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Abstract

Traditionally, manipulation has been considered as an act that necessarily takes place somewhere in the background, in secret, “backstage”, in the dark, so to speak, in the “unconscious” part of our social actions. Such an understanding of manipulation thus suggests, psychoanalytically, that manipulation is fundamentally constituted by a logic of the unconscious, which must be suppressed, concealed, and camouflaged, something that resists being easily uncovered. However, in the post-communication era manipulation has taken a step further. Encouraged by big data technologies, pseudo-communication strategies, digital factories of fake news and lies, pseudo-journalism, industries of viral mystification, fabricating and disinforming media, and by related complex systems of deceiving, disguising, blurring, simulating, falsifying, distorting, diverting, mispackaging, deforming, misrepresenting and misusing the reality that have colonised all spheres of social life, from politics, business, media, mass communications industry, public sphere to interpersonal communication, manipulation has recently taken on a new form: that of deep manipulation. This term aims at the increasing, intense and omnipresent naturalisation of manipulation, which has brutally invaded the territories of communication between people at both individual and collective levels, moulding it into its tool. In such a world of perverted communication, the goal of using communication is not “plain communication” but the constant production of manipulation by performing it as our “new communication”. But this is not the end of the story of deep manipulation operating both in depth and at the capillary level, both

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individually and globally. Against this complex background, another, transparent version of manipulation has evolved, whose key ideological effect is undermining the ability to see manipulation as manipulation, that is, as an excess of communication. Transparent manipulation is dangerously imposed as our new “natural communicational condition”, or even, invigorated by its unscrupulous visibility, as our “new communicational conscious”. In other words, it is an accelerated mystifying system that has not only enabled Trump to become Trump, but is able to produce, multiply, and legitimate countless other Trumps in our lives. This insight serves as a starting point to outline a brief history of manipulation, develop a critique of the economism of manipulation, and reveal the psychoanalytical mechanism behind such visible manipulation. The paper not only shows why it is easy to become trapped in the post-communication quagmire, but also why deep manipulation, even in its most transparent version, is a threat to the democratic potentials of communities and societies.

Keywords: communication, post-communication, manipulation, deep manipulation, transparent manipulation, history of manipulation, economy of manipulation, psychoanalysis of manipulation.

1. Introduction: When Manipulation Is Confessed

After more than thirty years spent willing to deliberately lie, fabricate truth, conjure up calculated manipulations, sideline facts by inventing “alternative facts” and “counterfacts”, and hypocritically side with the elites and the capital in the interest of the US Republican Party, its lead strategist and most successful political communications operative Stuart Stevens has now performed a repentant about-face in his new book *It Was All a Lie: How the Republican Party Became Donald Trump* (2020), offering, as touted by the publisher, “a devastating portrait of a party that has lost its moral and political compass”. Stevens has been a key adviser in the party’s key election campaigns over the past several decades. As campaign organiser, manager, and communicator for a number of Republican politicians, from presidents and governors to senators and mayors, all the way down to local elected officials, he knows the Republican America and the political America generally like the back of his own hand. Now US media teem with his contrite interviews and self-criticism pieces, which read as provocative acts of *mea culpa* by a penitent whose subversive opinion post-“conversion” is that the blame for Ex-President Trump’s failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic should fall squarely on the shoulders of the Republican Party. What has particularly caught public attention were his self-exposing statements published in *The Washington Post*: “Don’t just blame President Trump. Blame me.” In an interview with CNN correspondent Michel Martin he said:

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Well, look, for 30 years, I have been helping elect Republicans. I have elected, helped Republican governors and senators in over half the country. So I think one of the principles of Republicans used to be that we believe in personal responsibility. And that's totally gone out the window now. We're against personal responsibility ... And I can't say this just happened. I was part of it. I was deep into the machine, working five presidential campaigns for Republicans. So I was there. I saw it. I would like to have done things differently in retrospect, but can only move forward.

