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Images and symbols in public communications

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Abstract

This paper is focused on examining persuasive technologies that use images and symbols as an instrument of creating cognitive links, and forming desired ideological models within social consciousness in the context of public communications. The objective of this research is to prove a hypothesis that the exploitation of images and symbols resonating with a target audience plays a key role in the effectiveness of political manipulations, propaganda, and information warfare. Methodology of this research is based on qualitative approach, and consists of comparative analysis of three cases: historic precedents where similar manipulative techniques were applied in the course of political upheavals with a purpose of shifting, shaping, and controlling public mind, and system of values. Political manipulations of the French Revolution's later stages, the Third Reich, and the ongoing information war in Russia related to local authorities' abuse of power, and initiation of the war in Ukraine, were analyzed and compared. The study is intended to complement existing works on public communications, political manipulations with social consciousness, and the use of images & symbols in the process of persuasion.

Keywords: public communications; social consciousness; manipulative mechanisms; political propaganda; images; symbols.

1. Introduction

The topic of manipulations with public consciousness has been a subject of social scientists' significant interest since early 20th century. Academic curiosity towards the mechanisms of mass influence kept growing exponentially as global society was witnessing unprecedented effectiveness of propaganda during World War I, World War II, and subsequent totalitarian regimes in USSR, and divided Germany (Fedotova, 2003). Numerous social, political, and psychological researchers started to wonder what kind of manipulative technologies were used; how and why they worked in the past; and whether they are likely to work in the future. Particular attention was paid to such vivid examples of manipulations with social consciousness as political propaganda, ideological struggles, and information wars. Throughout the world, researchers attempted to identify and understand the mechanisms of shaping public opinion, forms of disseminating propaganda, reactions of different social groups on different types of persuasive technologies, and the role of mass media in such political

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equilibristics. Numerous attempts to analyze the phenomenon of successful manipulations with public consciousness have been taken.

1.1 Previous Research

Before moving on to manipulative mechanisms themselves and attempts to explain the principles of their operation, it is essential to get a clear idea on what traditional functions and effects of public communication channels are. According to the works of H. Laswell, originally, mass communication had three fundamental functions (Laswell, 1948), which are: informative (disseminating information within a society), communicative (influencing public opinion, social consciousness, and patterns of mass behavior), and culture-transmitting (passing norms, values, and ideologies from one social group / generation to another). In addition, C. Wright has introduced an “entertaining” function (Wright, 1960). However, a couple of decades later, D. McQuail and S. Windahl suggested to complement existing list with a “mobilizing” function, which prevails in the course of political and social campaigns by playing a role of a “trigger”, or a “call to action” that encourages a target audience to either take or refrain from certain actions (McQuail & Windahl, 1981). This description already sounds like a precise definition of manipulations with public consciousness designed to impose certain ideas and disseminate them within certain groups. Although the main “official” function of mass communication is to purely inform, it would be a serious mistake to rely on statements coming from mass media as a source of ultimate truth and verified facts. As a general rule, the actual goal of such “communicators” as media channels, most of which are either government-sponsored or influenced by political parties, is suggesting initially biased picture of the world, imposing prejudiced point of view, and shaping public opinion in accordance with the needs of those at the top (Khan & Ullah, 2020). The brightest illustrations of how mass media manage to shift social opinion on significant issues are information wars and PR activities (Gamson & Wolsfeld, 1993). What’s interesting, in general, persuasive technologies applied in the course of political confrontations and marketing campaigns are very similar. Over the decades, social scientists of the 20th century have been building the foundation for analyzing the power of manipulative public communications over social consciousness. C. Hovland dedicated his research to the factors influencing persuasive communication effects (Hovland et al., 1953). K. Mannheim studied the problem of “social technology” (Mannheim, 1936): methods that impact human behavior and serve as means of social control. H. Schiller researched the influence of mass media on one’s consciousness, formation of public opinion, and social management (Schiller, 1973). H. Marcuse analyzed the mechanisms of humans’ subordination to information technologies (Marcuse, 1964). However, even a cascade of solid theories on the means of social impact did not make it easier to accept the fact that numerous large groups of reasonable and educated individuals proved to be so easily manipulated into groundless hatred towards representatives of different nations, ethnicities, religions, and other social characteristics upon discretion of political leaders. How can a rather primitive political

