Mind management 2.0: The internet and the myth of individualism and personal choice in neoliberal times[1]

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Abstract. The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of Herbert I. Schiller's The Mind Managers that carried out a critical political economy analysis of the myths that sustained industrial capitalism and the role played by the media and cultural industries in their dissemination. As a tribute, this paper highlights the value of Schiller's work, tracing the historical origins of, and updating, what he considered to be the most important myth in this groundbreaking book: individualism and personal choice. The research shows that this myth has strengthened and undergone important changes in the technologically-centered neoliberal context of today's cognitive capitalism, where its function is to hide and idealize the present-day structural conditions. The prevalence and characteristics of this myth are analyzed through the paradigmatic example of dating apps. Both the possibilities and limitations provided by media technologies are considered in the context of power relations.
Keywords: Herbert Schiller; myths of neoliberalism; political economy of communication; The Mind Managers.

[es] Gestión de la mente 2.0: Internet y los mitos que sustentan el neoliberalismo

Resumen. En el año 2023 se cumple el 50º aniversario de la publicación del libro *Mind Managers*, en el que Herbert I. Schiller llevó a cabo un análisis de economía política crítica de los mitos que sustentan el capitalismo y del papel central que desempeñan los medios de comunicación y las industrias culturales en su difusión. A modo de homenaje, este artículo resalta el valor del trabajo de Schiller para los estudios de comunicación; rastrea los orígenes históricos y actualiza el mito que el autor consideró el más importante en este innovador libro, es decir el mito del individualismo y la elección personal. La investigación muestra que estos mitos se han fortalecido y experimentado importantes cambios en el contexto neoliberal tecno-centrado, característico del capitalismo cognitivo actual. Su función es ocultar e idealizar las condiciones estructurales actualizadas. La prevalencia y las características de este mito se analizan mediante el ejemplo paradigmático de las apps de citas. Tanto las posibilidades como

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las limitaciones que ofrecen las tecnologías comunicativas se consideran en el contexto de las relaciones de poder.

Palabras claves: Economía política de la comunicación; Herbert Schiller; Los Manipuladores de Cerebros; mitos del neoliberalismo.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Herbert Schiller's contribution to communication studies. 3. The Mind Managers. 4. The Myth of Individualism and Personal Choice. 5. Paradigmatic example: Dating apps. 6. Conclusion. 7. Authorship contribution statement. 8. References.

1. Introduction

In a world-system increasingly marked by a structural crisis, conflict, fast changes, uncertainty, and chaos on multiple levels (Wallerstein, 2011), analytical tools to understand the new realities and its legitimation are in need. As the geographic and sectorial expansion of neoliberal capitalism continues, some of such tools can be found in the work of US scholar Herbert I. Schiller. From a political economy of communication (PEC) perspective and critical theory, this author and activist made fundamental contributions to the study of the globalization of capitalism and the international communication system in the 1960s and 1970s (Hudson, 1999; Maxwell, 2003; Mirrlees, 2016a, 2016b; Segovia, 2000). In addition to his critique of the hegemonic media system and other allied powers (corporations, the State and political forces, the military…), Schiller discussed alternatives for the development of a just communication system. As Hudson (1999, p. 36) has noted, «the work of Herbert Schiller provides a reliable guide to the obstacles we face, but it is also a goad to action».

This paper discusses and pays tribute to Schiller's (1973) *The Mind Managers,* which turns 50 years old in 2023 and is one of his main works. This book follows the aforementioned two-fold approach. It focuses on the methods of social control applied by the managerial class of the US State, the media, and corporations. Specifically, the book identifies five myths which were disseminated for domestic consumption with the aim of fostering ideological conformity and the management of consciousness. Moreover, it discusses alternatives for the development of information technologies as a democratizing force.

The objective of this article is to illustrate the ongoing relevance of Schiller's work. Specifically, it aims to critically update the myth of individualism and personal choice, which Schiller considered the most important for the manipulation of the population, 50 years after its original conceptualization.