When asked by a disbelieving interviewer the reason for his participation, over so many years, in complete fixation on a machinery deliberately and ruthlessly working to avert the public from science, facts, and reality, his answer, tritely infantile and banal in the extreme, unmistakably bespoke a *petit esprit*:

Well, that question really led me to write this book. And it's a very troubling question to me, and I don't really have a good answer. I think that, when you're involved in something like this, particularly on the end of politics – I was in the campaign part of politics. I never worked in government. So I was really about winning. And, to be honest, I was really good at winning. I won more races than just about anybody out there, helped in races, more. And there's a certain intoxication that comes with that. You don't really question it ... And when you win, you just kind of roll into the next race. And it is tribal. You have a comfortable place in the tribe. You're well compensated. People know who you are. You're good at what you do. There's something about that is just very comfortable.¹

As suggested by the subtitle itself, Stevens' book about the “big lie” is not actually a book about how Donald J. Trump ensnared and captured the Republican Party, turning it into a political prosthesis serving as co-producer for the reality show of Trumpist lies and manipulations. Quite to the contrary: Stevens tries to show how Trump is really the natural result of five decades of lies, manipulation, hypocrisy, and self-deception going back to the early 1960s political struggles for civil rights legislation. Racism, elitism, and corporatism have long been part of the very DNA of Republican politics, from systematic opposition to the building up of genuine welfare policies for all social classes, to the deceptive rhetoric of commitment to and defence of “family values”. Yet Stevens now asks neither mercy nor forgiveness. He simply offers a first-hand account of what he has seen and helped create when his thoughts were not on politics, but on business only: business that was well-paid, triumphant, and

¹ Michel Martin (interviewer) and Stuart Stevens (interviewee), “Interview with Republican Strategist Stuart Stevens”, *CNN's Amanpour*, *CNN Transcripts*, March 31, 2020.

professionally conducted. That was the business of organisation, administration, and communication logistics, which allows and no doubt even requires all kinds of calculating, gain-oriented, manipulative creativity in presenting, adapting, and dictating preferred realities with no regard what is actually real.

If this business of the professionalised use of manipulation as communication intended for mass dissemination to voters, citizens, consumers, audiences, and publics is to succeed, it must be strongly supported and legitimised by the suitable social and economic conditions of a highly economised² interestedness in manipulation. It would be naive to view

² In using the terms “economised” or “economistic”, I refer primarily to Bourdieu’s contribution to a considered understanding of economic worlds, phenomena and practices as developed in his *Le sens pratique* (1980, tr. as *The Logic of Practice*, 1990). Written in Bourdieu’s inimitable style and now considered one of the classics of economic anthropology, the book explores the concept of economism, its logics, and practices. What is an economistic practice – or rather, the practice of an agent acting in an economistic manner? It is a practice where a social agent, in the role of a “rational actor”, demands or claims monopoly on “the common stance” (on “public interest” if you will), presenting themselves as someone capable of overcoming specific groups’ or classes’ partial and particular views and of avoiding “mistakes” stemming from the diversity of society, its assorted practices and interests. The “rational actor”, looking to “intentions” or “conscious choices” for the “sources” of actions (whether strictly economic or not), often operates according to a logic closely associated with a narrow view of the “rationality” of practices. According to *economism*, as Bourdieu labelled this ideological operation, rational practices are those directed and legitimised by a conscious search for maximum (economic) profit at minimal (economic) cost. The trick of this sort of economism is to draw on pseudo-economic mechanisms to produce perfectly legitimate economic interests. The problem with economism is that it only recognises one single type of interest – that produced by capitalism: economic interest. With the economy of capitalist societies entirely founded on economic interest, such societies can allow for little, if any, place for any other type of “non-economic” interest (*intérêt non économique*). If capitalist economy is reduced solely to its “objective” reality, and if economic agents’ ambitions to gain a hold on economic mechanisms of controlling economic interests go ignored, the resulting reductionist economism negates the specificity of a socially-maintained discrepancy between “objective” truth and the social representation of its production and exchange (*Le sens pratique*, 48–49, 85, 192–193; *The Logic of Practice*, 28, 50, 113). In other words, economism’s key assumption is that what we call “economy” can be justified as if it had existed “since forever”, participating in the original, virtually unadulterated essence of cultures and societies. This might be said to be the first *économystification* to be dealt with, to borrow a term from the critique of economic reason offered by French economist and social and political philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy (2012). As Bourdieu had shown in another of his books (2000), research into and knowledge of economic reality is crucial for a critical

professional, professionalised or professionalistic communication³ as an automatic guarantee for a production of reality that was non-manipulative, non-mystifying, non-exploitative, and non-destructive. On the contrary, the striking case of Stuart Stevens points to a completely different conclusion: that professionalistic communication performed as propaganda or P.R. activity can constitute itself as socially relevant and successful precisely by means of social

consideration of both the economism of economics and the economism of social structures of economy – that is, for distinguishing between the economy that can save us from destruction and the economy that can destroy us.