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manipulation have sufficient power over social mind to turn peaceful communities into violent fighters, make a society buy into irrational and destructive war-oriented ideology, and turn on its head a whole nation's system of values? According to the theory that inspired this paper, the effectiveness of manipulative techniques applied by political leaders is ensured by appealing to resonating images and symbols that are capable of evoking strong emotions in a "target audience". P. Nora became the first researcher who suggested that preserving the unity of society requires creating new historical images (Nora, 1998), that's images of the past that serve as an abstract, symbolic model of historic reality ingrained in public consciousness. The formation of the "image of the past" model starts from choosing an object that's going to serve as a symbol. It can be an image of certain time period (i.e., Medieval Age; modern society), an image of specific historic events (French Revolution, World War II), an image of "others" (enemy, ally), an image of certain historic character (Louis IV, Martin Luther), or a collective image. These images can be transmitted by governmental, socio-political, and propagandistic structures, artistic and political elites, or wide social categories (i.e., French, Americans, modern society). In addition, texts, pictures, and videos that express the worldviews of these groups can serve as "carriers" disseminating generated historic symbols, which are capable of influencing a target audience. This turns films, belles-letters, performing arts, and any other forms of storytelling into potential tools for ingraining certain ideas, and attitudes in public mind. Writers, playwrights, and directors often base their works (i.e., books, theater plays, films) on important political, social, and cultural issues, and successfully manage to draw public attention to existing problems, and make them share the proposed point of view (or at least consider it). Thus, they can shape public opinion by simply telling a story, which is capable of provoking the audience to think and act. The same principle applies to other forms of art, i.e., songs, paintings etc. On the one hand, such power of arts provides a society with illustrious opportunity to change the world for the better in the most peaceful and beautiful way, by sharing creative expression. On the other hand, just like any other instrument, it can be used for either good or evil. According to J. Nye, artworks have often been exploited by political leaders to create the so-called "image of external enemy" by showing representatives of certain nation or ethnic / social group in a sharply negative light, and subtly nudging the audience to form negative attitude towards them (Nye, 2003). Thus, arts and storytelling, as well as images and symbols may be used for either making an audience more educated, thoughtful, and emotionally intelligent, or exercising manipulations with public mind to get more control over society.

2. Comparative analysis of persuasive technologies applied in different times and settings

According to G. Le Bon, it is sensual images triggered by certain words and expressions that can impress the masses during a speech, not the logic and reasoning of what is said (Le Bon, 1895). Thus, the success of influencing a crowd depends on the form of a message rather than its substance, and it is this form that is capable of shaping public mind. The art of forming the "right" global picture by affecting social consciousness through images and symbols is a remarkably powerful, and ancient instrument of public communications, which has been

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forming, developing, and evolving for centuries. This craft has originated in Ancient Greece, along with the emergence of public politics and public courts. The mastery of making speeches full of bright images and symbols that are so powerful as to have an impact on an audience's perception of reality has always been, is, and will be a key to enormous political influence, and power. The Ancient Greek socio-political system itself, where all public issues of significant importance were to be solved in people's assemblies (ecclesiae) was contributing to talents for persuasion and eloquence being recognized as indispensable instruments of policy making. Excellent language and communication skills, and ability to persuade turned into a source of power. Furthermore, the oratory mastery played a crucial role in the Ancient Greek litigation, which was exercised in the form of heliaia (specific jury trial). The life of defendant often depended on his ability to affect the audience's perception of his character. By the way, the same principles apply to contemporary jury trials. The verdict and sentence often depend on the image of defendant, and his history created by either defense, or prosecution: whose storytelling will turn out to be more expressive and convincing. Therefore, there is no wonder that rhetoric, which was described by Cicero's contemporaries as a "science of persuading with the art of words" (The History of Rhetoric, 2022) has quickly become the most significant part of education in Ancient Greece and Rome. In the course of time, the tasks of appealing to images and symbols have been taken to a new level. While originally these techniques were only used to form "the right" image in public consciousness of ancient assemblies, over the years, they got a much more significant application: images and symbols started to be used for the purposes of transforming ideological values of the whole nations. Through history, taking advantage of constructed, altered, or misinterpreted images of the past has played the lead role in contributing to organization of large-scaled riots, revolutions, wars, and political regime changes. In order to support a hypothesis that the use of images and symbols is a key element of any successful manipulation with social consciousness, and it is what makes mass disinformation work, several cases where similar persuasive methods were used by political leaders with a purpose of controlling public mind were examined and compared.