Although the general structures of capitalism and the media remain today, important changes have undergone. A sociohistorical analysis is developed to identify the origins of the myth of individualism and the continuities and transformations it has experienced through neoliberalism and the ongoing technological revolution. This approach, combined with a critique of the PEC and the support of interdisciplinary classic and current scholarly works, allows to investigate the conformation and role of this myth in the reproduction of neoliberal

capitalism in the context of corporate-driven digitalization. Following the hegemony paradigm (Gramsci, 1992), this research tries to understand how this myth has become embedded in society as a 'common sense', but also discusses possible counter-hegemonic technologically mediated communicative alternatives within the context of power relations. Both the salience of the myth and resistance to it on online communication is evaluated through the paradigmatic example of dating apps.

2. Herbert Schiller's contribution to communication studies

Schiller is well known as a founding figure of the field of political economy and communication (PEC) and for being one of the first scholars to critically analyze cultural imperialism and the role of the media in the survival and expansion of capitalism, both inside and outside the United States (Schiller, 1969). Schiller also investigated the military-industrial-communication complex, the doctrine of the free flow of information, media manipulation, and the importance of public policy and state support in ensuring the success of corporate media (Maxwell, 2003; Segovia, 2000).

Schiller was also one of the first authors to write about the information age, but contrary to hegemonic, celebratory research, he developed a critique of the role of communication in the accumulation of capital and the reproduction of capitalist cultural frameworks. Schiller focused his intellectual effort on explaining how the dominant communication system was structured to justify and foster both economic and cultural inequality.

Maxwell (2003), a former student of Schiller, has demonstrated that various criticisms of Schiller's work have been based on misconceptions. Schiller was never a technophobe nor did he fail to propose viable alternatives to an oppressive use of technologies. At a time when the functionalist perspective was dominant, Schiller understood that critical theory not only involves the critique of established structures, but also the proposal of constructive alternatives and normative policies.

Maxwell (2003) shows that Schiller's work actually inspired social movements and various post-colonial governments around the world in democratizing communications. Schiller warned against economic and technological determinism and developed analyses which did not view cultural imperialism as a mere one-way-flow of information. Instead, he applied the world-systems perspective to identify relationships between the center, the semi-periphery and the periphery in which the center, dominated by the USA, exerted influence in alliance with the elites of the semi-periphery and periphery at the expense of the majority of the population in all three locations. He also wrote on the hegemonic use of technologies and the shaping of a cognitive workforce that perpetuated dependency, but simultaneously underscored that highly educated knowledge workers were a potential force of media and social change.

3. The Mind Managers

This book was highly influential and sparked many controversies at the time (Segovia, 2000). However, Schiller's work in general and *The Mind Managers* in particular, is barely cited in today's mainstream scholarship. The book has been scarcely discussed even in critical research, with the exception of a few significant contributions (Hudson, 1999; Maxwell, 2003; Mirrlees, 2016a; Segovia, 2000). It is worth noting that the same year Schiller (1973) published *The Mind Managers*, the agenda-setting theory renewed the opposite, hegemonic functionalist paradigm. In contrast to Schiller's work, the agenda-setting theory is still today highly popular in scholarship. From a PEC perspective, it is expected that each perspective will be celebrated and praised to a very different extent in their 50th anniversary for obvious reasons: one is applied instrumentally to shape public opinion in favor of political and economic elites, and the other provides tools for the critical analysis of social control and for communicative and social emancipation.

In this book, Schiller (1973) identified and criticized five myths that contributed to the «maintenance of the status quo» (p. 29), by distorting the characteristics and consequences of capitalist social relations, lessening public concern, and orienting desire towards consumerism and the fulfillment of the media's business motives. The managers of US media and political powers resorted to myths as the central ideological force to shape information to benefit corporate and State interests. In his view, information control had become part of both national policy and business administration. Thus, myths operated not only at the level of ideology, but more broadly to shape consciousness, thus molding worldviews and influencing social action.

The five myths identified by Schiller are individualism and personal choice, media neutrality, unchanging human nature, the absence of social conflict, and media pluralism and diversity.

According to Schiller (1973, p. 8), the myth which conflates individualism and personal choice is the most important one: «Manipulation's greatest triumph, most observable in the United States, is to have taken advantage of the special historical circumstances of Western development to perpetrate as truth a definition of freedom cast in individualistic terms». This myth is possibly also the one with more capacity to shape the current transnational media system.