³ The terms “professional communication”, “professionalised communication”, or “professionalistic communication” (the first referring to the notion’s performative or operational level, the second to the practice’s processual character, the third to the ideological mechanism of the phenomenon’s production; the same applies to the terms “economic”, “economised” and “economistic” communication) are used to refer primarily to such aspects of planned, organised, coordinated communication validated by interests as enable this type of expert communication to produce expected, predicted, or desired effects. Here we may justifiably ask what it is that constitutes professional communication. The answer does not seem to necessarily be the production of civilised, transparent and ethical communication, but rather better and more efficient organisation, administration and logistics of communication resources, channels and skills to achieve desired goals. Professionalism in communication, then, presupposes a certain degree of economisation of communication in the sense that communication must serve certain economic interests. Thus, professional communication is above all communication reflective of a capacity for constant adaptation and for pertinent self-invention for the purpose of serviceability in an ever-changing environment, particularly in politics, the corporate sector, and the media (see Lilleker & Negrine, 2002; Negrine & Lilleker, 2002; Negrine et al., 2007; Waisbord, 2013; Tenscher et al., 2016). Here we come to a cynical paradox that traps many professional communicators and information workers. Economic agents who demand professionalism from communicators and information workers, additionally legitimising and boosting it by means of the levers of economic authority available to them, on the condition, of course, that professional communication work serves as a means to their ends, can just as easily turn around and subvert, degrade and even abolish it on the spot. One of the most striking examples of such deprofessionalisation is what has been happening in professional journalism under strong pressures towards commercialisation, marketisation, automatisisation, robotisation, dehumanisation, pauperisation, and precarisation – pressures that are both external and internal. By the latter, I mean that the ideology of non-professionalism, which tells us that everyone can be a journalist in the digital era, has seeped right into the core of the digitised work habitus of the journalist profession, giving rise to new internal distinctions; for instance, an increasing number of precarious journalists and news workers no longer count themselves as belonging to the professional journalist workforce (see Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016, 8).

self-legitimation as a professional practice capable of producing manipulative effects. As if nothing else could provide genuine empirical confirmation that it is, indeed, deserving of existence and of the demand, commissions, and payments it receives on the communication services market. This case does not, however, simply serve as an introduction to political⁴ communication in the US; it also suggests the fate of what could, until very recently, still be called – indisputably, self-evidently, or at least confidently – “communication”, in circumstances where highly professionalised, marketised and economised communication⁵ is realised through complex systems of tailoring, distorting, twisting, deforming, faking, deceiving and fixing in many segments of society, and particularly in politics, business, media, and the public sphere. There is a wealth of recent scholarly research, lucid descriptions, alarming diagnoses, and serious analyses⁶ arguing that ours is an era of complex systems of lying, manipulating, blurring, falsifying, and distorting the information transmitted and of omnipresent deception, even though we know that era has long been with us. Yet the emergence of a new “post-factual” or “post-truth” world, as illustrated by the choice of *post-truth* as the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016, does suggest that in this new constellation the concept of post-truth is far from limited to the relationship between politics and truth; the key distinctions between true and false, fact and appearance, and transparency and

⁴ Manipulation in politics appears as “dirty politics”, “the nastiest face of power”, “the evil core of power”, “abuse of power”, “the deceptive exercise of power”, “the morally repugnant practice of power”, “one of the most conspicuous forms of discursive power abuse” etc. For more on how deception, manipulation, and lies have infiltrated US politics see Alterman (2004); Benkler, Faris & Roberts (2018); Goodin (1980); Hall Jamieson (1992); Jacobs & Shapiro (2000); Mills (1995); Perry (1968); Riker (1986); Woolley & Howard (2019); for examples of totalitarian right-wing ideologies of the 20th century see De Saussure, Schulz et al. (2005).

