

DISINFORMING THE MISINFORMED: ELITISM AND MEDIA MANIPULATION

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I shall begin with two quotations from the noted American journalist and editor, H. L. Mencken, known as “the Sage of Baltimore” “The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.” (*In Defense of Women*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922: 74) “A Newspaper Is a Device for Making the Ignorant More Ignorant and the Crazy Crazier.” Répétition Générale” by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness*, March 1920: 47-48).

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For over a century, the manipulation of public opinion has been standard operating procedure for governments and business. The impetus for the massive implementing of propaganda policies was The First World War. Men who served in government during the war took their expertise into the private sector. The propaganda campaigns continued after the end of hostilities as a new war had broken out, an ideological one between Communism and capitalism. The new Soviet Union spent much of its energy in its formative years attempting to foment world revolution or trying to destabilize the European governments and the United States of America. This led to a Red Scare in the United States and the collapse of the first socialist government on the United Kingdom because of a forged letter. The so-called Zinoviev letter was published in the British newspaper *The Daily Mail* in October of 1924. It was alleged to have been written by Grigori Zinoviev, the chair of the Executive Committee of the Communist International--Comintern, the Secretary of the Comintern Otto Kuusinen and Arthur MacManus, a British Communist Party Member and a member of the Comintern Executive Committee, and addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain. It called for a rapprochement as a prelude to the British revolution:

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A settlement of relations between the two countries will assist in the revolutionizing of the international and British proletariat not less than a successful rising in any of the working districts of England, as the establishment of close contact between the British and Russian proletariat, the exchange of delegations and workers, etc. will make it possible for us to extend and develop the propaganda of ideas of Leninism in England and the Colonies. ("The Zinoviev Letter." G. Zinoviev, Mcmanus, Kuusinen and J. D. Gregory. *Advocate of Peace Through Justice*. December, 1924, Vol. 86, No. 12. December, 1924: 695-698 at 696).

Conventional history asserts that the letter's provenance was immediately suspected by British intelligence, but wary of their reputation they failed to disabuse the government. On the contrary, the letter is now thought to have been part of a plot by the intelligence service to bring down the government; the letter, in fact, originated from the service itself. The service was not protecting itself from the accusation that it had failed to do its job; it was shielding itself from accusations of gross impropriety, if not treason. (Richard Norton-Taylor. "Zinoviev letter was dirty trick by MI6" *The Guardian* 3 February 1999. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/feb/04/uk.politicalnews6>).

This extraordinary example, which remains one of the great scandals in British political history, reveals the relative ease by which a newspaper was used to profoundly influence an election and thereby history. Two years earlier, the almost back-to-back publication of two books marks a sea change in the public consciousness: *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann and *Crystalizing Public Opinion* by Edward Bernays. Both men had worked for the United States government during World War I. Lippmann's book was an attack on public and private publicity agency. Bernays saw the impact of Lippmann's work and quickly put together his own book designed to promote his own business. He distorted Lippmann through the prism of his own ambition, and for the rest of his life asserted that Lippmann had provided the theory, while he offered the application. This was false. (Sue Curry Jansen, "Semantic Tyranny: How Edward L. Bernays Stole Walter Lippmann's Mojo and Got Away With It and Why It Still Matters." *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1094-1111 at 1094).

Earlier, we looked at an example from British politics in the 1920s, let us look back to the first quarter of the 20th century in the United States. Consider the First Red Scare, the savage disillusionment that occurred after World War I, and the bitterness towards internationalist idealism that accompanied it. In many ways, the hypocrisy and ignorance that poisoned Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy remain a toxic force in the American psyche into the 21st century. The Wilson administration's pioneering manipulation of public opinion also must be recognized as groundbreaking in its official presentation of war aims and other public policies. For our purposes, Wilson's conscious use of propaganda techniques is particularly relevant. Wilson created something called the Committee on Public Information to manage awareness of the war. The noted journalist Walter Lippmann was an adviser to the President yet was critical of what he considered the Committee's unsophisticated methods. His experiences monitoring the Committee and its work contributed to his influential book, *Public Opinion* (1922), the first such

socio-psychological study. Lippmann coined the term “stereotype,” and his text remains a landmark.

