

Cyber-Manipulations: Old Means for a New End

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Abstract

The recent history of Internet networks could be compared to that of the French press in the late eighteenth century. Gradually reduced from 1774 onwards, censorship was abolished by a decree on January 13, 1791. This allowed the development of a prodigious number of libels. However, the liberal parenthesis during which opinions clashed only lasted for a moment. Censorship was indeed restored by a decree of August 2, 1793, which ordered the closing of theatres and the arrest of the directors guilty of letting uncivic actors perform.

We are currently witnessing a similar evolution in the field of high technology. In a few years, Internet networks will be both costly and standardized. A fundamental question arises therefore: will cyber-manipulation only transpose on the scale of the individual the techniques formerly used on crowds or, conversely, will new techniques be invented in order to improve the miniaturization of control? For the active minorities who are pulling the threads, there is no doubt that the main geopolitical action will take place within the human brain, which represents the new battlefield. Ultimately, it will be a matter of reconfiguring it to the commercial or national interests of the opposing elites. Cyber-manipulation techniques based on bio-political foundations already belong to history. Yet the individualization of cyber-actions of influence will rest in the future on a new challenge: the possibility of benefiting immediately from the data freely given by each connected individual.

Biological and Psychological Foundations of Manipulation

The cyber-manipulation of public opinions is all the more efficient in that it takes into account three fundamental characteristics of social animals: the thirst of dominance, the herd instinct, and the quest for entertainment.

Cyber-Dominance

Within individualised societies, human beings are instinctively looking for the restoration of archaic hierarchies. In effect, strong leadership brings peace. Beyond its apparent disorder, the structure of the Internet could be used to restore a hidden order. We know that “species organized by despotisms, such as bumblebees, paper wasps, hornets, and artificially

crowded territorial fish and lizards, live in relative peace owing to the generally acknowledged power of the ranked subordinates contend for the top position.”¹ In the animal world,

(...) hierarchies contain multiple ranks in a more-or-less linear sequence: an alpha individual dominates all others, a beta individual dominates all but the alpha, and so on down to the omega individual at the bottom, whose existence may depend simply on staying out of the way of its superiors. The networks are sometimes complicated by triangular or other circular elements, but such arrangements seem a priori to be less stable than despotisms or linear orders (...) The life of the group may eventually become so pacific as to hide the existence of such ranking from the observer — until some minor crisis happens to force a confrontation. Troops of baboons, for example, often go for hours without displaying enough hostile exchanges to reveal their hierarchy.²

Now the Internet has not only led to the structuration of virtual cyber-territories or islands; it has also developed as a hierarchy of substitution. And despite the individualisation of its use, natural herd movements are easily noticeable in the social media.

Herd Instinct and Centripetal Movements

“Men almost always walk in paths already trampled, and almost always act by imitation,” declared Nicolas Machiavelli. This very powerful phenomenon was studied in 1890 by a magistrate from Périgord, who published *The Laws of Imitation*. For him, social life was limited to two great tendencies: invention and imitation. He noted that new ideas tended to spread by forced or spontaneous imitation, like a light wave or a movement in a family of termites. He wrote: “One cannot imagine the enormous amount of regularity that the most agitated societies contain.” Now, there are two ways to imitate: to do exactly like one’s model, or to do exactly the opposite. We must realise that men are very much counter-imitated, especially when they have neither the modesty to imitate purely and simply, nor the strength to invent; and by counter-imitating, that is to say by doing the opposite of what they see or do, they are in fact assimilating the original fact or idea more and more.

¹ Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 140.

² Edward O. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

How to explain this centrifugal force? It is merely a question of survival: “The mere concentration of members of the same species in one place makes it more difficult for a predator to approach any one member without detection. Another social way of avoiding predators is to use marginal individuals of the group as a shield. Since predators tend to seize the first individual they encounter, there is a great advantage for each individual to press toward the centre of its group. The result in evolution would be a herd instinct that centripetally collapses populations into local aggregations.”³ This instinct is used by networks like Twitter, in which people give some of their time merely to repeat what others have said, thus earning the possibility of getting nearer to the standardised centre. Obviously, imitation via the Internet gives even more strength to rumours: “Open your ears; for which of you will stop the vent of hearing, when loud Rumour speaks: I, from the Orient to the drooping west, making the wind my post-horse, still unfold the acts commenced on this ball of earth: upon my tongues continual slanders ride, the which in every language I pronounce, stuffing the ears of men with false reports.”⁴

According to Blaise Pascal, imagination is dominant among human beings. This *mistress of error and falsity* marks with the same character what is true and what is false. It enlarges small objects and diminishes bigger ones. Human beings wish to live in an imaginary life and work to embellish their imaginary being while neglecting the real one. Social networks have obviously become the most effective mirrors of these distortions. In a way, they respond to a sickly need: “We hate the truth, we hide it; we want to be flattered, we flatter ourselves; we like to be deceived, we are deceived.” Thus, the restoration of an invisible dominance within social networks, the multiplication of the effects of imitation, constitutes the biopolitical foundations of the new actions of manipulation.