2.1 The French Revolution

Let's consider an example of "La Révolution Française", the French Revolution. Initially, it has been inspired by great minds, the Enlightenment's ideas, and quest for justice. The fundament of the revolution consisted of Montesquieu's writings, where he encouraged "appellation of political virtue" (Montesquieu, 1748), and emphasized the significance of "the love of one's country, and of equality" (Montesquieu, 1748), as well as reasonable arguments on the incapacity of a monarch to be a sole power holder. The nation strived to turn the ideal of "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" ("Liberty, equality, fraternity") into reality. Being influenced by the Enlightenment and its values, the society was ready to break the outdated "old order" and start an era of liberated minds. However, the key word here is "initially". The goals were reached: Louis XVI officially gave up his authorities, the French Constitution of 1791 was adopted, and the monarchy was abolished. However, instead of concentrating on building a better future for France and French, leaders of opposing political factions (i.e., Jacobins,

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Girondins, Cordeliers, Dantonists etc.) started a struggle for power that eventually led to massacres and the Terror of 1793. In order to gather supporters and control public mind, political leaders appealed to the images of “the enemy” (i.e., aristocracy, or literally anyone who does not support the revolution), “dark past” (monarchy’s abuses) and “bright future”, which has never come for so many ones fighting for it. Manipulating mechanism was simple but powerful. First of all, the revolutionary leaders appealed to the idea of the monarchy’s injustice, which was naturally resonating with the whole society, and supported it by examples of authorities’ abuses from the past. Then they labeled any opposition as “supporters of the monarchy”. Finally, they appealed to the symbols of liberty and equality, and promised the future based on these principles (that will come as soon as the revolutionary leaders come to power). According to E. Burke, in the course of the French Revolution, it became clear that images, symbols, and language are going to be the most powerful instruments in the toolkit of ruling authorities (Burke, 1790).

2.2 The Third Reich

The most vivid and very precise description of political mechanisms operating in the Third Reich was made by Australian writer Marcus Zusak in his novel “The Book Thief”, which says that the Third Reich has been “ruled with words” (Zusak, 2005). Here are some highly relevant quotes that explain persuasive technologies of those times better than any student book. “The Fuhrer decided that he would rule the world with words. “I will never fire a gun”, he said. “I will not have to” (Zusak, 2005). Indeed, as a general rule, political leaders that are skilled in rhetoric and psychological manipulations don’t have to put themselves in danger by fighting for their own goals. Instead, they need to create crowds of fanatical supporters and / or scared subordinates who will do this for them. “His first plan of attack was to plant the words. He watched them grow, until eventually, great forests of words had risen throughout Germany... It was a nation of farmed thoughts.” (Zusak, 2005). This is an exact “diagnosis” of any totalitarian regime. When the whole nation is brainwashed on a daily basis, and new generations are born, and raised under the influence of propaganda, controlling a society’s cognitive models, system of values, and ideological settings becomes an easy task. “While the words were growing, our young Fuhrer also planted seeds to create symbols.” (Zusak, 2005). Hitler controlled social consciousness by using blackened image of certain ethnic groups as “the enemy” guilty of all political, social, and economic problems. He was drawing public attention to every single negative incident related to these groups that has ever taken place in the past; and promising a better future for Germany, and for the whole world as soon as it gets rid of his “enemies”. According to C. Hsu, Hitler also worked hard on creating his own public image and disseminating it via mass media: dozens of papers published pictures where he was portrayed as a likeable man playing with his dogs or holding children’s hands (Hsu, 2015). By presenting himself as a “country gentleman” (Hsu, 2015) instead of fanatical Fuhrer, Hitler successfully managed to win the trust of an average German citizen.

