

Council: Special Conference

Issue: Media manipulation techniques as an expression of political corruption

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Introduction

In the 21st century, media play undeniably a predominant role in the life of most people. The Internet, social media, television, newspapers and the radio are commonly used for information, communication and entertainment. Therefore, our opinions and actions are highly influenced by what we read, see, and hear through the media.

As of December 2017, about 55% of the world's population is actively using the Internet, which means that it has become the most commonly used and fastest growing (more than 1000% increase in users since the year 2000)¹ medium of communication, with the rise of social media and blogs playing a decisive role in that. Such platforms can be manipulated relatively easily, since creating a profile gives the user the ability to use manipulation techniques when addressing an immense audience, while simultaneously remaining anonymous. This fact gives Internet users with adequate skills a great amount of power as they now have the means to influence the public.

Especially when the manipulation of the media is being carried out directly or indirectly by people with political power or by people willing to gain political power, this poses a threat to democracy. We are thus called to find solutions in order to tackle this issue. Such practices are equal to political corruption as malicious means are used by people in a country's administration to obtain personal gain in terms of: increasing the number of supporters (mainly in periods before elections), not being held accountable for mistakes, weakening political adversaries etc. One could even say that the current state of the media is open to political corruption.

Definition of Key-Terms

¹ internetworldstats.com

Media

Media can be defined as: *“The main means of mass communication (broadcasting, publishing, and the Internet) regarded collectively”*².

Social Media

Social media are: *“Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”*³. The number of their users, mainly the younger generations, is constantly increasing at a very high rate.

Media Manipulation

From a legal standpoint, media manipulation refers to the act of using certain techniques in order to make an argument or fabricate an image, which will be favoring the partisan’s interests. This can be achieved through the Internet or through dealing with reporters and news agencies in a specific way. On the other hand, media can be using manipulation as a form of marketing to increase their revenue, which, however, is irrelevant to our topic.

Political Corruption

The term “political corruption” generally refers to the use of illegal means by government officials or people acting for their personal gain. However, as far as media manipulation is concerned, the means used are not always illegal, but the personal benefit obtained by the politicians still remains illegitimate, thus making the manipulation of the media an expression of political corruption.

Background Information

Media Manipulation Techniques

Generally, any successful manipulation technique is based on a gradual approach to the public. When information is being communicated at a slow pace to the public, the latter is not overwhelmed, which makes it harder for authorities to detect the manipulation. The following list includes the most common methods used to manipulate the media:

Fake News

This is the simplest technique of manipulating the media and mainly occurs when media outlets are state-owned or affiliated with a certain political party.

² Oxford Dictionary

³ Oxford Dictionary

The term “fake news”, as the first part of this compound noun would suggest, refers to the publishing of fake stories concerning current events so as to make people believe in the success/failure of a politician. For example, in periods before elections news broadcasters often publish stories about scandals concerning the personal life of a candidate. Although these stories are not always true, they influence the voting behavior of the electorate. This method includes publishing (or concealing) certain photos and videos so as to shape the opinion of the public. In times of war, for example, photos of brutal scenes are not shown to avoid public outrage. In countries with authoritarian regimes, fake news is the only method used to manipulate the public, since the broadcasting of news is controlled by the government. However, in countries where many independent media exist, fake news is also a common practice used in combination with the following techniques.

Distraction

When major events are occurring, which put a political party in a difficult situation, the involved party may use the technique of distraction. This means that it exaggerates other, more appealing events, the knowledge of which is, however, of less importance to the public, in order to attract the attention of the media and the people and prevent them from criticizing its political decisions. Alternatively, it can use the media to create a diversion by publishing a large number of less important stories, thereby causing confusion.

Scapegoats

Scapegoats are usually people, groups, other countries, or anything else that politicians blame for their mistakes or for the overall situation. For example, a common practice of nationalist politicians is making accusations against immigrants for the deterioration of the situation in their country. Especially when some news agencies are affiliated with a certain political party, scapegoats can be used by the media to justify the party’s actions, even if those actions are ineffective or not in the state’s best interests.

Astroturfing

“Astroturfing” is an attempt to create the illusion that a certain cause, opinion or individual has widespread public support. When political parties use astroturfing, they aim at promoting themselves by making the public believe that they are acting in the greater good, that their supporters are already convinced and therefore that everyone else should believe them as well. This may be noticed everywhere in the media. It is especially common in blogs and comment sections of articles on the Internet, where individuals pretending to

be impartial and objective are posting their biased opinions supporting a specific stance. Such individuals or groups are often employed by politicians in order to increase their supporters. This has been facilitated by the anonymity of a single person and the possibility of possessing numerous social media accounts through which he/she is able to voice the same opinion supporting a cause. Although astroturfing is illegal in most countries, it is rarely detected since the aforementioned conveniences of the web can be easily exploited.

Appealing to Emotions

It is commonly known that often our emotions strongly influence our actions. Corrupt politicians do not hesitate to exploit this fact and use the media in order to provoke human emotions, which will lead the public to taking decisions in their favor. This can be achieved by showing graphic pictures or by exaggerating the danger that lies in a specific situation. Thereby, fear is provoked and politicians can capitalize on this emotion so as to persuade people to make a sacrifice which is portrayed as necessary or even present any unpopular decisions as “necessary”. Furthermore, another strategy is to provoke emotions of guilt. More specifically, people are being lead to believing that they are responsible for problems, which are in fact caused by their government. In that way, the mobilization and outcry of the public is prevented.

Further media manipulation techniques do exist, but they are used more rarely.

Such is the creation of fake problems. First, the partisans use their social media accounts to spread rumors about a problem, creating an issue which however does not exist in reality. Then, they would solve the issue, making themselves look like heroes and increasing their supporters. In other words, they fabricate a problem so as to solve it.