When translated into social and media organizations, the mythical model of free individual choice allegedly provides media diversity. The possibility of choosing what to produce would lead consumers to be able to choose among a diversity of contents. In Schiller's view, the reality was that there were few options to choose from due to corporate and State power in limiting the diversity of points of view, particularly regarding information. The myth of media neutrality plays the role of hiding vested interests and making them pass as natural, unavoidable, or desirable. The myth of an unchanging human nature based on competition fosters the view that social change based on equality and solidarity is impossible. It attempts to make people believe they are expected to act egotistically according to their own nature. The violence present in US society and media is mythified as individual conflict based on human nature. The social roots of conflict are thus made invisible (myth of the absence of social conflict).

Schiller identified two key techniques to disseminate the myths effectively. Communicative fragmentation as the dominant format in news production works to separate and de-contextualize interrelated issues, thus hindering the possibilities of developing a comprehensive understanding of the political-economic system. Closely associated with fragmentation is immediacy of information, which makes it evanescent, blurs meaning and makes it difficult to evaluate the importance of each issue. The ultimate objective of mind management, Schiller (1973, p. 29) notes, is to generate «individual passivity, a state of inertia that precludes action», thus blocking the possibility of social change.

The last chapter of the book discusses the role of highly educated knowledge workers. In Schiller's view, this type of workers had come to play a key role in the State and corporations, but they were more difficult to manipulate and made use of their agency. Schiller noted that knowledge workers had actually questioned prevailing myths and that there was a growing social understanding of how mind management takes place. Schiller (1973, p. 189) concluded that «the involvement of many people in the media, on their own initiative and out of their own desire to communicate, is ultimately the strongest defense any society has against information control and mind management». As can be observed, Schiller combined the structural analysis of conditions and practices of social control with the valuation of agency as the main force for human emancipation.

Schiller wrote the book in a context of industrial capitalism in which Keynesianism and Fordism were beginning to give way to neoliberalism and cognitive capitalism. It is therefore worth noting the value of his work in identifying the fundamental shift towards a social system based on corporate and state control of information and knowledge as key economic and cultural resources.

4. The myth of individualism and personal choice

Schiller (1973) questioned the prevailing understanding of freedom in exclusively individualistic terms as a matter of personal choice in the free market. He argued that this myth was developed to justify the private ownership of the means of production, since allegedly only a system based on this type of property can assure that producers and consumers are free to decide on which goods to buy and sell. Free choice would also assure free speech and meritocratic success. Schiller challenged this ideology by citing academic works providing evidence to hold that humans are social animals, and that the 'sovereign' individual's rights are a fallacy. In this view, society and the individual are inseparable, and people live together in communities to help one another, caring about ethics and morality. He contended that freedom to choose cannot be realized in conditions of inequality which actually limit the diversity of the offer and the possibilities of consumption. Moreover, he noted that upward social mobility is statistically rare, and that the system actually allows powerful corporations, including the media, to make their voice heard, increase their wealth and power and undermine individuals.

This myth has historical roots in liberalism and has developed further with neoliberalism and the corporate-driven technological revolution. As Hobsbawm (1996, p. 235) has argued, classical liberalism conceived the human world as

composed of «self-contained individual atoms» moved by self-interest. Nineteenth-century liberalism understood human beings as social animals only insofar as they co-existed in large numbers, and defined society as an inevitable but regrettable diminution of 'man's' unlimited natural right to do as 'he' liked (Hobsbawm, 1996, p. 243). For example, Alexis de Tocqueville understood and defended individualism as an «endorsement of private enjoyments and control of one's personal environment», which neglects «public involvement and communal attachment» (Lukes, n.d., par. 5).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that classical liberalism argued that some State intervention was needed to protect the individual. Liberalism originally thought of individualism not only in economic terms, but also as political autonomy.

This myth includes the belief that individualism lies at the very foundation of the United States, but there is plenty of «evidence suggesting that Americans were more communalist than individualist in the Revolutionary era and beyond» (Grabb, Baer, and Curtis, 1999, p. 511). According to these authors, local communalism and small-group collectivism were hegemonic during the revolutionary period due to the majority of people living in small, relatively autonomous villages, the influence of community church and other factors, including the fact that the term individualism did not even appear until 1839, more than 50 years after the War of Independence.