2.3 Information war in Russia

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A more recent example illustrating the use of manipulative technologies and propaganda is the ongoing information war in Russia, which keeps taking more and more violent forms since the mass protests that followed the arrest of Russian political opposition leader Alexey Navalny (Kuznetsova, 2022), and came to a climax after the wave of mass protests against the ongoing war in Ukraine (BBC News). According to Russia's foreign agents law, all independent mass media that criticize the current political regime, authorities, or the war in Ukraine, are immediately labeled as "foreign agents" that must not be trusted, subjected to extreme censorship, and repressed in every possible way (Salaru, 2022). At the same time, all official, government-sponsored mass communication channels actively produce exclusively political propaganda in attempt to convince the society that all military crimes of authorities are justified (Kuznetsova, 2022). First of all, they heavily rely on the "enemy" image by presenting Ukraine, USA, NATO, and any state that has publicly criticized actions of Russian authorities as "enemies" who make up false accusations against Russian government for the sake of their own political reasons. Besides, they actively exploit images of the past victories from the World War II times where Soviet soldiers symbolized heroism, self-sacrifice, and faithfulness to their homeland, and what's important, those are the images that several generations of Russians grew up on. Finally, they appeal to the old USSR symbols to evoke nostalgic emotions and empathy towards the old regime among older generations, and promise a better future that, supposedly, will come after the rebirth of the Soviet era (BBC, 2014). As threatening as it sounds to the vast majority of post-Soviet states, this idea resonates with a big percentage of older population within Russia who miss the Soviet times, and prefer them to present regime. As a result, the part of society that relies on official TV & radio channels and newspapers (i.e., the vast majority within older generations) is subjected to political propaganda, and brainwashing every time they interact with mass media. Thus, the only version of the ongoing situation that this audience ever gets is distorted facts, and alternative reality's picture of the world imposed by the government. Such deficit of non-corrupted media, as well as brutal prosecution of anyone who publicly expresses an opposing point of view (Kuznetsova, 2022) enables authorities to keep a huge percentage of society ignorant, and thus, turn them into easy targets for political manipulations.

3. Discussion

Based on precedents described above, several patterns of similar manipulative processes can be identified. In all three cases, which took place in different time periods and countries, and under different circumstances, political leaders managed to create distorted pictures of the world capable of shifting public attitudes in desired direction, and disseminate them among masses by exploiting the same three types of images.

3.1 Selective history: images of the past

The image of the past is a very complicated concept that integrates many different meanings. It's not just an intellectual metaphor anymore; it's one of the most important instruments of

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manipulating the attitudes of society. The uncertainty and unpredictability of the future have substantial influence on social coordinates system, and thus, force one to look for some stable spiritual and social grounds, and “*raisons d’être*” for one’s past life. Any society tends to make attempts of compensating the ambiguity and vagueness of the future by unequivocal assessment of the past. Going back to P. Nora’s theory, creation of new historical images is capable of uniting a society (Nora, 1998). According to the cases described above, these images are also capable of manipulating a society into a hatred towards and / or fear of the old regime, political opposition, or certain social, or ethnic groups. There is no even need to fake historical events to exercise these manipulations. It is enough to focus a society’s attention on the facts that are corresponding to the formation of desired public attitudes, and simply ignore everything out of “the right image” frameworks. For instance, the history of World War II became a subject of permanent ideological manipulations. For numerous states, it turned into a norm to focus the society’s attention on the events that are favorable for the national image, and ignore all unsightly facts. For instance, until recently, most Russian schools did not consider getting students familiarized with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 as something that is worth being included in the history classes program. Instead, authorities prefer new generations to grow up with an idea that they are born in a country that consists exclusively of heroes, while learning anything related to the precedents of authorities’ crimes is highly undesirable. Thus, the soil for susceptibility to political propaganda is prepared from one’s school years. Under regime of dictatorship, the history often tends to be divided into the must-to-know facts, and the facts that one should not learn about. Naturally, the best objects for practicing political manipulations with a use of distorted images of the past are the states that practice partial, selective study of historic events.

