

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Media manipulation: A public deception through subliminal seduction

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ABSTRACT

This research intends to closely examine “how” media platforms and outlets influence the general populace by shaping perspective that affects an individual’s decision, culture, and political inclination. By using Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model on how media platforms affect the judgment of an individual or viewers, and Michel Foucault’s notion of Power Relations on how privileged individuals or the elites were able to take advantage of their position. By doing so, public seduction happens to those individuals and decisions were altered thinking it to be as their own. Likewise, in reference with several pertinent local authors and provision of the 1987, Philippine Constitution were integrated in the research to underscore the social, cultural, legal, and political aspects of information and expression.

Keywords: *Media Manipulation; Power Relation; Subliminal Seduction; Cultural Projection and Consumer Culture; Political Machination.*

Introduction

Mass media serves as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace (Chomsky & Herman, 1998). Chomsky sees that media plays an important role in shaping the public's opinion, especially the individual's. Their mindset is configured by messages and symbols being conveyed through media outlets. In the 1987 Philippine Constitution it is stated that "The State recognizes the vital role of communication and information in nation building." The use of media plays a pertinent role in how our nation and culture are being projected to the general public, both locally and in neighboring countries as well. Mass media are inextricably connected to how our nation progresses and grows. Evident here is the role of investors, trade and exchange, and tourism in how we market ourselves and our culture. Mass media are not just changing the outside world, but they appear to be undermining our inner world as well (Howitt, 1982). Mass media are seen as an instrument to mobilize and reconstruct [on] how we see our society and communicate our culture as Filipinos.

A number of studies have shown that the media also recognize the importance of press freedom, which encompasses speech and expression not just as civil rights but as political rights too. Entitled to such on the basis of their liberty, people may participate in public affairs with a *locus standi* (legal standing) and voice their opinion on issues such as transparency, equal rights, abuses, scandals, and corruption. This ability is supported by the Constitution when it provides that "No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances."

However, the freedom to establish private broadcasting outlets does not guarantee that everyone is able to equally exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression (Beger, 2009). This is apparent when media outlets are dominated by a gatekeeping elite that filters what is disseminated. Media today has deviated from its mission to convey the truth with its shift to the dispensing of propaganda. Propaganda is problematic in part because the lines between the information, persuasion, and entertainment functions of media are blurred. Ethical implications are considerable for various stakeholders, including the propagandists themselves, those who avoid being propagandists, and those who would be propaganda's targets (Christians & Wilkins, 2009).

The propaganda model consists of five so-called filters that "filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (Goodwin, 1994). Media show only what they want to show via sublime messages that manipulate an individual's decisions. Media reflect and

project only the views of the dominant elite resulting in the marginalization of dissidents. The operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media people, frequently possessing complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they handle the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values (Chomsky & Herman, 1998).

Framework of the Study

This study is anchored in contemporary occurrences in the domains of the cultural, social, and political as they are analyzed under Avram Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault.

Chomsky is an American who revolutionized analytic philosophy through his contributions in cognitive psychology and the philosophies of mind and language. On the role of the mass media, he argues that vested corporate interests controlling the content of newspapers, television, and radio form what he and Edward Herman in their seminal study *Manufacturing Consent* call a “propaganda model” that is put in the service of power (Herman & Chomsky, 1994).

Meanwhile, Foucault was a French philosopher known for his encompassing concept of structuralist and post-structuralist inclination especially in his works on the archaeology of the human sciences, classical representation, language, and power relations.

This study intends to analyze and harmonize numerous notions of Chomsky and Foucault, specifically on how media outlets and platforms change social, cultural, and political aspect of society; it will also recognize other scholars and critics pertinent to the study. It can be deduced that vested corporate interests controlling newspapers, television, and radio are able to take advantage of their position as outlets to disseminate information to the general populace in accordance to their will.

Methodology

This study uses comparative critical analysis as a method of hypothesizing. It is an attempt to broaden our understanding of changes in our culture, society, and politics in order to attain an appreciation of a rational and ethical use of media platforms. In this respect, the principles of Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model and manufacturing consent and Michel Foucault’s power relationship and panopticism are employed. Adopting an eclectic approach that includes numerous fields like science, technology, language, philosophy, and politics, the study also integrates the works of Filipino thinkers known for their scholarly publications in global ethics, radical democracy, and the like.