The involvement of the film industry and movie stars in managing the American public also dates from Wilson’s time. Lippmann advocated taking advantage of the burgeoning popularity of motion pictures to influence public opinion. He saw that not only films per se, but movie theaters and performers could be put to use. The First World War showed movie stars themselves the extraordinary popularity they had achieved. Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, to name but three, were astonished by the hordes that greeted them when they first agreed to appear at rallies to sell war bonds. Movie stars mobbed by their fans, when being put to use by a government pushing its war program, is the moment society is overtaken by mediatized modernism. Printed images of performers had been widely circulated since the days of the actress/playwright Isabella Andreini the internationally renowned star of the Commedia dell’Arte troupe, La Compagnia dei Gelosi, and Will Kemp’s “Nine Days’ Wonder” in the late 16th century. Engravings, photographs, and other souvenirs of performers multiplied through the centuries. With the advent of international cinema however, audiences could associate themselves directly with their stars as never before. This absorption with the figure on the screen is as much a reflection of alienation in the modern era as it is a product of star-making publicity machinery. Add the power of a government at war to this fan frenzy, and the process expands exponentially.

I would add that this aspect of popular entertainment is part of Walter Lippmann’s deep distrust of that opinion. Films are part of the mass media that Lippmann blames for the degeneration of public deliberation into either acclamation or vituperation. (Walter Lippmann. *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace. 1922: 51). Of course, no one would want morale to be low during a crisis and boosting it is important. The problem arises when it is not so much morale that needs lifting, but dissent that must be hindered.

Once stirred up “public opinion” is difficult to calm down. The extraordinary wartime measures gave the public a steady stream of extremism. The enemy was not just an army on battlefields overseas; it was an ideology and a sinister force that was operating inside the United States driven by the dreaded “fifth columnists.” Lippmann’s fear of a mediatized public is well founded. (Walter Lippmann. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922: 51, 87, 91-92).

The same devices that he saw develop during the First World War to mobilize the people into a patriotic pro-war frenzy could be adapted to stir up the public over any issue. What is more, ever since World War I, those propaganda techniques transmogrified into “public relations” by Edward Bernays, had been turning a nation of rugged individuals into mass consumers. The task of the “public relations counsel” (Bernays coined the term) is to direct sales toward a group in such a way as to get into the subconscious desires of the individual. Bernays declares that a man will buy a car because its color reminds him of his college banner and that people’s diet can be influenced simply by having it seem that a medical professional recommends a particular food. Sentimental notions or fears within the public can easily be manipulated, but Bernays insists that proper propaganda must pay close attention to the public’s pulse. (Edward Bernays. *Propaganda*. (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928: 47-55).

Edward Bernays is the self-proclaimed father of public relations, though, most experts in the field award that title to Ivy Lee, most famous for repainting the ugly public face of John D. Rockefeller. Therefore, it may be that Bernays's most successful campaign was creating his own image as the ultimate public relations guru. In 1919, Bernays was part of the presidential delegation to France. It is significant that Wilson brought along Bernays, and others, to ensure that the propaganda for the League of Nations and the treaty would be successful. He thought more about that than bothering to invite senators from the opposition party in Congress, to accompany him. Many historians blame this blunder on the subsequent failure of the Senate to ratify the treaty. Wilson ignored everyone's advice and took his case directly to the American people with a national speaking tour. He exhausted himself and suffered a stroke in the process. Bernays later commented, "Never place too great a reliance on words. Words may win your war and lose your peace. In public relations, as in all other pursuits, actions speak louder than words." (Edward L. Bernays, *Public Relations*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952: 75).

