



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Tobias Eberwein,
Austrian Academy of Sciences
(OeAW), Austria

*CORRESPONDENCE
Daniel Broudy
dbroudy@ocjc.ac.jp

SPECIALTY SECTION
This article was submitted to
Media Governance and the Public
Sphere,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

RECEIVED 25 June 2022
ACCEPTED 07 July 2022
PUBLISHED 19 July 2022

CITATION
Broudy D and Ellefritz RG (2022)
Editorial: The age of mass deception:
Manipulation and control in digital
communications.
Front. Commun. 7:978082.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.978082

COPYRIGHT
© 2022 Broudy and Ellefritz. This is an
open-access article distributed under
the terms of the [Creative Commons
Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other
forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright
owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is
cited, in accordance with accepted
academic practice. No use, distribution
or reproduction is permitted which
does not comply with these terms.

Editorial: The age of mass deception: Manipulation and control in digital communications

Daniel Broudy^{1*} and Richard G. Ellefritz²

¹Department of English Communication, Okinawa Christian University, Nishihara, Japan,

²Department of Psychology, Sociology & Social Work, University of the Bahamas, Nassau, Bahamas

KEYWORDS

deception, manipulation, psychological operations, internet memes, digital communication, deepfake, technocracy, cognitive bias

Editorial on the Research Topic

The Age of Mass Deception: Manipulation and Control in Digital Communications

This editorial is a reflection on the scope and aims of the Research Topic “*The Age of Mass Deception*” and the extent to which the articles it attracted to this section have contributed to existing knowledge in the broader field. We began, initially, with the pre-supposition that centers of power wield enormous influence and control over public communications and therefore, widespread perception of the issues deemed most salient and worthy of attention. A central effort, therefore, was to invite analysis and descriptions of the ways in which power centers organize and conduct campaigns of persuasion and engineer consent for policies and actions across cultures. An additional aim, though not explicitly stated, was to encourage interdisciplinary explorations of the following sorts of questions: to what extent can disinterested observers understand public discourse as part of a larger experiment in which dominant social, political, and economic forces influence human perception and shape public opinion? Can the observer extrapolate meaningful data from public opinion that verifies the conditions of the experiment, who the experimenters are, the subjects, and the control groups? Can the observer describe the precise mechanisms that work to shape perception and opinion? The editors feel that the contributors have broadened understanding in these areas of interest.

In his pivotal work *Propaganda* (1928), Edward Bernays applied to a new field of research and practice principles of human perception and desire developed from the psychoanalytic theories of his famous uncle, Sigmund Freud. We find in the book the managers of modern societies, purporting to abide by and be guided by the sensibilities of Classical democracy (logic, dialogue, informed opinion, and consent, ...) to be under

the sway of “men we have never heard of” who govern, mold the public mind, form our tastes, and suggest ideas. The “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the habits and opinions of the masses,” in fact, “is the logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized” (Bernays, 2005/1928).

Bernays’ descriptions suggested to audiences, at the time, that mystery and deception were integral to and necessary in the organization and maintenance of a modern democracy. Such facts should not surprise us today. Indeed, the processes of which Bernays had written are self-evident. Digital forms of mass communication in the contemporary world have only intensified the need to manipulate and deceive so as to uphold the predominant system of perpetual buying and selling and to maintain optimum levels of social control in the interest of keeping power structures in place. As scholars aware of the persistent and subtle methods deployed by centers of power to shape public perception and engineer consent for antidemocratic policies, products and plans, we have noticed since 9/11/2001 a bewildering array of tools and techniques deployed by an emerging unelected center of technocratic skill and influence with global reach.

The central aim of this Research Topic was to invite scholars to engage critically with the major issues that these vehicles and forms of mass communication entail: coordinated campaigns of censorship, fabrication, intimidation, smearing, and/or coercion, clandestine surveillance of populations, the manipulation of emotion at the micro- and macro-level, the funding of these activities, and their ethical implications. Drafting the Call for Papers for “The Age of Mass Deception” commenced in the summer of 2019—well before any hint of a new crisis would demand that the world comply with entirely new forms of universal medical intervention. While the articles published in this section did not directly engage with the most salient examples of mass manipulation in the current Corona program, the authors present important evidence that a range of tactics in media and messaging have been deployed against populations.

Bakir, for example, explores in “*Psychological Operations in Digital Political Campaigns: Assessing Cambridge Analytica’s Psychographic Profiling and Targeting*,” how powerful forms of coercion and deception can be better understood through the use of big data analytics and psychographic profiling, which essentially constitute a psychological operation conducted by Cambridge Analytica against unwitting citizens.

In “*Internet Memes: Leaflet Propaganda of the Digital Age*,” Niebuurt analyzes the development of leaflet propaganda into contemporary forms of mass persuasion appearing in digitally reproduced memes aimed at hacking cognitive bias and exploiting the tribal mind. Niebuurt cautions that while memes can level the playing field against prevailing power structures, they can also expose populations to new threats of mass manipulation.

In their “*Case Report: Women, Be Aware that Your Vocal Charisma can Dwindle in Remote Meetings*,” Siegert and Niebuhr discuss the results from an empirical study of digital communications (Zoom, Skype, Teams) so as to understand the impact that these channels of discourse have on speakers and their persuasive effect in remote meetings. They discover that compression rates of digital signals can have a significant impact on females’ persuasive effectiveness. The results are significant, especially in times when meetings are increasingly mediated through electronic means.

Langguth et al. explore the problem of image and video manipulation in “*Don’t Trust Your Eyes: Image Manipulation in the Age of DeepFakes*.” Especially significant are findings that suggest deepfake technology can effectively undermine the trustworthiness of images and videos in the mediated world.

In “*An Inquisition for Propaganda and Mass Deception: Depositing the Neolithic*,” Walsh outlines his perspective on the pernicious problem of mass communications for human beings oriented naturally toward social organization and yet beset by the “tribal mind, an unconscious collective ego predisposed to propaganda.”

Lastly, Broudy and Arakaki discuss in “*Who Wants to be a Slave? The Technocratic Convergence of Humans in Data*” how the contemporary digital media landscape can be understood as an outcome of Marshall McLuhan’s predictions whereby tools come to reshape human beings as toolmakers. The authors discuss the major threats to human freedom, agency and sovereignty posed by an emerging technocratic order that works to integrate humans with the tools of big data.

Despite the relatively small number of contributions to this Research Topic, we feel that the authors grapple with crucial problems we face today when the specter of a technocratic order looms large. We are reminded of Karl Polanyi’s predictions in *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi, 1944) about the empty promises of a utopic neoliberal turn taken by states in the twentieth century that has guided the world to its present late stage. As Polanyi explains, the abstraction of a self-regulating market treats human beings and natural resources as if they were fundamentally created by someone for the market at some price, including “fictitious commodities”—in particular, labor, land, and money.

Treating humans and the environment as if they were commodities clears the groundwork for a dog-eat-dog world where all citizens would seek to arm themselves. Without some ethical authority, impervious to corruption, assuring the integrity of hard currency (now undergoing a digital transformation), property rights, and fair labor conditions, the market economy in which fictitious commodities are bought and sold—as if they were actual commodities—is not only impossible but also, if attempted in practice, destructive to the population. Mass communications that deceive, manipulate, and conceal today the financialization of nature and human beings are at real risk of achieving total irrelevance.

Author contributions

DB wrote the initial draft. RE wrote critical comments and wrote amendments to key passages. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships

that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Bernays, E. (2005/1928). *Propaganda*. New York, NY: Ig Publishing

Polanyi, K. (1944). *The Great Transformation*. New York, NY: Farrar & Reinhart.