Results and Discussions

The study ponders the idea of media as controlled by conglomerates in pursuit of their own agenda. Subliminal messaging is integrated into platforms and outlets the dissemination of which indoctrinates the individual and depreciates human integrity. The framework tries to question the value, output, and integrity of what media conveys, and eventually attempts to define the practice of media extending to consumer culture of the country.

Media Outlets and Platforms: Means, Methods, and Manipulation

The primary function of mass media is to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity values (Chomsky & Herman, 1998). In understanding society, we must look at who is in position in order to determine how society functions. In the book *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky said that major decisions on what happens in our society are dictated by large corporations in order to satisfy their political and social interests. One of the ways by which they do this is through the use of mass media outlets that they also happen to own. This revelation addresses questions of who owns the media, who controls the media, who recruits media personnel, what sorts of personnel are recruited, how are programmes produced, how is content determined, how do stylistic factors influence output, what effects do pressure groups have on programmes, and other such concerns (Howitt, 1982).

Major corporations or the elite have been manipulating the media to cater their own interests, and feeding them to the public as normative criteria for how society should behave. The power of mass media to manipulate an audience implies something of the nature of that audience (Howitt, 1982). Chomsky argued that manufacturing consent is inextricably connected to understanding how our thinking faculty works as manufactured by propaganda. Patterns of news choices mobilize biases (Howitt, 1982).

The main objective of propaganda is to target audiences such as the masses and the political class. Eighty percent (80%) of our population is comprised of the masses whose main function, according to Chomsky, is to follow orders and not to think. The masses are the ones who are widely affected by propaganda. The other twenty percent (20%) are the political class or the specialized class. They are the ones who are more educated, participate more in decision making, and exercise more their suffrage since they are the ones who are more knowledgeable of such. “The propaganda model does not assert that the media parrot the line of the current state managers in the manner of a totalitarian regime; rather, that the media reflect the consensus of powerful elites of the state–corporate nexus generally,

including those who object to some aspect of government policy, typically on tactical grounds” (Chomsky, 1989).

A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public (Clifford & Wilkins, 2009).

For Michel Foucault, power is not a possession but a strategy of positioning yourself such that power becomes beneficial from your vantage point. In this case the major corporations are able to maximize their use of power by means of such propaganda to influence the people. Through this influencing, they are able to deflect scrutiny from them (the elite) to other issues, or even exaggerate or create issues. They attempt to capture the audience’s attention by making them believe that they are going to be affected by political, criminal, safety and security, or territorial issues; they also create distractions in the form of amusement and , and leisure.

The Filipino elite allegedly likewise manipulate domestic mainstream media for their self-interest and to the detriment of the public good (Meyer et. al, 2020). For example, in the political sphere, the elite would support or criticize a particular candidate that would affect their holdings or ideology. Through media outlets they are able to create a “polarizing presence in the national consciousness” (Heydarian, 2018) by influencing the masses regarding who to vote for or not vote for. This is made possible through advertisements showing the good side of a particular candidate or their bad side by casting moral and immoral discourses in media (Kusaka, 2017). Since major corporations cannot do the things they want on their own, they have personnel that acts as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers are the ones who filters or narrows down what needs to be shown to the public according to their ulterior interests. If a particular story does not correspond to such interests, then either it cannot be made public or it first has to be tailored-made to jive with their interest. The persistent failure to see this point—that the media will protect the interests of the powerful and not of state managers from criticism—may instigate more illusions about our democratic systems (Chomsky, 1989).

The arrangement becomes a panoptic system that deprives the individual of autonomy, thought, culture, and freedom of expression (Harris & Taylor, 2008). For Foucault, panopticism acts as a disciplinary mechanism that

induces in the inmates—the audience in this case—a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power (1977). The public who are influenced by normative claims through media outlets are compelled to act in accordance to such. Despite the lack of public surveillance, they still adhere to the norms and think of them as their own decision. Panopticism imposes a kind of imprint that unconsciously commands them to conform to the standards.