Bernays was inspired by the propaganda techniques of the Woodrow Wilson administration and his intimate connection to his uncle Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious. By the end of the war, "propaganda" had become a term of opprobrium and, as noted, he fashioned a new term and created a new profession, "public relations counsel." Bernays insisted that businesses must assume that irrationality dominated decision-making; he went on to make a fortune manipulating the American people.

Bernays and other professional propagandists were so successful that as early as 1935, a seventy-nine-page annotated bibliography of over 4500 titles related to public relations was published by the University of Minnesota. This bibliography reveals how quickly and deeply the roots of the manipulation of public opinion were established and acknowledged. Interestingly the compilers of the bibliography rejected Bernays's euphemism and entitled their work: "The Channels of Propaganda" Lasswell, Harold D., Ralph D. Casey, And Bruce Lannes Smith. "The Channels of Propaganda." In *Propaganda and Promotional Activities: An Annotated Bibliography*, New ed., 264–343. University of Minnesota Press, 1935. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt5xg.8>.

After the Second World War, psychologists who had analyzed military personnel had been shocked at what they deemed disturbing levels of mental instability. Fearing a crisis, William Menninger, of the famous family that founded the Menninger Clinic and President of the American Psychoanalytic Association, drafted and saw passed through Congress, The National Mental Health Act of 1946. Local mental health centers proliferated. Many of the therapists who staffed them were in thrall to the notions of another Freud:

Thousands of counselors were trained to apply psychoanalysis to marriage guidance, and social workers were sent out to visit people's homes and advise them on the psychological structure of family life. Behind all this was the fundamental idea of Anna Freud's -- that if people were encouraged to conform to the accepted patterns of family and social life then their ego would be strengthened. They would be able to control the dangerous forces within them. (*Century of the Self*. Transcript of the documentary film. Written and Produced by Adam Curtis. BBC (2002): 18. <http://aireform.com/wp-content/uploads/20160219cpy-Century-of-the-Self-Transcript-4-part-film-series-by-A.Curtis-55p.pdf>.)

The idea that the irrational masses must be controlled is profoundly undemocratic, but that was also the basis of Bernays's business model. In this way, he perverted Lippmann's arguments against such manipulation (Jansen 1095).

Bernays was not a trained psychologist, but Dr. Ernest Dichter was. He had studied at the University of Vienna and the Sorbonne. Before fleeing from Vienna in 1938, he had practiced next door to Sigmund Freud. Dichter would apply the group therapy techniques used by doctors during and after the war to help suffering veterans to a new form of consumer research. In 1946, he founded the Institute for Motivational Research. One of his staff psychologists, Fritz Gehagen recalled:

And he said why can't we have a group therapy session about products? And so Dichter built this room up above his garage and he said we can have psychoanalysis of products, they can actually act out and verbalize their wants and needs. And they could be observed and watched and other people could comment and they could talk about it and everybody could join in. He was the first to do this, this was absolutely the first time this was ever done. And he had a movie projector up there where you could show advertisements and people could react to them and he invented the whole technique for mining the unconscious about the hidden psychological wants that people had about products. This became the focus group. (Curtis 20)

Consumerism had its roots in the 1920s, but it flourished as never before in the late 1940s and 1950s. Building on the foundation that Bernays had created, marketing specialists and advertisers cemented mass media manipulation of post-war America.

