Chapter 5
Neoliberalism and the Production of Enemies: The Commercial Logic of *Yahoo! News*

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Theories of Media and News Production

Traditional flows of corporate media content from producer through distributor to consumer have become less dominant as the Internet democratizes access and the distribution of content. Advertisers, who traditionally would have had to deal with broadcasters (the "old guard" of traditional distribution), can now publish advertisements globally and immediately using the Web. Additionally, relative newcomers such as Netflix and Hulu, companies built on a platform of digital distribution, are increasingly bypassing traditional content producers (broadcasters and studios) to create their own content. Just as the nature of ad content changed with the inception of product placement, advertising practices have changed in response to the Internet's promise of unconstrained, individualized distribution.

This phenomenon extends practices that are common within traditional media, such as the so-called *native advertising* where corporations pay news sources to have their journalists write stories for the company's products (Williams 2014). For example, the Xerox Corporation has paid content distributors—including *Forbes, Esquire*, CBS, and *The Week*—to write and publish articles designed to increase public awareness of services offered by Xerox (Basney 2014). Marketers do not see a problem with corporations paying for the news they want distributed as long as the quality remains high and the arrangement is somehow noted (Grensing-Pophal 2014; Murphy and Schram 2014). Native advertising blurs the line between ads and news by presenting both in an identical format, one that mimics the style of traditional news articles. The links aggregated on *Yahoo! News* function in a similar way.

Because these advertisements masquerade as news stories, they illustrate the commercialization of news content, a topic that has long interested media theorists who examine the role of the press in society. Many of these theories are considered

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"normative" in that they prescribe a set of best practices journalists are expected to follow. McQuail describes normative media theories as those that explain "how media ought to work," (2002, p. 16). However, defining what an industry *should* do always presents the theorist with a moving target in relation to contemporary social reality. One of the central debates about normative theory is whether corporate news media should be held responsible for their actions in relation to the public good or if enforcing such expectations would be an imposition on their rights to freedom of speech (McQuail 2010). Typical normative media theory springs from specific assumptions about the relationship between the media entities and the society in which they exist. Specifically, normative theories assume that the media exist in a democratic society and that the media play a role in the political process. If societies are truly democratic, citizens should have their say in the political realm. Therefore, the role of the media is to provide accurate information to the public, so that people can make the best possible decisions when voting or otherwise participating in the political process (Lichtenberg 2010).

In theory, media are cognizant of their power in relation to the political process and have established specific principles to uphold in order to avoid manipulating the citizenry. McQuail describes "objectivity" as the "core value" of journalistic integrity (2002, p. 283). In opposition to bias and subjectivity, striving for objectivity requires that the news practitioner present only what is factual and do so in a way that is impartial (McQuail 2010). Lichtenberg (2010) describes the role of the press as that of a "watchdog," alerting the public to things that are often obscured from view.

The practice of the press conference ideally illuminates the nature of how the press tries to counteract bias and influence. Instead of independently investigating events, journalists report on politicians who have specific and conflicting perspectives on issues under popular examination. Journalists will therefore not report facts and instead report on the speech of deliberating parties. However, this second-order reportage, which reports that "Democrats say this while the Republicans say that," comes at the expense of examining actual data and pursuing independent expert analysis. In this way, the news is packaged into meaningful blocks for consumers based on genre conventions that signify "legitimate" news reporting. As Tuchman (2010) notes, a news story cannot be idiosyncratic, but instead must be molded into formats known to audiences.

The ways in which news services construct parcels of meaning are central to the process of newsgathering and have been approached by a number of scholarly theories. Entman (2010) describes the phenomenon of framing, in which media construct news stories in ways that increase audience salience for specific aspects of the story or particular interpretations of its content. Tuchman (2010) argues that media frames provide for the audience an explanatory schema for interpreting information. In other words, the way a news story is told does more than simply convey information; it tells an audience how to make sense of the event, implying that audience members are not completely free to apply their own explanatory frameworks. Under the broader heading of agenda setting, Lowery and DeFleur (1983) have posited that—at the very least—the news focuses public attention: not so much telling persons what to think, but reinforcing what they should think about.

In the propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (2006) detail why certain topics get filtered out of news content as a result of the media's overarching political economy. Several interlocking filters—private oligopolistic ownership, funding, sourcing, flak, and fear of communism—interact to severely and consistently limit the range of information citizens routinely encounter. These filters shape the routines of newsgathering and insure the reporters do not cover stories that will either disrupt access to influential sources (political mouthpieces), anger key constituencies (biased audiences), or threaten advertising revenues (Herman and Chomsky 2006; McQuail 2010).