Early Modern Dreams of Manipulation

An important historical precedent can be quoted here, namely, a utopia from the first half of the seventeenth century.

New Atlantis, the Secret Island Which Could Have Poisoned the World

1627 saw the appearance of the *New Atlantis*, a picturesque fairy tale originally written in Latin by Francis Bacon. It was quickly translated into French and English and attracted considerable attention. Bacon’s dream might be very amusing and colourful; we are

³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, London 1842, p. 143.

nevertheless lucky that it never became reality. In effect, *New Atlantis* would have become our nightmare. Bacon's political and cultural project of world domination would have become both toxic for the population of his island and subversive for the distant kingdoms plundered by the happy sect which controlled Solomon's House.⁵

In Bacon's fairy tale, *New Atlantis*⁶ ruled over the world, but its domination was ignored by its naïve geopolitical periphery: "We here are in God's bosom, a land unknown,"⁷ explained the island's representative. The British sailors who had discovered this strange country were surprised indeed: "This happy island where we now stood (...) knew most of the nations of the world (...) and yet we in Europe, notwithstanding all the remote discoveries and navigations of this last age, never heard any the least inkling or glimpse of this island. This we found wonderful strange, for that all nations have inter-knowledge one of another."⁸ They were even a little bit frightened as they heard the authorities affirm, "The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire."⁹ More surprisingly, power in *New Atlantis* was exerted less by the King than by a secret society¹⁰: "You shall understand, my dear friends, that amongst the excellent acts of that king one above all hath the pre-eminence. It was the erection and institution of an order or society, which we call Solomon's House, the noblest foundation (...) and the lantern of this kingdom."¹¹

Now who inspired the regulations decided by Solomon's House? Bacon answered: "Moses by a secret cabala ordained the laws of Bensalem, which they now use."¹² Even though the island seemed to be Christian, the very sources of Christianity had been strangely modified by its inhabitants. In effect, their great book contained "all the canonical books of the Old and New Testament, according as you have them (...) and some other books of the New Testament which were not at that time written."¹³ What were these other books? No one knows. In any case, several people collaborated in Solomon's House. Beside the natives, we found "Hebrews, Persians, and Indians."¹⁴ But how could the sect maintain its domination on the population?

⁵ It should be noted that Francis Bacon, beside his philosophical talents, was a master cryptologist.

⁶ Bacon was behind the English settlement of North America and thus can be considered a founding father of the United States and Canada.

⁷ Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*, London, 1845, p. 269.

⁸ Francis Bacon, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁰ For Frances Yates, the *New Atlantis* has its roots in the Hermetic-Cabalist tradition of the Renaissance, though rationalized in a seventeenth-century direction.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

The Power of Deception

In *New Atlantis*, political domination rests on deception that targets all senses. Apparently, television, cinema, and artificial imagery are already in use:

We have (...) perspective-houses, where we make demonstration of all lights and radiations, and of all colours (...) Also all colourations of light, all delusions and deceits of the sight, in figures, magnitudes, motions, colours, all demonstrations of shadows (...) We procure means of seeing objects afar off, as in the heavens, and remote places; and represent things near as afar off, and things afar off as near, making feigned distances. (...) We make artificial rainbows, halos, and circles about light". Sounds are also manipulated: "We have (...) sound-houses, where we practise and demonstrate all sounds and their generation (...) We have also divers strange and artificial echoes reflecting the voice many times, and as it were tossing it; and some that give back the voice louder than it came, some shriller, and some deeper. Yea some rendering the voice differing in the letters or articulate sound from that they receive.

Solomon's House diffuses artificial smells and shapes the inhabitants' tastes: "We have also perfume-houses, wherewith we join also practices of taste (...) we imitate smells, making all smells to breathe out of other mixtures than those that give them. We make divers imitations of taste likewise, so that they will deceive any man's taste." More interestingly, Solomon's House initiates biomimetic processes: "We imitate also flights of birds: we have some degrees of flying in the air: we have ships and boats for going under water." To manipulate the masses, the sect has *houses of deceits of the senses* producing "false apparitions, impostures and illusions and their fallacies."¹⁵ The internal strength of Solomon's House — which has superseded the power of the King¹⁶ — is thus based on deception. Happy Island? For the manipulators maybe, but certainly not for the population.