Public Deception

Media manipulates and indoctrinates audience. “Through such practices as selecting topics, framing issues, filtering information, binding debates within certain limits, and other strategies, the mass media serve the interests of dominant, elite groups in society that own the mass media” (Trier, 2006). The question “how does the elite control the media?” does not satisfactorily correspond to how they influence or manipulate the media. It is not even a question—it’s not that they control the media platforms and outlets, in fact, they own or dominate them. It is where in fact “media” manufactures our consent. They tell us what to think and to concentrate on their preconceived notions.

Theodore Adorno recognized this during his time. “In Hitler’s Germany he had witnessed the powerful role that mass media could play in shaping the opinions and behaviour of populations, and arriving in America he confronted a society in which the mass media’s influence was ubiquitous but apparently benign” (Harris & Taylor, 2008). Despite the rampant propaganda of media outlets in manipulating the stream to influence its audience, Adorno saw that it was plausible for the media to influence and shape the audience’s opinion but only in a subtle manner. In this case, it is highly probable that the masses, which eighty percent of the population according to Chomsky, are the ones who are more prone to deceit and would become docile little by little. .

Adorno showed how the use of media outlets could reach vast places and propaganda could be easily conveyed and understood by the masses. “It has an inherent tendency to make the speaker’s word, the false commandment, absolute” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997), and access to it is made without any difficulty or worry. Adorno argues for example that, “the radio [became] the universal mouthpiece of the *Führer*;...his voice [rose] from street loudspeakers to resemble the howling of sirens announcing panic, from which modern propaganda [was] hard to distinguish in any case” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997).

The real market of the media giants, then, “is advertisers, and the ‘product’ they sell is audiences, with a bias towards more wealthy audiences, which improve advertising rates”. The major media, in other words, “are corporations ‘selling’ privileged audiences to other businesses”. This “filter” obviously puts at a severe disadvantage those media that really do rely largely or exclusively on individual subscribers for their revenue (Goodwin, 1994).

The public also have another role in this case. They are not mere audiences or targets to be influenced. The public are also customers and so advertisers come into the picture. Because media cost more than consumers will ever pay, advertisers fill the gap and pay for audiences. It is not so much that the media are selling you a product, i.e, their output. They are also selling advertisers a product: the audience.

In addition, we can speak of commercial advertisements conditioning people’s minds and replacing their critical and reflexive capacities. In the virtual world, the image replaces the person. In this mode of being-in-the-world, there is a diminution of human reality into the existential vacuity of a pompous crowd that is falsely conscious of reality (Maboloc, 2016).

Since the real target of advertisers are thought to be the elite, the public, particularly the masses, are left at a disadvantaged as innocent targets in the market. They enslave themselves into thinking that to purchase and possess merchandise would give them status or recognition in society. Advertisers are aware of this self-delusion but they still go along with it by making them, the masses, think that they need what they want, and that they must have it. The elite are able to profit through the advertisers, and the advertisers in turn earn more from the masses through their advertisements.

Subliminal Seduction

“Subliminal advertising is a technique of exposing consumers to product pictures, brand names, or other marketing stimuli without the consumers having conscious awareness” (Trappey, 1996). “Subliminal [in the spectacle of] advertising is widely and frequently used and that it is successful in selling product” (Feinberg et al., 1987). Advertisers stimulate or create desire in the audience without the latter noticing that such a feeling is instilled in them. This is made possible by: 1) getting the attention of the audience, 2) stimulating interest, and 3) manufacture desire.

It makes people buy products they do not need; it promotes dangerous products and encourages harmful behavior; it is deceptive and manipulative; it is intrusive, irritating, offensive, tasteless, insulting, degrading, sexist, racist; it is loud, obnoxious, strident and repetitive to the point of torture; it is a pack of lies; it is a vulgar bore (Kirkpatrick, 1986).

Subliminal messages target the audiences' subconscious where their innermost desires reside. Subliminal messages seduce an individual in a way that they believe they were the ones who made the choice, and so the subconscious mind accepts the idea and executes it. Advertising deceives and manipulates consumers into buying products they do not need or want through subliminal advertising (Kirkpatrick, 1986). Advertising companies manipulate the viewers' perception by instigating desires.

Subliminal seduction is a kind of forceful persuasion that can be equated with coercion. Advertising "is just another form of physical force, perhaps only a little less direct than pointing a gun at the consumer" (Kirkpatrick, 1986). The individuals who are mostly affected by this seduction are the masses. For Chomsky, they are propaganda's target who could be easily manipulated and influenced to conform to a particular trend. They can be considered as society's docile individuals because of their fragility. While they seek recognition when they try to conform to a particular normative claim, in fact it does not actually help them.