⁵ Such communication is manifested in multiple versions of complex but promiscuously shared economic principles that entangle a number of industries such as mass communications, media, audience measurement, public image, and publicity formation, political propaganda and campaigns, corporate, business, marketing, the creative industry, etc.

⁶ Such as D’Ancona (2017); Andrejevic (2013); Bennett & Livingston (2018); Bradshaw, Howard (2019); Cheney-Lippold (2017); Dieguez (2018); Edelman (2001); Farkas, Schou (2018); Giacomello (2014); Harsin (2018, 2017 and 2015); Josset (2015); Kalpokas (2018); Keyes (2004); Kien (2019); Klein (2017); Kovach & Rosenstiel (2010); Lamotte, Le Caisne & Le Courant (2019); Lazer et al. (2018); Maddalena & Gili (2020); Manjoo (2008); Marda & Milan (2018); Revault d’Allonnes (2018); Roudakova (2017); Sandoval (2014); Singer & Friedman (2014); Thompson (2020); Vaidhyanathan (2018); Zimdars & McLeod (2020).

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mystification have been obscured, increasingly eroding our capacity for coexistence – for a shared life in a shared world.

Leaving aside the inscription of Stevens' confession of manipulation in the context of the post-factual, post-truth world, where truth-saying has become just another ritual of boundless self-promotion and self-branding, there is another aspect to it that merits attention: the disclosure and exposure of manipulation, its admission, and the assumption that manipulation is unavoidably carried out backstage, hidden from view, as if part of the “unconscious” of our actions. From a psychoanalytical point of view, this understanding of manipulation suggests that manipulation is fundamentally constituted according to a logic of the unconscious that must remain repressed, concealed, and camouflaged, something that resists being easily uncovered. This is what Stevens's confession hints at. Be that as it may, the thesis I will be developing here is that, in the so-called post-communication era, manipulation takes place much more overtly than we might wish to admit or see. The case of Stuart Stevens will serve as a starting point for two tasks: first, a careful consideration of the illusion that manipulation is predominantly invisible, necessarily hidden from view, and that this is precisely the reason it appears as manipulation when uncovered; and secondly, a conceptualisation of the omnipresent, accelerated possibility of the emergence of manipulation as a form of *deep manipulation*, which not only operates both in depth and at a capillary level, both individually and globally, but also with increasing transparency and ruthless visibility, thereby undermining our ability to perceive manipulation *as* manipulation – as an excess in communication.

2. Manipulation Cannot Not Communicate

My proposition here is not to evaluate communication through the lens of an ideal, utopian redemption model (such as Meadian “perfect communication” as a condition of the human social ideal) but on the contrary, through the realistic observation that manipulation is today increasingly and intensely present in an infinity of communicative situations in everyday life, whether in the form of love deceived, of money lost, of dubious possessions, of moral speculation, of questionable publicity, of misleading silence, of media scandal, of disguised hypocrisy, of profits large and small won by ruthless players, of institutionalised dishonesty, of betrayal of trust, of abuse of public goods, of appropriation of the public sphere, of denial of actual reality; the list goes on.⁷

⁷ Manipulation, as many philosophers, sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, semiologists and political scientists (Beauvois & Joule, Boissevain, Breton, Goffman, Greimas & Courtès, Kirschner, Mannheim, Raynaud, Riker,

Everything seems to be acceptable in the manipulator's attitude towards reality, provided it serves to ensure control of reality for particular gain and for power over one's victims. My intention here is not to present a standard history of manipulation but merely to sketch out a historical background against which to delve into the complexity of phenomena of manipulation, so as to avoid unnecessary trivial amalgamations, over-dramatic caricatures, or trite actualisations. Manipulation – as term and as concept⁸ – is not something that has been with us forever; according to French historian of manipulation and propaganda Fabrice D'Almeida (2018[2003]; 2013; 1995) it is linked to a specific moment in history.⁹ Before that moment, it had only been known in the numerous figures of ruse, trickery, guile, cunning, craftiness, slyness, artfulness, perfidy, duplicity, ingenuity, and calculation – as some sort of *mêtis* or *mélange*,