Manipulating the Extremes: Anonymous Crowds or Individuals

The industrialization of manipulation was the subject of quite extensive studies in France and Italy at the end of the nineteenth century. Scientists wondered at that time how magnetizers worked on crowds. Half a century later, as crowd gatherings became rarer, a new

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 262.

¹⁶ According to Peter Dawkins, Bacon's formulation of a double majesty state became the basis for the unwritten constitution written by John Locke in the two treatises and for the written constitution created by the American Founding Fathers.

school theorized the intoxication of elites. Apparently, a few lessons have been drawn by cyber-influencers.

Magnetization of the Crowds, What Lessons for Today?

In his *Psychology of Crowds* (1895) Gustave le Bon explains that ideas suggested to crowds can only become dominant if they assume a very absolute and very simple form. When they present themselves in the aspect of images, they become accessible to the crowd. These idea-images are not connected to one another by any logical link of analogy. One can be substituted for another, which is why we can see in crowds the most contradictory ideas side by side. According to the moments, the crowd will be placed under the influence of one of the various ideas stored up in its understanding and may consequently commit the most dissimilar acts. Its complete lack of critical thinking does not allow it to perceive the contradictions. Only images terrify or seduce these crowds, becoming motives for action. In this context, crowd manipulators mainly use three techniques: affirmation, repetition, and contagion. Pure and simple affirmation, free of all reasoning, is one of the surest means of bringing an idea into the minds of crowds. The more concise the affirmation, the less it is demonstrated, the more authority it has.

Statesmen asked to defend a political cause know the value of affirmation. The affirmation, however, has real influence only if it is constantly repeated and, as much as possible, in the same terms. Napoleon said once: "Repetition is the strongest figure of rhetoric." The repeated thing ends up becoming embedded in those deep regions of the unconscious where the motives of our actions are elaborated. After a while we no longer know who made the repeated assertion, and we end up believing it. Within crowds, emotions are very quickly contagious, explaining the suddenness of panics.

Intoxicating the Elites

Intoxication consists of making the adversary believe what he must believe in order for him to be constantly surprised by reality, to have an incorrect view of the situation, so that he leads his war as a blind man and later as a paralytic. The most dangerous intoxication of all subversive weapons is the intellectual aggression against the human spirit. It is the weapon *par excellence* of intelligence. The ultimate goal of counter-espionage is therefore to intoxicate the enemy in order to ensure his defeat. The equivalent of a war today can be won by successful political intoxications. In 1944, for example, the German intelligence services had been totally intoxicated by the allies. A report of the *Kriegsmarine* on the reasons explaining the blindness

of the German armies in June 1944 makes a ruthless critical study of the reconnaissance provided by the R.S.H.A. (Central Security Office of the Reich) and classifies it as follows: Exact: 8 percent, Partially Accurate: 14 percent, Possible: 15 percent, Unusable, Too Vague: 4 percent, False: 59 percent. The Germans had more clues than were needed to predict the place, date, and manner of the great Allied landing. But there were far too many microbes and poisoning agents introduced into their intelligence services. The infection eventually went back to the head. Obviously, the development and experimentation of rational manipulation methods on crowds or elites can be both miniaturized and transposed to an Internet environment.

What Are the Goals of the Digital Revolution?

The digital revolution has initiated a process of exposing the individual to a handful of multinationals. Their intention is to transform radically the society in which we live and to make us permanently dependent on them. At every second of our existence, we generate information about our health, our psychic state, our projects, our actions. In sum, we issue data. This production is now collected, processed, and correlated by computers with gigantic storage and computing capacities. The goal of big data is no more and no less to rid the world of its unpredictability. In the future, the world will be organized in such a way that each individual will emit the largest possible amount of data. This harvest of information, collected most often for free, has already given birth to a colossal market. Companies already exchange consumers' habits between themselves. In the future, we will be permanently connected, under the gaze of those who will endlessly collect information about us. The supervision of every human being will be the rule. Few will be able to escape unless they agree to be part of a new category of marginals. The purpose of these evolutions is algorithmic governance.

On the whole, the manipulation of public opinions has become increasingly sophisticated. While crowds of consumers are still manoeuvred, the targeting of opinions has become precise and individual. In the future, the most important problem facing social engineers will be *resistance to change*. For the manipulators of the web, indeed, the aim is to reconfigure with the less possible resistance. Instability and movement have thus to become positive values. This is why words like *nomadism*, *dematerialisation*, *mobility*, *flexibility*, and *liquification* have been promoted in the public space.