Cultural Projection of Philippine Media Market

The vocabulary of media outlets and platforms can generate insight into the kind of persuasion that is present in today's "mediatised" landscape where ethics and morals are fragmented. In the local context, Filipino journalists, media practitioners, authors, and influencers are safeguarded under the 1987 Philippine Constitution. They play an essential role in the dissemination of information, entertainment, and other content to the entire country, provided that the said contents are not contrary to laws, morals, good customs, public order, and public policy.

However, despite the benefits of media outlets and platforms, individuals still find other use for them that promote their self-interest and advantage. Meaning, "social media is that potent tool for black propaganda and strategic maneuvering in our money-driven consumer society. Thousands of trolls use the public space to deliver vile and vicious attacks against clueless personalities. From a political end, any viral post does not only destroy a candidate's reputation; it can also irreparably erase the value and wipe out

the core substance of our democracy” (Maboloc, 2017).

Trolling has become a trend and some media outlets are participants in the dissemination of disinformation. Trolls have now moved to major media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter). Conglomerates and huge businesses are willing to pay large sums of money for advertisements that market their schemes and/or propaganda. Considering that schemes and/or propaganda require machinery and manpower, they need to expand to cater numerous and vast individuals. Thus the emergence of trolls. “The main role of trolls is simple: to justify putting down potential subalterns, people who are to be hated and marked as less than human” (Maboloc, 2017).

“Advanced technologies including social media, have continued to manipulate people and as such, diminish rather than deepen the authenticity of human life” (Maboloc, 2016). It should be noted that media outlets focuses on captive audiences, those individuals who pay attention to a certain station as a source of their daily information. It is implied that their understanding of truth or reality is dictated to them by that single source. On the other hand, media platforms are flooded with information, and at first no captive audiences are involved. However, the algorithm of media platforms creates a patterns. The language of the system consolidates an individual’s search history, visited pages, shared contents, and even caption on individual posts, and through that algorithmic process the platform would suggest targetted content to that individual. A new kind of captivity is created, one where modern technology controls life, designs social relations, and even undermines the whole thing one calls living (Maboloc, 2021).

The individual is now reduced to an instrumentality, and being entrapped, the idea of the self is diminished. Heidegger called it *Gestell* or enframing. Feenberg contended that “we ourselves are now incorporated into the mechanism, mobilized as objects of technique” (Feenberg, 1999). In this degradation of the self as being enframed and dictated upon by media outlets and platforms, the individual would still think that the dictates are sole product of the self. However, as pointed out by Maboloc in Feenberg asserted that “translated out of Heidegger’s ontological language, this seems to mean that technology is a cultural form through which everything in the modern world becomes available for control” (Feenberg, 1999). The individual’s existence is at risk of becoming bait for consumer culture, – even as they are not aware of its existence. Maboloc said that “consumerism is like some monstrous, cold-bloodied, heavy equipment that overruns people without due regard to deeper context of human relationships” (2016). For Marcuse, consumer culture somehow reveals how “the people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment” (Marcuse, 1964). In this respect,

the individual presumes that his or her identity is dependent on what he or she possess. And these possessions are introduced in numerous ways creating the impression of a good life equating to happiness.

The notion of “happiness” in consumer society is patterned after the dictates of the culture industry. True happiness, however, must not be confused with the pleasure derived from the products found in consumer society. Consumer culture creates a type of desire that renders the satisfaction of people ephemeral. Marcuse says that people, by falling into the lure of new trends and styles, have all succumbed to their false needs, false desires, and false dreams (Marcuse 1964).

Conclusion

Adorno made himself clear when he said that media plays a pertinent role in influencing the public. However, with the emergence of major conglomerates who own/control the majority of media outlets and are able to mechanize media platforms, that role now serves self-interest. Media manipulation occurs in this respect. It enables the elite to control not just the social life of individuals but also their understanding of the world. They are subjected to a culture of consumerism which reduces the value of a clueless individual to a mere commodity. Therefore, we must be critical and question what media presents to us and reflect if it is for the betterment of the self.

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