Shostrom, Vincent, White, etc.) have made clear, is a constitutive dimension of interpersonal and social relationships. In our everyday interpersonal interactions, we always try, consciously or not, to manage and control the impressions we make on and exercise for others, to present a favourable image of ourselves and to turn the interactional situations in which we are involved to our advantage. In different spheres of social life, from politics to business, leadership, decision-making, advertising, media, education, family, parenthood, romance, and other intimate relationships, everyone plays, wittingly or not, the role of manipulator or manipulated (see Shostrom, 1967; Boissevain, 1974; Vincent, 1978; Kirschner, 1999[1973]; Körting, 2011). Not only socially or externally, but also psychologically or internally, our thoughts are always manipulated through an array of different mental tricks, such as temptation, distraction, misdirection, etc. In certain social situations the desired human behaviour cannot be achieved at all without at least a certain degree of a certain sort of manipulation. For an inquiry into its ethnical status (e.g. whether, when, how, and why “ordinary manipulation” or “everyday manipulation” is morally problematic, and whether it is less problematic than coercion) see Coons & Weber (2014), Noggle (2020) and Handelman (2009).

⁸ The terms ‘manipolare’ and ‘manipolazione’ stem from mediaeval Latin and only appear in modern European languages (Italian, French, English) with the meaning they have today in the 17th or 18th century. In the 19th and 20th centuries, ‘manipulation’ was further associated with other related concepts (coercion, influence, persuasion, propaganda, exploitation, indoctrination, deception). For a more in-depth exploration of etymological, terminological, and conceptual distinctions see Harré (1985, 126–142), Gili (2001, 11–12), Coons & Weber (2014, 1–16), Wood (2014, 17–50), Barnhill (2014, 51–72), D'Almeida (2018[2003], 7–11, 21–23).

⁹ There is manipulation in countless situations in everyday life, and the fear of falling victim to it has been pervasively present ever since the 18th century, which saw the emergence of the very term designating dubious political and financial “affairs”, completing the process of differentiation between manipulation as a systemic practice carried out by holders or instances of power and the previous, relatively simple, unorganised practices of popular ruses, ploys, and tricks.

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corresponding to an age-old model of mixing and crossing between indistinct calculating practices. It was in the 18th century, with the emergence of the concept of the organised political subject, that manipulation first intruded as a form of systemic *mystification* (whose concept arose at approximately at that time¹⁰), that is, as a form of strategic, planned and instrumentalised *manoeuvre* (until then only known as a naval military term) or as a new type of *imposture* (expanding its 17th-century meaning, which had been limited to deception, duplicity, lie, and identity theft or “borrowing”), enabling considerable transformations in some of the older practices of communicative domination. This was also the time of the Enlightenment’s extensive attempts at a *clarification*, a refining of social life where transparency became a key concept in the struggle for the production of public space and of public sphere. In other words, the public space is founded on the Enlightenment concept of *transparence* as a form of social transparency, limpidity and clarity. Nevertheless, the struggle for the public sphere, for the visibility, limpidity and translucence of the public space and of public affairs unavoidably involved various rich sources of manoeuvring, plotting, manipulation and propaganda necessary for power holders’ invention of “the people”, “the enemy of the people”, “revolutionaries” and “counter-revolutionaries”, in short: of new political agents that would, after the French revolution was over, give rise to a new reified image of the morally, politically, and juridically-founded social person. When it came to discussing manipulation, the dynamic political and philosophical thought of the time (Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot, Condorcet, Spinoza, Hobbes, Kant, Constant, Tocqueville, etc.) was not exactly in step with the ideological time of popular literature, which did not stop at fictionalised documentation of manipulation, but went on to offer instances of its comic domestication, satire, and destereotyping (Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Eugène Sue’s *Le Juif errant* [*The Wandering Jew*], Alexandre Dumas’s *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* [*The Count of Monte Cristo*], etc.). According to D’Almeida (2018), manipulation as preserved in popular literature oscillates between the manipulator’s individual value and general circumstances flowing from other dimensions of social relationships. Far from being limited