In order, however, for the aforementioned techniques to have the desired results it is important that the public does not think critically. This is usually achieved by oversimplifying information and not presenting it in depth. Media are approaching the citizens with excessive kindness, exactly as they would approach children, forcing them to follow a childish thought process, in which critical thinking does not play an important role and emotions and instincts control one’s actions.

Last but not least, a precondition for the success of any method is the accessibility to the personal data of the public. Only in this case it is possible to produce a fallacy, which will make a person support the desired opinion. Unfortunately for us, in the technological era we live in, such information is not very hard to get ahold of. Through social media, most people publish information about them, which, when

interpreted correctly—which usually is the case as psychologists are being employed to achieve this— can reveal a lot about their personality.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Norway

Norway is, according to an RSF (Reporters sans frontières / Reporters Without Borders) report, the global leader in press freedom, something that has become a tradition in the country. Media manipulation in general is almost non-existent and an outcry has been provoked even when there was the slightest suspicion of censorship. Local news broadcasters have even tried to form an alliance against the influence of tech-giants, such as Facebook and Google, so as to prevent them from manipulating the public.

United States of America

The situation concerning media manipulation is constantly deteriorating in the USA with President Donald J. Trump playing an important role in it. The current administration is accusing news broadcasters of biased and fake news, going as far as blocking access to the White House in order to restrict its critics. Simultaneously, President Trump has been very active on social media platforms, especially on Twitter, discussing important political issues. It has been recently revealed that the candidates in the 2016 presidential election used personal information of citizens collected from social media to manipulate and optimize their political campaigns. Additionally, most social media platforms stem from the USA, giving the country an even more important role in this issue.

Turkey

Since the attempted “coup d’état” in 2016, numerous media outlets have been shut down or controlled in Turkey and many journalists have been imprisoned. With Turkey being the country with the most imprisoned journalists in the world, it is evident that all media are being directly (state owned) or indirectly (fear among journalists) controlled by the state, making it much easier for the government officials to manipulate them. Therefore, for Turkey it is absolutely necessary to combat media manipulation as a form of political corruption.

China

The government of China has been trying to combat media manipulation by non-state actors. This has led to a total control of all media by the Communist Party which

is currently governing. The situation is similar to that of Turkey, with the difference that the social media are state-controlled as well. This makes it obvious that the government is aiming at maintaining its power by manipulating the media and thereby the opinions and thoughts of its citizens.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

In general, UNESCO is an organization, which seeks to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN in Agenda 2030. However, another main objective of this organization is safeguarding freedom of expression and protecting journalists. These two goals are vital for combatting media manipulation, involving UNESCO directly in the present issue. Furthermore, UNESCO supports several media freedom groups such as Reporters Without Borders and the International Federation of Journalists, which are devoted to protecting journalists and promoting free and impartial media.

Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

United Nations Convention against Corruption

This treaty was adopted by the GA Resolution 58/4 on 31 October 2003 and promoted by the UN Commission on Drugs and Crime. It refers to combatting corruption in general but it can apply to the case of media manipulation as an expression of political corruption as well.

Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

The main objectives of this treaty, which was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris (October 20, 2005), revolve around the protection of cultural diversity. However, it incorporates clauses specifying diversity and freedom of media, goals that were included in the discussions about the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There have been no substantial attempts to solve this particular issue by the United Nations. However, conferences on mass media are being organized yearly and in that context the issue of Media Manipulation can be discussed in the future.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1974-1980	Intense discussions about the NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order) were being held.
May 3, 1991	Windhoek Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly (GA) of the UN concerning media freedom, pluralism, and independence. May 3 was also declared to be the "World Press Freedom Day".
October 31, 2003	The UN Convention against Corruption was adopted by the GA.
October 20, 2005	The convention on cultural diversity was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO.
2012	Elections were held in South Korea (Republic of Korea). Later, the country's secret services (NIS) admitted to having manipulated the media to shape the public opinion in favor of the candidate who won the elections.
2016	Before the U.S. presidential election, a company, which was hired to support the county's current president, used personal information of Facebook users so as to manipulate them through various methods.

Possible Solutions

The main factor, which politicians are exploiting so as to manipulate the media is the lack of critical thinking on the part of their audience. When people can think critically, they can detect any attempt that is being made to manipulate them. Therefore, the development of critical thinking in schooling may be a decisive step in rendering media manipulation techniques inefficient. Furthermore, information campaigns organized by the UN and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on the dangers of media could be very helpful. By informing people of the ways, in which they are manipulated by the media, it is possible to prevent manipulation, since people will be familiar with the manipulation methods and therefore, will have the ability to notice when a broadcast or article is being manipulative. This will result in avoiding such news and not being influenced by them.

Manipulators are also taking advantage of the new technologies, which are not addressed by the legal framework of many countries as they are constantly evolving.

That way, they are able to manipulate the media without violating the law and the authorities do not have any right to stop them. In order to tackle this issue, countries need to consult experts on technology with a view to modify their legal framework and sanction any form of media manipulation. Imposing sanctions needs to be stricter for government officials, as they will be deceiving the people, instead of working for them. Such sanctions can be: fines, removal from power, revocation of media permits, detention.

Additionally, establishing short periods before the Election day, in which it will be prohibited for the candidates and the media to broadcast about the forthcoming elections. In that way, all forms of manipulation of the media aiming at increasing a party's voters will be prevented. Even though these periods should only be 3-7 days long and manipulation could take place during the previous days, it will not influence the voters' final decision.

Lastly, I would like to mention that, when trying to address the issue of media manipulation, we should not propose censorship of the media as a solution. Such a measure would only result in the manipulation of media by the agency responsible for the censorship, as they will have the power and the right to control the information accessible to the public.

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