One need not look far to see examples of how media processes support specific political positions. In his oft-cited work on media concentration, Bagdikian (2004) extends the political economic approach and posits that Rupert Murdoch uses his control of numerous media outlets to push a conservative agenda. Additionally, Bagdikian (2004) notes that during the 1980s, corporations began to buy media organizations outright to gain access to and control investigative journalists. Once these journalists become employees of larger conglomerates, they can easily be silenced. The strategic infiltration of journalism by partisan politics can also be seen in the case of *The Washington Times*, a politically slanted news source that emulates the format of a traditional newspaper.[1] Even the name, *The Washington Times*, mimics established news sources such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* so that the casual observer and uncritical reader will be unable to tell the difference between journalistic and unabashedly partisan news sources.

Scholars such as Bagdikian (2004) and McChesney (1999, 2013) have mapped ownership patterns of traditional media, focusing on the ways that horizontal integration has worked to limit the role of competition in the media market, which in turn has limited the diversity of media content in the USA. This trend is becoming visible on the Internet as well. While originally hailed as a space where individuals will have great freedom to create and access content, the Internet, particularly the platform of the World Wide Web, is quickly being redesigned to serve corporate interests (cf., Burgess and Green 2009 on YouTube). Today, the emergence of the Internet has prompted many corporations to vertically integrate, meaning that production and distribution processes are owned by the same parent corporation. As a result of this trend, the overhead costs of running a media corporation are less, and marketing costs are minimized because the same company owns both the studio and the outlets where media content is advertised and distributed. Whereas the old system had content producers and distributors, as well as advertisers who needed access to both, the Internet allows all three components of media production to be handled by a single company. The process of media concentration that has reorganized traditional media outlets has therefore continued into the era of the Internet as companies scramble to regain the monopolistic control of content distribution they held in the past. Recently, this has taken the form of the widespread purchase and commercialization of once-independent blogs. Streamlining the Internet as a system

[1] *The Washington Times* was founded by the Unification Church of Korea a specifically an anti-communist "news" paper.

of private content distribution is especially important for advertisers. The Internet is not only a cheaper option for distribution than television; new advertising formats and strategies continuously become available on this medium. The popular example is the ability of low-budget advertisements to "go viral," and spread spontaneously because of the actions of independent Internet users. Attempts toward "viral marketing" are themselves efforts to commodify interpersonal networks in such a way that informal communications among friends and acquaintances become laced with promotional references (Jacobson and Mazur 1995). The Internet, therefore, provides an excellent contemporary example of how privatization transforms media.

Yahoo! News and Internet Advertising

On July 21, 2014, one could access the *Yahoo! News* Web site to become more informed about the day's events, US cultural commentary, and celebrity gossip. At first glance, nothing seems out of place on *Yahoo! News*: The content, structure, and design of the Web site mimic those of many other contemporary news Web portals. Some important stories covered on July 21 include an incident on the border between Texas and Mexico where US border patrol agents were shot at by narco-traffickers, a commentary on the potential impact of gay rights legislation on religious freedom, and a story on the LA Lakers' re-signing basketball player Nick Young to a multiyear contract. Nestled among these typical examples of daily news fare was an article titled: "Debt Collectors Harass Debt-Free Woman for Years." There is no information present on the *Yahoo! News* Web site to indicate that this story would be different from any of the others.

Clicking on this headline takes the viewer to a Web page on *Yahoo! Finance* where the full article is presented. The article, written by Christine DiGangi (2014), details the story of Francis Marshall, a North Carolina woman, and great-grandmother, who has been receiving threatening calls form debt collectors even though she owes no outstanding debt. As the text of the article continues, the author also includes links to help people resist intimidating debt collectors. Five out of the six links present in the text take the viewer to the Web site for Credit.com, a company that advises customers on financial decisions for a fee. In short, this entire article, presented as a news story, functions as a way to traffic *Yahoo! News* users onto Credit.com's commercial Web site.