¹⁰ What is referenced here is the mid-18th century meaning (McGinnis, 2009) which emerged along with the invention of the term itself, at a time when Enlightenment philosophy and the critique of the religious, political, literary and other deceptions of the *ancien régime* (and later, of course, those of the *nouveau régime*) were in full swing. At that point, then, *mystification* was established as an act of abuse, whether intentional or unconscious, by an individual or a collective in the form of embellishing, distorting or falsifying the truth, often with the aim of self-interested deception, disinformation or fraud. Mystification has since been considered to be “la ressource des petits esprits”, as ruthlessly described by Balzac in *Modeste Mignon* (2014[1844], 57), and above all, something in urgent need of its opposite: *démystification*.

to the discourses of law, morality, and justice, the literary manipulator of the 17th through the 19th centuries does not flinch from breaking laws and manoeuvring, scheming, and machinating in the pursuit of their goals, even at the risk of mockery, condemnation, or excommunication.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, paradoxically, the unfolding of legal and moral-political discourses – which were supposed to bring manipulative practices under the legalistic scope of forbidden trickery, criminal fraud, tarnished credibility, socially punishable abuse of trust or at least of an institutionalised sensibility for distinguishing, on both individual and collective levels, between “good” and “bad”, “right” and “wrong” – also spurred the development of new forms of sophistication, mediatisation, and economisation of manipulation. Bluntly, if manipulation is to be worth the effort, it must find success in society; and if social circumstances are limited, they must be foreseen and forestalled so that manipulation can be carried out in new ways. In the 19th century, as manipulation came to be a useful tool both for advocacy and criticism of new methods of scientific, particularly psychological, psychoanalytical, criminological, sociological, and pre-communicological conditioning and adaptation, it no longer appeared as an arbitrary agglomeration of predetermined procedures, that is, as an age-old *métis* of a variety of practices of ruse and calculating thought and action, but rather as a manufacturally or industrially administered event or series of events. Thus, manipulation moved from an interpersonal mode to mass communication, whose power-based mobilising publicity was guaranteed by the scientific, political and economic interest in grasping the theory of the masses (Le Bon, Tarde, Sighele, Freud, Reich, Trotter, McDougall, Park, Blumer, etc.). The period from the second half of the 19th century to the mid-20th century, therefore, appears as a time when manipulation was invented afresh, producing an industrialised version of itself wherein certain centuries-old phenomena and concepts were revitalised, redefined, and modernised: *propaganda* (originally a religious concept coined in the Vatican in 1622 to describe methods of disseminating Catholicism; in the late 18th century, already highly compromised, it made its way into the sphere of politics, before coming to designate, during the French Revolution, a conscious mobilisation of the media to change the populace’s minds, as a means of inventing the *opinion publique*); *embrigadement* or *recrutement* (associated with the recruiting of able-bodied men into the army during the French Revolution); and *indoctrination* (a late medieval term, religious in origin, associated with the Church’s directives on teaching the Catholic doctrine). The era of new manipulation offered up an impressive, wide-ranging list of phenomena of all kinds: thriving communication monopolies, industrialised advertising, the Dreyfus affair, the emergence of the Hollywood fiction industry, the first systematic propaganda campaign of the British government during WWI, the

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rise of a strong class of commercial propagandists in the 1920s US, the birth of marketing following the Great Depression, the development of political propaganda theory (Lasswell, Tchakhotine/Chakhotin, Domenach, etc.), the rise of Nazi propaganda, psychological experimentation and behavioural engineering (Watson, Thorndike, Pavlov, Wolpe, Skinner, Bandura, etc.), media spoofs as the reverse of manipulation (the Great Moon Hoax in 1835; the Great Wall of China Hoax, about a supposed contract for its demolition by US companies in 1899; Wells' Martian invasion broadcast on the radio in 1938, etc.), the post-war transformation of hated propaganda¹¹ into pleasant-sounding "public relations"¹² ("the new propaganda", according to Bernays¹³), and more.