However, reifying the dreams of affluence proved fleeting. In the middle of the 1950s, two signal texts revealed that there was an awareness of the transformation of society. Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) was a literary portrait of a veteran struggling with his life and times. William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* offered a sociological analysis of the corporatized citizen. Both authors seemed to be town criers of the new watchword: conformity. They are more complicated than that though; it is not mere revisionism to question a monolithic assessment of the era. Anna Freud's implicit prognosis was that without some method of imposing conformity chaos would come again. The horrendous violence of the war years traumatized every strata of society, not only the returned veterans. If this was a time of such conformity, then what of all those busy local mental health centers, the developing civil rights struggle, the anxiety over juvenile delinquency, and other symptoms of unrest. A film from 1957, *No Down Payment* depicts life in a subdivision as a mixture of alcoholism, racism, promiscuity, financial tension, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It was not a hit, but someone at Twentieth Century Fox must have thought it had box office potential. Gone were the days when a studio would risk losing money on a prestige project. Nevertheless, while ambivalence about the changes in society were implied by Wilson and Whyte; they were shown in Ritt's mainstream Hollywood film. This cultural neurosis had been percolating ever since the Russians had exploded their own atomic bomb.

I conclude with a mention of George W. S. Trow's landmark essay, *Within the Context of No Context*. Trow contrasts the authority of newspapers and the connection of print-

based media to both geography itself and the social landscape. He is fundamentally inspired by family connections to these phenomena. His great-great-grandfather published a printed directory of New York City businesses that lasted from 1842 until the early 20th century; his father was an editor of *The New York Post*. Print and a text that one can be held in one's hands is crucial to Trow's vision of culture. His ancestor's printed directory literally grounded an entire society. The newspaper his father edited was the world folded in one's hands that one could read on the subway. Trow's essay adumbrates the decline of the newspaper and the devolution of information via the mass medium of television. Trow's "non-context" is created by the relentless meaninglessness of television programs that are ephemeral not only because they are broadcast, but as they are exclusively topical, that is all they can be.

The constant function of topicality is to erase permanence. Without the possibility of permanence, there can be no context. There is no means of achieving any greater understanding. There is no possibility of analysis more significant than something spontaneous, delivered off the top of one's head. Trow's essay is a despondent response to Marshall McLuhan's messianic "medium is the message" mantra. Trow presages its dread consequence, "journalism no longer [being] the source of truth but an instrument" to be used for the fulfillment of goals. (Graham Majin, "Bitter Fruit: Marshall McLuhan and the Rise of Fake News" *Quillette* 18 January 2022 <https://quillette.com/2022/01/18/bitter-fruit-is-marshall-mcluhan-responsible-for-the-rise-of-fake-news/>). By 1967 McLuhan had been declared the "savant and prophet" (Quirk qtd. by Majin) of the new technology, the Chief Priest of the Age of Information. McLuhan made media part of the public's consciousness. Remember though that the "global village" that he constructed is a place where the tribal drumbeats were advertising jingles, and "the informational content of a message should be disregarded because it was an illusion" (Majin). McLuhan laid the foundation for the post-truth era.

Ours is a "hyper-mediated" age. "Based on a true story" has become such a commonplace that it is almost taken for granted that TV shows do little more than trawl tabloids for their plots. Many people claim that they know that so-called Reality Shows are in fact scripted, but one has to wonder about the sophistication level of the fan base for "The Real Housewives" and the myriad of other such programs. This has gotten to the point where even the ridiculousness of "zombies" has to be discussed with a degree of decorum because of hoaxes involving the Center for Disease Control and horrific "copycat" crimes by drug-ravaged sociopaths. To complicate matters the CDC eventually admitted that its 2011 "zombie apocalypse" warning was a deliberate tactic to get people's attention about preparedness for disasters. A perfect example of talking down to people—or was it a sophisticated public service announcement? Now with the manipulation techniques available such as deep fakes and other synthetic media it is easy to create the impression that someone has done something. Indeed, it is much more than an impression. In the metaverse one can make *anyone do anything*.

We live in a world of nostalgia for the vanished paradise of discourse because we are subjected to endless ranting from pulpits propped up in echo chambers. Populists rage

against the elites; fake news flourishes and its fruits are conspiracy theories that feed on themselves and nourish hatred and intolerance. A century of disinformation has rendered misinformation *virtually* impossible to detect. We must recognize that the post-war technology boom did not create The Information Age, but The Disinformation Age.

References

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