Christine DiGangi's (2014) article entitled "Debt Collectors Harass Debt-Free Woman for Years" is a type of advertisement, although one that has a specific and nuanced format. Considering that the link to this story was present on an Internet news portal, and the article was presented as a news story, one must wonder if there were any indicators present that would signal the commercial nature of this article. The symbol next to Christine DiGangi's name is a Credit.com logo that indicates that her "press affiliation" is actually a financial advising company. The Credit.com logo next to the author's name is small and easily missed by the casual reader. Attention to detail and intentional effort on the part of the viewer is required to notice the subtle (one might say hidden) aspects of the Web page that distinguish it from a news story.

One way that the Internet has changed the patterns of media production and distribution is that online delivery systems have made the dissemination of content cheaper. Twenty years ago, it would not have been possible for the advertiser (Credit.com) to plant a commercial ad into a news story without having to make extensive arrangements with a large broadcasting corporation. Today, placing content onto the Web is easy, fast, and inexpensive. The content of persuasive "news stories" found on *Yahoo! News* illustrates how the flattening of media industry processes made possible by Internet distribution has resulted in new ways to blur the line between advertising and news content.

The format of *Yahoo! News* mimics that of many contemporary news Web sites. Most of the Web site's content appears in the form of a list of similarly formatted hyperlinks. Each link provides the title of the article, the first several lines of the story, and a photograph. These links form a list running vertically down the center of the page. Each link also cites the source of the story, such as Reuters, The Associated Press (AP), or *Yahoo! News*. The left margin contains links to other branches of the *Yahoo!* Web site, while the right margin provides ads and links to stories that contain video. The advertisements at the heart of this study appear as news stories, in the center column alongside links to other stories, and often look exactly like the links for other, actual news sources, such as Reuters or AP. Most of the time, there is no difference in presentation between an actual news story and an advertisement. Two specific types of persuasive articles were found in a review of *Yahoo! News* between June and September 2014. One type focuses on selling commercial products and services, while the other promotes political agendas. Both types of articles are indicative of changes to Internet-based media content as an outcome of neoliberal commercial interests. Additionally, both types demonstrate how news content facilitates the production of enemies, which in turn normalizes expectations of violence in contemporary society.

Selling Products

The Credit.com article, written by Christine DiGangi, about creditors harassing a debt-free woman, is a prime example of this trend in advertising parading as a news story. Like many advertisements on *Yahoo! News*, the link to this story did not contain any indication that it linked to an advertisement. Not only is the link presented as a normal news story, but after clicking the link, the reader is directed to a page that emulates the style of "real" news. This portion of the Credit.com Web site is written in the prose of news copy and contains in-text hyperlinks similar to many contemporary blogs. However, these hyperlinks do not take audience members to other sources for support or previous related stories; instead, these links direct the user to Credit.com's services, which are for sale.

Credit.com is hardly alone in this practice of presenting advertising as a news story. Instant Checkmate, an Internet company that allows users to access criminal records, employs the same tactic for their online advertising. Unlike Credit.com,

Instant Checkmate's link on *Yahoo! News* did carry a small "Ad Choices" arrow. However, when users click on the link they are taken to a Web page that emulates perfectly a professional news Web page. Additionally, the faux news story by Jessica Ruane (2014), while it exists on Instant Checkmate's corporate URL, uses aesthetic choices to distance its "news" page from its sales page. For example, the article utilizes a different logo than the page from which someone orders Instant Checkmate's services. The logo on the news site uses the acronym ICM PR, while the main page has a logo that features the entire name of the company. The faux news appears different than on the main page, specifically in ways that mimic other news sources whose logos often employ acronyms (e.g., CNN, MSNBC, BBC, etc.).

Photos and emphasized quotes within the text, along with a prose that sounds like news copy, set the stage to make this advertisement feel like a news story. The news portion of Instant Checkmate's site even contains links to other news stories along the right margin and below the text of the story, thereby emulating many other news sites. However, the links only direct the user to other stories on the Instant Checkmate Web site (i.e., the user is never directed off of the Instant Checkmate Web site).

Both of the examples listed above (Credit.com and Instant Checkmate) provide the reader with something to fear. Credit.com tells the story of an innocent woman, targeted seemingly at random by immoral debt collectors, while Instant Checkmate relies on the uncertainty one feels when encountering new people. Articles like these only work to the extent that the reader finds credible a general hostility toward them in the world. When discussing the mean world syndrome, Gerbner posited that as television viewing increased, so did an individual's assumptions about the dangers of their immediate environment. Regardless of the antecedent of such feelings, the reception of these news stories is predicated upon assumptions about credible threats. When one feels legitimately under threat of debt collectors and untrustworthy acquaintances, then the advertisements discussed above seem both plausible and ultimately helpful. News stories that market in political partisanship also rely on fears and assumptions about the hostile nature of contemporary society to sell their agendas.