Industrialisation, commodification, and economisation of manipulation following WWII¹⁴ gave rise to fresh problems as systems of law, morality and justice attempted to convey persuasive commitment to reforming post-war societies. Foremost among the factors that shaped the post-WWII spirit were motivation theory (Dichter, Cheskin), radical behaviourism (Skinner),

¹¹ In the 1920s and 1930s, Lasswell (1927; 1946) and Chakhotin (1939) attempted, each in his own way, not only to theorise about but also to demystify and destereotype propaganda – the former considering it the only democratic means by which to achieve the support of the masses, as well as to effect more economic than violent, corrupt, and other such techniques of domination. This was neither more nor less moral than any other instrument of persuasion, since it could be used for good as well as bad. Chakhotin, meanwhile, believed that dynamic, even violent propaganda was possible without overstepping the moral principles at the basis of community.

¹² Highly professionalised "public relations" have morphed into a complex PR industry, another name for a system of legitimisation of mystifications of all sorts, from disguised propaganda and a politics of lying through manipulation, the use of spin doctors' techniques and echo chambers, to a professionalised excuse for the toxic commercialisation, commodification, corporatisation, and barbarisation of communication, including purchasing reputation (see Cutlip, 1994; Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Tye, 1998; Davis, 2002; Cronin, 2018; Eidelson, 2018; Horel, 2018; Pozzi, 2019). In short, the driving force behind the entire PR industry draws its power from a mixture of manipulating visible realities, optimising behind-the-scenes commercial interests, and realising the invisibility of its own mystifying practices. The most illustrative case of such multiplied synergy was the repugnant *Cambridge Analytica*, which functioned, for all intents and purposes, as Facebook's own political manipulator and behind-the-scenes PR consultant, managing to pass under the radar for quite a while.

¹³ Bernays, *Propaganda*, 19–31.

¹⁴ A critical commentary of these ambitions of mediatised manipulation is found in *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard (1957), warning the public of the industry of manipulation functioning via "subliminal" publicity and advertising (that is, mediating messages wrapped in other messages).

aggressive marketing theory, the increase in advertising as paid publicity, new publicity as a new empire of persuasion,¹⁵ new communication technologies as prophets of a new world (technologisation of communication), cybernetics as a science of communication of inputs and outputs (Wiener), neuro-linguistic programming¹⁶ (Grinder, Bandler), and more. Although we should not discount the sort of trivial everyday tactics of manipulation that, as vividly shown in the socio-psychological bestseller by Jean-Léon Beauvois and Robert-Vincent Joule (1987), ceaselessly unfold on a smaller scale (such as within the family), the post-war practice of manipulation did remain essentially focused on one core issue – that is, collective or mass manipulation.¹⁷ This, then, is the sort of self-interested instrumentalisation of manipulation as neo-hegemony that had prospered in the interwar years and continued to do so post-war. Moreover, by the end of the 20th century, enough new cases of the phenomenon had been spawned (with the help of the digital revolution inventing codes, algorithms, online trolls, bots, and big data, which gave rise to a new realm of manipulation in the form of social media, automated systems that facilitate manipulation with social connections) that the term itself has become, as sarcastically noted by D’Almeida (2018), the cherry atop the cake of journalistic and intellectual discourse. Thus, in the second half of the 20th century, manipulation was turned to new uses, so that what used to be propaganda mutated first into public relations and then into prominent political and other marketing, which today is often accused, perhaps too sweepingly, of being solely responsible for manipulating people. On the other hand, it is difficult to pretend not to see how political, corporate, media, and other forms of marketing have risen to the level of subtle systemic technologies of economic, social, and symbolic domination. Based on this insight, D’Almeida draws a logical conclusion: “*Communication seems to have killed political manipulation*” (2018, 85). The statement is somewhat cynical in comparison to what I intend to show here; still, it should be read in the spirit of his clear-eyed warnings that belief in ubiquitous manipulation of information may, paradoxically, result in the demonisation of the very *modus operandi* that is virtually inherent to the world of communication and that involves fulfilling the need to tell something for a certain purpose and in a

¹⁵ For links between publicity, manipulation, and persuasion see Breton (2000[1997], 41–57) and Blociszewski (1993, 26–27).