Selfish market individualism has often been questioned since the 19th century, but the neoliberal offensive that started in the 1970s-1980s took it one step further (see Maxwell, 2003). Margaret Thatcher defined the basic tenets of neoliberalism by stating that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and the family (Harvey, 2005), and that 'There is No Alternative,' meaning that the only possible way to organize the life of individuals is through unfettered markets. Milton and Rose Friedman (1980) justified the subordination of human existence to the rules of the market as they provide individuals with the freedom to choose. The belief system that sustains the market thus resides in being considered the most suited for each individual. Accordingly, neoliberalism has always aimed to privatize all aspects of life in the name of individual freedom (Giroux, 2008; Harvey, 2005). Consequently, individual freedom is unrelated to political freedom or the affirmation of one's dignity; it is reduced to its role in market transactions.

As noted by Hudson (1999, p. 30), another way in which neoliberal ideology has taken this myth a step further is «with its insistence that *any* interference with market forces and corporate prerogatives is a threat to freedom». As Freedman (2012) has documented, the corporate-driven internet era has been underpinned by neoliberal and libertarian narratives about the power of individual producers and consumers to succeed in conditions of absence of regulation by the Commons and the State. In particular, corporate actors have praised the individual freedom of consumers in the private market without State interference. For example, Esther Dyson, the founding chair of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), has advocated for an unregulated internet in which «consumers themselves can exercise their power and control their own information» (in Freedman, 2012, p. 96).

In agreement with Schiller (1973), this myth disconnects the production, distribution, and consumption of online communication from a social structure based on asymmetrical power relations (Freedman, 2014). Thus, it neglects that freedom to choose cannot exist within unequal social conditions because these conditions

empower certain actors and disempower others. Powerful actors with abundant resources are capable of dominating the online flows of information, therefore reaching higher levels of visibility, and generating increased attention, while the majority of actors have less chances achieving relevance, something which is favored by the algorithmic functioning of social networks, search engines and other media. The isolated individual can hardly compete against the power of huge corporations.

Since the social conditions are not questioned, the individual is made responsible for the social failures. As Giroux (2011) argues, the individualization of social problems in the new media environment means that citizens are left with few tools to develop public values and a culture necessary for a democratic polity. Social problems are privatized so that the immense power of the dominant State-corporate nexus and its consequences are hidden from the public eye.

According to Han (2018), on the internet there is an 'expulsion of the other' and, consequently, the capacity of listening to others, sharing suffering and building communities is diminished. The individuals blame themselves and suffer from psychological distress. Suffering is privatized because it is not shared with the community. The suffering of different people is hardly connected and is dissociated from the overarching social system that generates the sufferings. Isolated individuals become incapable of building an 'us,' as society is depoliticized by the collapse of the political into the personal. As the extensive research conducted by Turkle (2017) shows, individuals are hyper-connected but feel lonely, and this creates several vulnerabilities.

Galtung (2002) refers to individual isolation as atomie: the individual atom is isolated from other atoms and from social totality. Solidarity is reduced and the social fabric necessary for humans to develop suffers and fragments. Galtung (2002, p. 25) characterizes this type of society as one «of egoistic leibnizian monads, uncoordinated by any divine plan except its latter-day substitute: the 'discipline of the market,'». The consequence of this is increased violence, which is reflected in the rise of hate speech on social networks and other online channels (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021).

One key solution has been developed around the idea of the manufacturing of happy citizens (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). In this view, the industry of happiness is making huge profits based on the obligation of permanently having a willful optimism and a desire for happiness without considering the social conditions. However, it is clearly difficult to be optimistic in conditions of exploitation, precarity and isolation. Without a proper diagnosis of the social constrictions that limit human development, the therapy offered by the myth of individualism is nothing, but wishful thinking based on the naïve belief in the 'omnipotence of thoughts' (Freud, 2013) i.e., the idea that believing strongly in something will make it come true. This approach can only generate further self-blame, frustration, and mental health problems. The result of pursuing ineffective individual solutions to systemic problems is anomie, i.e., the absence of shared norms beyond sheer egoism to achieve socially desirable objectives (Merton, 1938; Galtung, 2002).