Selling Partisanship

In addition to the advertisements present on *Yahoo! News'* Web site, many links contained other forms of persuasive content, specifically regarding political partisanship. While the advertisements described above break the norms of journalism by demonstrating bias for a commercial service, these political stories demonstrate bias in terms of how they are positioned relative to specific political parties. Often, one can map the biases present in these stories by following each article's editorial lineage. Take as an example the article titled "Obama's LGBT Executive Order Threatens Religious Liberty, Say Advocates," by Kate Patrick (2014). While this article was listed on the *Yahoo! News* Web site, clicking the link takes the viewer

to a site named the *Daily Caller*. The *Daily Caller* is a news Web site founded by Fox News personality Tucker Carlson and Neil Patel, a former aide to Dick Cheney.

A conservative lean was not the only form of political bias found in these articles, as a number of stories were also linked to liberal sources. The story "Yes, Obama's Whitehouse is More Secretive than Bush's," by Justin Lynch (2014) is an example of liberally biased content linked to from *Yahoo! News*. While the story is hosted on *The Week* (a British news magazine), the author Justin Lynch lists his organizational affiliation as *The Weekly Wonk*, another news source that is owned by the New America Foundation. While the foundation claims to be a bi-partisan think tank in search of better ways to approach politics, the board of directors contains mostly democrats and a couple of self-described "anti-war conservatives."

To say that a news venue claims a political territory is nothing new. While such a statement may seem in opposition to journalistic ethics, journalistic practice is a different issue. Adhering to journalistic norms, these news stories report on facts, but only certain types. The politically partisan news stories present on *Yahoo! News* seem to focus on facts that would make members of a specific party angry. There are numerous examples of this approach to political reporting present on *Yahoo! News*.

Consider *Yahoo! News'* article titled "Read Hillary Clinton's 1971 Letter to Saul Alinsky," by Dylan Stableford (2014) who writes for *Yahoo! News*. Following the link to the article (also hosted on *Yahoo! News*), one finds a news story that details the correspondence between Clinton and an assistant of noted community organizer and author of *Rules for Radicals* (1971), Saul Alinsky. In addition to quoting passages from the letters in the article, a PDF of the correspondence is provided, which includes a photocopy of the envelope Clinton used to mail the letter. What does this story do and how is that "news?" While politically liberal individuals may see this information as a nonissue, conservatives may view the connection as proof of Clinton's connections to a "radical" left, an offense worthy of conservative anger.

Another article on *Yahoo! News* draws attention to an attack ad against President Obama that some allege portrays him as a perpetrator of spousal abuse. In addition to describing the video, the article also shows it by using an embedded video player on the story's Web page. The video depicts a woman who describes a relationship that has gone sour (an allusion to her voting for Obama). The video is placed alongside tweets that argue that the video is insensitive to actual victims of spousal abuse. The headline of the article paraphrases succinctly its argument: "Ad Paints Barak Obama an Awful Lot Like an Abusive Boyfriend," (John 2014), a notion that may instigate democrat anger against the producers of the video.

These articles present facts as well as supporting evidence by placing items in question directly into the text of the story. The PDF of the Clinton–Alinsky correspondence is provided in photocopy realism. The video of the anti-Obama attack ad is embedded in the Web page. The appearance is created that these articles exist as exposés, documenting damning evidence. Both stories highlight aspects of political parties that would instigate anger in members of the opposing party. In addition to documenting the "facts" of each case, these facts are supported by embedding the "evidence" of alleged wrongdoing. In short, these advertisements—under the guise

of "news"—exist to reignite anger for individuals of one political party against the other. In short, these stories manufacture enemies.

When discussing the enemies next door, it always seems as the stakes could not be higher. In the article on Clinton, the author uses Alinsky's suggestion to listen to the disenfranchised in order to paint a picture of Clinton fostering unrest and violence in inner city, motivating the lower classes to call for real social change. Indeed, the American way of life seems under threat from the secretive meetings of Clinton and Alinsky. While in the article about the advertisement equating Obama with an abuser, the article's author argues that the producers of the ad (a group supporting the Republican Party) discount the lived experience of abuse and the lives of the women who have felt that violence firsthand. Indeed, the ad is painted as an affront to our honor as civilized people. The institutions seemly under attack in these articles—our "way of life" and honor—fit the description of ideographs (McGee 1999), strategically ill-defined words whose meaning everyone is expected to agree upon and support (or decry in the case of negative examples). The connection between ideographs and violence lies in the fact that anything, even immoral acts, is justified in defense of these ideographical concepts and values. If Clinton or the Americans for Shared Prosperity are threats to our honor or way of life, it becomes less and less surprising that potentially violent action could follow.