3.2 Utopian promises: images of the future

Whenever appealing to pictures of the past turns out to be insufficient for the purposes of ingraining the “right” behavior patterns into public consciousness, there is another instrument. It is the vision of the future, which is “guaranteed” to be bright, but only in case if masses choose the “right” model of political behavior. Needless to say, if society does not follow the model offered by political leaders, “*Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here*” (Alighieri, 1315): it is going to face all circles of Dante’s hell. As it can be observed in the cases examined above, promising a better future that, allegedly, will result after the end of upheavals, is typical for political leaders. The worse social, political, and economic situation within a state (especially the one suffering from dictatorship, wars, or revolutions) is, the more desperately a society longs for a strong and decisive leader. The one who is able to drag his followers out of crisis, and lead them into a stable, safe, and prosperous future. That’s why we witness cascades of promises during any elections: increased salaries and pensions, better healthcare, education, and social support systems, reforms against corruption etc. (Solopova, 2006). If authorities manage to convince the vast majority of population that whatever they do, it ensures a better future, controlling public mind becomes considerably easier.

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3.3 Blame games: images of the enemy

The “enemy”, according to Schmitt’s *“The Concept of the Political”* (Schmitt, 1932), simply means a group (or in some cases, an individual) that has a different political ideology. Usually, the role of external “enemy” is given to opposing political parties, neighbor states, or other countries. Negative image of such “enemy” is painted by creating and disseminating political myths that both blacken, and empower him in the eyes of a target audience. Thus, it becomes easier to convince large social groups that all existing political, social, and economic problems are the fault of this “enemy” that is both evil enough, and powerful enough to do so much damage. According to J. Nye, appealing to the enemy image is a way to reflect an object as an aggressor in public consciousness; create sustainable negative stereotypes about certain individual, group, state, or ideology; and thus, unite one’s allies by cultivating a common “passion”, which is a hatred towards the “enemy” (Nye, 2003). The consequences of successful application of this technique are the following: whatever happens during the rule of certain political group, which ever mistakes authorities make, whatever happens to life conditions, minimum wages, education, health care systems etc., it is always the “enemy” who gets the blame, not the authorities.

3.4 “Cognitive shortcuts”

The power of images is in their ability to create the so-called “cognitive shortcuts” (Perloff, 2003), whether positive, or negative. Once a strong association between political regime, individual, group, ethnicity, nation, or country, and an image of something either great, or terrible is created, one starts to either like, or dislike those who trigger this association on intuitive level. It is extremely hard for anyone to overcome these “shortcuts”. According to psychology research, feelings and emotions have much more power over humans’ minds, opinions, and ways of perception than pure logic (Jung et al., 2014). Moreover, as proven by cognitive psychology research, images multiply the effect of any communication by evoking strong emotions and capturing attention (Flynn, 2019). Marketers and advertisers successfully apply this psychological specificity of humankind to create positive links with their products. For instance, by making their target audience associate Coca-Cola with Christmas holidays, joy, and festive mood via catchy images in ads and commercials; by using famous brands like Chanel or Dior, which have become iconic symbols embodying beauty and elegance, to advertise newer fashion houses or exhibitions; or by filming celebrities in their products commercials. Political technologists use the same methods to make their target audience intuitively like one political party and dislike another. War strategists actively exploit negative marketing to make their armies experience anger and hatred towards nations they are fighting against. Whatever the goal is, the principles are the same, and they numerously proved to work.

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4. Conclusion

Human nature is psychologically arranged in such a way that people's image thinking is the most powerful tool for making them perceptive to "catching" certain ideas. That's why constructing, and using the "right" icons, and symbols that resonate with the vast majority, creates a universal instrument of public communications, which is able to control ideological patterns of society, and form public opinion in accordance with political interests, and goals of certain parties. As history has repeatedly shown, there is no more powerful driving force for humanity, than an idea that is supported by symbols. Images and symbols have a much greater effect on human consciousness than bare reason, and logic since both affect feelings, and emotions; both resonate. Thus, the cornerstone for an ultimate success of any contemporary social or political leader, political technologist, public speaker, mass media representative, copywriter etc., is a competence to create, disseminate, and actualize bright and powerful images, in accordance with communication tasks and characteristics of a target audience. If one manages to create a combination of powerful images of external "enemies", "dark past", and "bright future"; support them by vivid symbols of fear & hope, oppression & justice, and deprivation & prosperity; and then ingrain this composition into public consciousness, for instance, by the means of mass media, public speeches, artworks, or political literature, a society will become a perfect material for political manipulations.

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