The myth of individualism has provoked radical transformations in the cyberspace. Curran, Fenton and Freedman (2012), show that the first internet was strongly marked by a scientific, humanistic, countercultural, and public service logic

due to the autonomy of the creators with respect to power structures, their alternative ideas, and the impulse of the public sector. Originally the internet was regulated by the prohibition of its use for commercial purposes and promoted a collaborative use based on the exchange and public dissemination of information and knowledge; cooperation and dialogue through virtual, non-commercial communities; role-playing games; and interactive socio-political debate through free software and free speech. However, states and corporations soon realized the possibilities of the internet for capital accumulation and social control. The prohibition of commercial use was lifted in 1991, and in 1995 the public internet was privatized. Private software and copyright were introduced, as well as a standard protocol for credit card transactions. Oftentimes, intrusive advertising was promoted. The internet became a space for buying and selling goods and services. Commercialization facilitated the popularization of the internet, but was accompanied by economic, securitarian, algorithmic, and metadata controls that diminished diversity and freedom and favored the expression of individual versus collective identities. Moreover, it facilitated concentration of ownership, wealth, and power, reducing the capacity of the majority to have a meaningful online impact.

Individualization and marketization have produced a dramatic shift whereby individuals are not only conceived as producers and consumers but also as products, as Han (2015) and Moruno (2015) have shown: in capitalism people are compelled to sell their wage labor in exchange for capital, but nowadays individuals themselves are considered capital. This is not only about producing and selling products; it involves selling oneself by being perpetually present on social networks and exhibiting an attractive image and a convincing narrative about the self. The online entrepreneur not only competes against others but also against oneself, which results in self-exploitation.

The myth of individualism has muted from its liberal understanding as co-existence of self-interested individuals to a neoliberal model based on a unique mode of understanding the individual as essentially antisocial. Marketized individuals are strictly defined by their freedom as producers, consumers, and products; society is subsumed by the economy. Moreover, the myth of neoindividualism both promotes and is promoted by privatization and deregulation. This myth hides systemic problems and transfers guilt to the individual, offering self-help therapies which only lead to further self-blame.

5. Paradigmatic example: Dating apps

The marketized individual is observed in dating apps, which show the impact of neoliberal subjectivation in ongoing transformations of sentimental relationships. The rise of dating apps and their acceptance in most cultures shows that they should not be analyzed from moral condemnation but focusing on how they contribute to the transformation of the rules of dating. A mandatory reference is Bauman (2003), who argued that in the society of liquid love, internet relationships become another transaction, where gains and losses are obtained to the detriment of commitment and the development of social skills to build community and true bonds of solidarity. The marketization of romantic relationships provides profits to the private companies that

facilitate the technological mediation and sell users' personal data while also eroding social bonds. Schiller's (1973) critique of the evanescent character of media products is also relevant today as individuals and relationships become ephemeral commodities.

Illouz (1997, 2007) has shown that there is a long history of connections between the capitalist economy and the romantic experience that has oriented desires, emotions, and relationships normatively and towards consumption. In her view, the post-industrial society has brought an important change in these connections, namely the blurring of the difference between reality and fiction. Romantic relationships are framed within wider utopias about the self and beauty, sensuality, happiness, success, and opulence. A self-perception of authenticity and individual value is affirmed while actual offline and online practices are marked by preconfigured codes of communication and structures of feelings promoted by the market. According to Illouz, the overexposure of individuals to fictional, idealized, and romanticized love messages has made them more cynical. As a reaction to this saturation, they doubt about the possibility of falling in love or even when feelings arise. They deny the possibility of love without noticing that this reaction is actually coherent with the logic of the market, which benefits from the fast and continuous consumption from one partner to another.