This trend in online news raises the question of to what extent this material can even be considered news or the products of journalism. More broadly, one must examine how in this genre of news coverage and reportage grow out of efforts to commercialize news distribution on the Internet and how this process links news to private global interests.

Internet News and Commercialized Media

The above example illustrates a trend in contemporary online content production which parallels the transformation of earlier media as they were commercialized. Historically, commercialization has transformed media content and formats in profound ways. Regardless of whether one examines newspaper, magazines, or, later, radio and television, the entry of advertising into the media business model transforms each medium from a content delivery business into an audience delivery business: Audiences become the basic product manufactured by media to sell to advertisers (Pope 1983; Smythe 2006). This devil's bargain insures that advertisers gain the power to shape media content and to demand that both presentation formats and content reflect their need to set a consistent buying mood (Leiss et al. 2005; Sivulka 2012). The examples drawn from *Yahoo! News* illustrate how the division between advertising and news content breaks down and becomes consciously adulterated through commercialization. While such a mixture between news content and persuasion is not new, critical scholars must acknowledge the ways in which advertising is changing in the Internet Age and is in turn transforming the Internet itself.

In part, these *Yahoo! News* stories reflect the influence of postmodernism on journalism in the sense that there has been a breakdown of the belief that opinion and news are clearly separate and should be presented as such by news media. The old notion of factual authority has been decentered as the line between subjective opinion and objective truth has blurred. This breakdown of facticity has been convincingly traced, at least in part, to the impact of promotional culture on social and political institutions. As scholars like Daniel Boorstin (1971), Neil Postman (1985), and Stuart Ewen (1996) have shown, commercial media require that news be produced on schedule, either for primetime broadcasts or to fit the continuous news cycle of cable outlets. This means that rather than simply reporting the infrequent and unpredictable breaks with daily routines that would naturally count as news, media outlets become news factories dedicated to manufacturing news on a rigorous schedule. Moreover, an entire public relations industry springs up to insure that news is reliably delivered to the media, and the media increasingly become dependent on these sources for news. The result, as Boorstin details, is a form of constructed facticity, an "image" of the world that is neither true nor false, but an elaborate theatrical production wedded to special interests—including political interests that benefit from the constant struggle. The proliferation of media channels extends this process as sponsors struggle to find channels that can hold audiences long enough to be exposed to their advertising messages. The process of commercial segmentation splits audiences into smaller units that can be more effectively targeted by commercial messages. Accordingly, the 24-h news channels market themselves as having a particular political slant. Audience members can thus tune into the bias they prefer and never touch the dial again. In this commercialized context, the only remaining measure of journalistic integrity and authority is based on ratings, which index which stations make the most money for sponsors—in other words, which outlet is most effectively "programmed."

Postmodern theorists have given academic justification to this situation, which in earlier times would have been dismissed as cynicism. This condition was described powerfully by social critics such as Vance Packard and Jules Henry, the latter identifying the emerging dominant epistemology as "pecuniary truth"—truth being simply what sells (Henry 1963, p. 8). Criticism is impossible in this context because everything is merely an interpretation with no allowable criteria for judging which positions are most true, rational, or accurate. When all positions are equally valuable as vehicles for attracting audiences, values become interchangeable. Accordingly, the cornerstone of all critical thinking, the exposure of false consciousness, is rendered irrelevant.

This collapse of the difference between truth and opinion dovetails with major shifts in media ownership patterns, a process George Gerbner and Hamid Mowlana (1996) described as the "invisible crisis." Because media tend to not report on themselves except as business news, there is rarely any widespread suggestion that commercial media monopolies have political consequences. Shareholders and media power brokers do not care about the truth as much as about the profitability of their investments. Their motto, as Malcolm Steve Forbes regularly repeats, is "the best way to predict the future is to make it." Inconvenient facts, even quantita-

tive data, can be simply reinterpreted or rewritten. Everything becomes endlessly debatable, not as an aspect of rich democratic deliberation but out of a contrived effort to draw and retain audiences to sell to advertisers. This situation suits those in power because such obfuscations disguise, confuse, obscure, and divert attention from their actions while producing a tangible enemy in the neighbor whose political views differ from one's own. Paired with the war rhetoric of contemporary politics, the only thing one can feel sure of is that the enemy is dangerously close.

