninth chapter and one I found especially instructive:

“The dramatic restructuring of American life in the early 2010s took place downstream of a technological revolution. Two new technologies, the smartphone and the social media network, triggered a process of breakneck transformation over the course of Obama’s first term. Their effects spread so rapidly that it was easy at the time to miss the extent of their impact, yet they left no aspect of the landscape untouched.”

For those of us who lived through this revolution and have a frame of reference extending back before technology became a central component of our everyday lives, the evolution has been nothing short of miraculous. At the same time, those who came of age during the era Siegel describes so eloquently may be tempted to shake their heads and ask quite honestly, ‘what’s the big deal?’ Fortunately, both perspectives are dissected in considerable detail in this exquisite expose.

A writer for Tablet magazine, Siegel cohosts the Manifesto! podcast with novelist Phil Klay. His background and perspective were shaped by his father Fred, who was as an urban historian and academic, as well as his experience as a U.S. Army officer who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Siegel’s articles have appeared in The New York Times, The Free Press, Politico, VICE, and The Baffler; his previous books include “Put Your Money Where Your Soul Is: Jewish Wisdom to Transform Your Investments for Good,” which was published in 2023, and “Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War,” an anthology of short fiction by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans (2013).

The timeliness and urgency of “The Information State” cannot be overemphasized. Siegel presents a coherent and powerful explanation and indictment of how we got to the crossroads we find ourselves at today, as well as a roadmap – of sorts – for how we get beyond the nightmare many of us experience on a daily basis. He discusses this extensively in “The Naked Emperor,” chapter thirteen:

“Grand conspiracies and mass rituals like QAnon and ‘resistance’ cults flourished by promising to identify the true source of the problems that everyone could see. Aware of being constantly lied to, tweaked, propagandized, and nudged by shadowy forces – all conditions that happen to describe the business model of the Internet – people frequently misread who and what those forces were. The search for identifiable villains offered psychological relief to individuals under the pressures of pervasive surveillance and paranoia. Whether it was Vladimir Putin, a cabal of deep-state pedophiles, or word Jewry, there was reassurance in putting a face to one’s diabolical persecutor. The more opaque and manipulative the functions of government became, the more plausible and comforting such theories appeared.”

As I made my way through this treasure-trove of enlightenment, I kept waiting for the inevitable reference to the premiere consideration of contemporary discourse: AI. I was not disappointed. Siegel broaches the topic in his final chapter, “Limits of Control,” although I got the distinct impression he was simply setting the reader up for his next foray into a story that shows no signs of fading away anytime soon.

“The AIs of the future, it is already clear, will eclipse the power of any technology that has ever existed,” Siegel confidently asserts. “Thus China, the United States, Elon Musk, and everyone else in the information dominance business is racing to build a planetary AI that will absorb all existing knowledge… From the rubble of the old information state, the outline of a new one takes shape. Yet it seems likely that AI will depart from the technocratic methods of control and move into strange new dimensions. The future stays mysterious.”

To be clear, the future has always been enigmatic. But thanks to Siegel, it’s somewhat less so. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.