Although their explicit purpose is to help matchmaking, dating apps foster individualistic ideology and the personalized selection of the other, who in turn must meet his/her own expectations and those of the individual who selects him/her. Affinities are defined by algorithms and the exchange of virtual communication is proposed as a means to dismiss or not a relationship. With no ties, no family or friends in common, relationships become disposable and easily consumed. According to Bandinelli and Gandini (2022), users mostly make an instrumental use of these applications, hoping to succeed on their investment in terms of money and/or time, evaluating and choosing among multiple options, just as they would do with a product. This freedom to choose is based essentially on the physical appearance, which is often presented in ideal forms, what is known as *posturing*.

Research (Vásquez, 2021; Zapata, et al., 2021) also shows how the uses of these applications deepen narcissistic behaviors in the way of relating and according to Navarro et al. (2020) the use of online dating applications increases the probability of suffering/exercising *ghosting* and *breadcrumbing*[4].

On the other hand, it can also be argued that dating apps have social benefits by facilitating sexual and romantic encounters, thus reducing the influence of puritanism and sexual repression. By breaking spatial-temporal boundaries, users might be able to find an appropriate match. The de-localization of the first chat through the app might be complemented with the localization of a face-to-face encounter, although it is common that most online matches never meet in person. The app also reduces psychological tension since it is not in-situ and there is no prior rejection, the drawback being the probable reduction of social skills. Apps allow to give 'Like' to attractive people who might be perceived as being outside of one's

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[4] Ghosting refers to ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication. Breadcrumbing means sending messages that transmit real interest or commitment when this is not true with the aim of keeping the other person interested.

reach, but the algorithm works to give more visibility to the successful profiles (those who receive more likes) while other participants enjoy less visibility. It is also possible for individual users to be selective, but the app's mechanics foster copious consumption, which can provide endorphin gratification. Moreover, dating apps can be a vital tool in authoritarian contexts where same-sex relations are prohibited. On the negative side, apps can be hacked and traced, but the security level still improves.

Some dating apps present alternative features which are worth considering. For example, Bumble only allows women to take the first step, proposing new forms of female empowerment through role swapping. This app has been perceived by users as a space which fosters feminism but has also been criticized for articulating a post-feminist sensibility (Young and Roberts, 2021).

In addition to promoting social transformations, dating apps are a lucrative market. Approximately 270 million people used dating apps in 2020 (Wetzler, 2021), which will generate approximately $8.4 billion worldwide in 2024 (Liftoff and Vungle, 2022).

This paradigmatic example shows that in spite of existing some possibilities for developing satisfactory romantic relations through the mediation of dating apps, the marketization of individuals favors the commodification of relations and other consequences related to anti-social behavior and to losing the feeling of reality.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown the value of Schiller's work for a critique of the PEC and, specifically, of the neoliberal model that determines the characteristics and functions of the international communications system. To understand the production of hegemony and the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism, this article has updated Schiller's work by analyzing the continuities and transformations in the myth of individualism and personal choice. The main features of this myth in today's context involve a radicalization of some key tenets of liberalism and the exclusion of other of its aspects:

- Complete marketization: individuals are not only construed as producers and consumers, but also as products.
- Anti-sociality (atomie): the only relations that this myth conceives are those mediated by market transactions. The rhetoric on complete autonomy means individual isolation in practice.
- No State intervention: deregulation and privatization
- De-politicization (anomie): offering ineffective commercial self-help solutions to systemic problems (wishful thinking).
- Blaming the victims: since the social conditions are precluded, blame for suffering is transferred to individuals.
- Disconnecting people from the principle of reality: narcissistic, idealize, and fictional representations of concrete life.

These features affect deeply the core of anthropological and sociological relations. It has been shown that, in the face of socio-psychological difficulties, the neoindividual is offered new expectations on romantic relationships and a liberation of sexual energies by becoming a marketized product through the mediation of dating apps. Even though digital technologies provide possibilities for collective and emancipatory social practices, the hegemonic model of online communication and social relations is based on an understanding of individualism which views others as disposable investments. The result of the ongoing transformations is a socially produced selfish war of each against all.

7. Authorship contribution statement

Joan Pedro-Carañana: Conceptualization, Methodology, Research, Resources, Writing - original draft, Writing - revision and editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project management, Acquisition of funds.
Ledy Armirola-Garcés: Research, Resources, Writing - original draft, Writing - revision and editing, Visualization.

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