Many scholars have shown that audiences routinely confuse journalism and opinion (Chomsky 2002; Edy and Meirick 2007; Meirick et al. 2011). This situation is worsened by the process of segmentation, which insures that no topic is brought up for serious debate and that any opinion can be validated by a change of channel. The, "I don't give a damn what the facts are" attitude is continually endorsed by commercialization. Belief provides sufficient ground to deny facts or to interpret them to fit preconceived worldviews. Indeed, people are less likely to bow to facts because they are taught that facts are socially constructed. Facts and reality can be manufactured and are in fact manufactured around the clock as a basic part of the media's business model. Because this organization of media erodes democratic deliberation and isolates people into increasingly smaller audience segments, this commercial affirmation of belief removes the individual from the political process and leads to conformity to the will of the powerful, as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky detail in *Manufacturing Consent.*

Illustrations of this process abound in contemporary society, whether in the way climate change denialism is treated as just another valid point of view or in the inability to subject the USA's endless "war on terror" to the thorough national debate it merits. The goal of the powerful in a commercialized postmodern democracy is to cloud the picture of reality, not to win the battle over truth. Substantial debate is not only unnecessary but practically impossible because it endangers the narrow interests that control the economy and government institutions. By contrast, the production of enemies and churning up of hatred in the context of news-entertainment formats not only is profitable and diversionary but also reinforces the political status quo (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Commercialized media strategically defocus reality; they use illuminated screens to create murkiness and spread darkness.

Clearheadedness impedes powerful interests from building armies of fanatical acolytes willing to march off on a crusade. Their efforts thrive when people are fatigued and confused about what is going on in their world and only are able to find irreconcilable versions of reality linked solely by the effort to sensationalize reality rather than inform. The epistemic confusion produced by commercialization eviscerates the notion of false consciousness because something cannot be false if there is no truth. Everything becomes just a matter of commercially manufactured and circumscribed interpretations distributed under conditions that prevent dissenting interpretations from seriously being compared or reflected upon.

A second important aspect of commercialism pertains to collective memory. Even the shortest of short-term memory can influence people's understanding and reactions. Recently, all the major news outlets spent copious time covering events that include a professional football player being caught on surveillance cameras

punching his girlfriend, people dumping cold water on themselves to raise money for medical research, the soaring stock market, beheadings by religious extremists in the Middle East, and five confirmed cases and two deaths from Ebola in the USA. Meanwhile, other much more important issues that will concretely impact people received much less coverage. These items include the fact that while stocks soared and US companies collectively moved their headquarters overseas to avoid US taxes, so-called corporate inversion, the wealth gap in the USA and around the globe continued to widen dramatically and rapidly. Another trend hardly mentioned in the media was the story of the media itself. The unrelenting commercialization of the Internet accelerated at a rapid clip along with eroding freedom of access as companies continued to pursue pay-per-view tiered systems that would severely limit access to information and transform the Internet solely into an adjunct to entertainment services.

While agenda-setting theory famously asserts that a few powerful producers of news can teach audience members what to think about but not what to think (McCombs and Shaw 1972), this somewhat comforting evaluation of audience activity has also been challenged (McCombs and Stroud 2014). George Gerbner's (2002) theory of cultivation effects is one such qualification of the agenda-setting model. Gerbner's theory is in part an effort to explain why Americans believe their country is far more violent than is actually the case. Gerbner argued that this judgment arises because people are inundated by news stories of violence and mayhem that dramatically misrepresents the amount and nature of violence in American society. Over time, this consistent representation of violence has led Americans to think about crime, law enforcement, youth, and race in exaggerated ways. In this sense, people's views about the world are "cultivated" over time as the result of processes that are endemic to commercialization.

Among Gerbner's claims, for instance, is that violence is profitable, especially the kinds portrayed in the media featuring cartoonish actors engaged in small-scale actions against individuals as opposed to much-more-difficult-to-portray forms of systemic violence. Because of its scale and because it is couched within powerful, almost archetypal narratives, people easily relate to these portrayals and have a readymade context for imagining themselves as victims of violence. Additionally, because violence is captivating, it is an ideal programming tool in a commercial context in which programmers strive to attract audiences to sell to advertisers. Moreover, because this type of violence is easy to understand, it plays well across cultural boundaries. Television content and films featuring violence can therefore be easily distributed globally to expand profits. Violence is a pervasive feature of the contemporary world, but it is complex and occurs at many different levels of social organization. When encountering violence in a commercial context, though, one is most likely to be presented a manufactured and exaggerated "face of the enemy" (Keen 1986) that is both profitable and, in accord with the propaganda model, implicitly legitimizes endless war against those that "hate us."

What Gerbner and his colleagues have demonstrated is that cultivation effects are not the result of a single powerful message but instead arise from the cumulative effect of years of media consumption. This model recognizes the interpersonal and

intertextual referencing (the multistep, multidimensional appreciation for the life of messages within social interaction) that occurs as people make sense of media content but also recognizes efforts to give violence a systemic organization, justification, and normalization for the sake of profits. This effort to construct cartoonish enemies interlocks with other forms of systemic violence that are much more likely to impact people. For example, Bagdikian (2004) argues that years of consuming corporate-produced pro-business, antigovernment propaganda has had a cumulative effect on the electorate and reinforced the belief that government institutions are corrupt, inept, and, as Ronald Reagan argued, the enemy. By continually suggesting that corporations working exclusively within the private sector can do everything better and more honestly than public institutions, this propaganda implicitly justifies the neoliberal undermining of democratic institutions.

Bagdikian (2004) demonstrates that journalism has been increasingly displaced by advocacy messages that masquerade as normal news, as well as massive spending on nonproduct advertising by corporations that attempt to generate and maintain positive feelings about corporatism. He argues that media oligarchs need not literally hold secret meetings in back rooms and coordinate an agenda to produce a one-dimensional, conflict-laden picture of the world. On the one hand, these oligarchs share essentially the same perspective on corporate power and seek to extend it. On the other hand, the commercial logic insures that a worldview consistent with these interests is constantly produced and distributed across the great majority of media outlets. There is accordingly great concern to commercialize the Internet and effectively seal off access to the diversity of voices that still participate in this medium. In the few years since its popularization, for instance, the World Wide Web has quickly been colonized by corporate interests and transformed into an invasive surveillance platform that services both advertisers' need to track consumers and the State's need to monitor an increasingly disaffected citizenry. This systematic transformation of the World Wide Web clearly illustrates the multileveled manner in which symbolic violence operates within commercialized media.

Neoliberalism can be thought of as propagating what Dalton and Kramer have termed the Third Sophistic (Kramer 1997; Dalton and Kramer 2012). According to Philostratus, a sophistic is a historical period when education is equated with persuasive speech. This name has been given to eras that are dominated by skilled public communicators who argue to persuade and win their interest rather than to reveal a truth. These ages are characterized by the ascendency of populist demagogues. According to Plato, Socrates was the first to expose sophists as those who care little for objective truth but who argue to secure their personal interests. The essential difference between sophistry and philosophy—which is occasionally obscured—is that sophists claim to have all the answers while philosophers insist that their search begins in ignorance.

The First Sophistic represents the rise of analytical philosophy around the fifth century BCE. This era culminated with Aristotle's epistemology, including his rudimentary notions of experimental testing and nomenclatural organization of observations, combined with his emphasis on inductive reasoning and symbolic logic. After the collapse of Republican Rome, with its democratic institutions of the Senate

and the Courts, the Second Sophistic rapidly developed. In first-century Rome, the resurgence of sophistical rhetoric was unsuccessfully countered by the revival of philosophy, as personified by Quintilian. Education abandoned methods of independent testing and observation and consolidated as the triumvirate curriculum of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Yet there was precious little emphasis on logic until the rebirth of Aristotelian thinking a 1000 years later with scholastics such as William of Ockham at Munich, Peter Abelard at Saint-Denis, Dons Scotus in Scotland, and Albertus Magnus at Paris.

The Third Sophistic is marked by the sudden emergence and sustained prominence of "public address." This form of communication stands in contradiction to philosophy. Professionalized communication is central to this sophistic era, and media are central to efforts to persuade people to adopt one interpretation of the world or another. Contemporary society is therefore inundated by a myriad of unsubstantiated, even false claims, so much so that the Princeton Professor of Philosophy Harry Frankfurt (2005) was moved to write his famous pamphlet "On Bullshit." Much current public discourse is sophistic in the sense that it is designed solely to enervate and persuade. Not surprisingly, much of this content features a rejection of expert analysis and scientific research in favor of anti-intellectualism and antiscience populism.

Commercialization fragments audiences and prevents them from encountering information that challenges their biases. Worse, it cements one's biases as neutral, painting all opposition as antagonistic—enemies. Yet debating alternative interpretations of events and policies is central to a democratic polity. The decline of public institutions, and the limitation of government to its policing functions, creates an alienating social environment in which people avoid points of view they dislike (Levendusky 2013; Kuklinski 2009). This process involves what is known as confirmation bias. This bias used to be interpreted in cognitive terms, but recent research has shown that confirmation bias has an affective component that leads to increasing attitude and belief polarization (Lodge and Taber 2013; Mooney 2012; Fritz et al. 2004; Lord et al. 1979) and stubborn belief perseverance (Cordelia 2006; Kelly 2007). In other words, confirmation bias leads people to ignore information that contradicts what they already believe while deriving pleasure from encountering content that confirms their biases. The scholarship on hostile media effects also documents that audiences choose which media to consume based on partisanship (Coe et al. 2008) and that individuals with different political beliefs will rate the same content as biased in different ways, but always in opposition to one's own position (Schmitt et al. 2004). Clearly, this affective and interpretive logic is central to the operation of commercial media because it suggests that sensationalized, highly biased content is most likely to appeal to alienated audiences, who can then be sold as distinctive market segments.

As this analysis demonstrates, the study of commercial media, including the still-developing formats of the Internet, provide an excellent way to understanding the normalization of violence in the contemporary neoliberal context. Media play several key roles in a largely privatized society that operates through fear and coercion. For one, media are a linchpin in a system of segmentation and surveillance that insures that people are increasingly isolated from each other. Not only are they

unlikely to recognize their collective interests but they actively distrust one another based on the production of enemies. Commercial media have developed a profitable model applicable to both news and entertainment content that foregrounds and exaggerates select kinds of violence perpetrated by exaggerated enemy figures. Fear, hatred, and a yearning for retaliation are thereby cultivated as normal, rational attitudes among the populace. People then try to make sense of their complex world by using these simple interpretive frameworks that validate the industrial and financial machinery of perpetual conflict, both real and imaginary.

Conclusion

Is there any way to break through the feedback loop of commercialization that has led to the polarization of contemporary society and the breakdown of democracy? Ironically, one source of hope lies in the way people make sense of media content. For instance, no matter how involved people are with the media, they make distinctions between news and fictional content. They also have complex ways in which they interact with and disregard or selectively use advertising messages. In dealing with news, people employ criteria to evaluate what makes the content believable; the events reported, for instance, must be at least plausible. Unlike fiction, the assumption is that stories are only "news" if the public trusts that the world exists and that this world accords in basic ways with what is reported. In this regard, fact and fiction have very different referents, and their distinction refers one to a phenomenology of lived experience that cannot be extinguished by mediation or commercialization. Therefore, when presenting "the facts," news must always index the intersubjective world of embodied human beings in some valid way.

An audience member's selection of news sources can therefore indicate a perspectival approach to news consumption (Kramer 2013), wherein one is free to choose a perspective on the world based on knowledge of different options. The indexicality of media points one back to a human subject capable of exerting choice, even within a sociopolitical context that pares down options to what is offered by the market. This realization is important for political news as well as advertising because it suggests that people are not inevitably duped by mixtures of facts and opinion as presented in media but have expertise in recognizing the difference even in the increasingly sleek portrayals of the Internet. Lamenting the current state of the news, accordingly, does not mean that journalism is passé, but that new forms of expertise (some may say literacy) are necessary to interact with media and that this level of sophistication is not inaccessible to human beings—on the contrary, people routinely make complex but unacknowledged decisions about what counts as "real" within media content. Identifying facts and navigating truth claims may be more confusing than in the past, but improved reading is possible. Although the news may be framed and reality skewed, this process is not beyond recognition and critique. Even the attempt to manipulate memory and construct enemies can be penetrated. In the end, reflection and judgment are ubiquitous. These abilities of the human

being can be nurtured and developed and can lead to more critical approaches to knowledge consumption. Only time will tell if these abilities can be redirected in ways that enhance freedom and democracy.

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