¹⁶ French communication anthropologist Yves Winkin has described neuro-linguistic programming’s pretension to scientificity as “intellectual fraud” (1990, 43–50); for a critique of this controversial pseudo-scientific method of communication see also Potier (2008, 22–28).

¹⁷ In relevant literature, propaganda has become practically synonymous with mass manipulation or manipulation of the masses (Colon, 2019).

certain way – in other words, fulfilling a “tactical need”. Hence also his call for citizens to tactically diversify the information channels they use and be more mindful (D’Ameida 2018, 99). This position is certainly more easily understood if we bear in mind the non-economistic and anti-economistic versions of manipulation as everyday resistance and survival tactics of ordinary people, that is, as “manipulation with a human face”. Yet it is not this type of small-scale manipulation that could be erected on the pedestal of ubiquitous manipulation (not in the sense of “everything is manipulation” but in that of “manipulation can find a home everywhere”) – of manipulation as a digitally economised technology capable of cannibalising human communication – whenever, wherever, from whatever direction. Such viral proliferation of manipulation contains no potential for democratisation or pluralisation. On the contrary, this digitally economised manipulation functions exclusively as an organised totality, a new hegemonist. This is no longer *pre-manipulation* (manifested as a ruse or trickery, such as was known pre-18th century) nor *classical manipulation* (manifested as politically-organised, then economically industrialised and later economically corporatised manipulation of the mid-18th through late-20th centuries) but a new type of manipulation that could be called *deep manipulation*¹⁸ (manifesting as a progressive, datafied form of digitally economised manipulation, increasingly, inextricably tying our lives to manipulation and its expanding infrastructure).

With the use of “marketing”, which seems to be simply a mix of old propaganda, recruitment and indoctrination in a new disguise, manipulation gains in symbolic value, freed as it is from certain pejorative meanings from the past, while its distinctive meaning and its impact on, say, communication-turned-manipulation find themselves blurred. The terms and the phenomena listed so far can be found, variously conceptualised and accentuated, in

¹⁸ The notion of deep manipulation draws on “deep mediatisation” as conceptualised by Andreas Hepp (2020, 5–6) and Nick Couldry (Couldry, Hepp, 2016, 215–218). The point of deep manipulation is its ability to use digital technologies to function at two levels at the same time, both omni-presently (globally) and at a capillary (personalised) level. Classic manipulation tended to give rise to parallel worlds, given that there was motivation for it to remain hidden, working from behind the scenes. Those worlds were antagonistic ones (lies vs. truth, truth vs. lies). Deep manipulation, on the other hand, gives rise to but a single, uniform world: our only world, one where manipulation does not only unfold deep down but also transparently, visibly, “centre stage” – yet unpunished. There is no more choosing between lie and truth; our world is predefined according to the laws of manipulation, so that the only legitimate choice left to us is between lie and counter-lie. Hence, in a world of deep manipulation, the easiest way for the truth to survive is, sadly, only as a form of cynicism.

typologies¹⁹ drawn up by several manipulation theorists. In D’Almeida’s *La Manipulation* (2018[2003]), the concept of manipulation is closely associated with those of propaganda, indoctrination, and disinformation, in some cases so tightly that these could, in a hasty reading, be understood as undifferentiated synonyms; nowhere, however, does D’Almeida equate manipulation with communication. Similarly, Ignacio Ramonet, Spanish semiologist, historian of culture, and communications researcher, who spent most of his professional life in Paris, including many years as the editor-in-chief of *Le Monde diplomatique*, tellingly, spontaneously opens his analysis of “silent propagandas” in *Propagandes silencieuses* (2004[2000]) with evidence for “mass manipulation” via mass media, particularly film and television; *La Tyrannie de la communication* (2001[1999]) by the same author starts with the spectacularisation of information as a mechanism for privileging new tricks of psychological manipulation.²⁰ In *Le Viol des foules par la propagande politique* (1939), Russian biologist, sociologist, and early critic of Hitler and of Nazi propaganda techniques Sergei Chakhotin correlates propaganda to the use of symbols and to impulses that trigger mechanisms of psychological fusion in the crowd (understood by him as violence against the crowd or as violation of the crowd), without using the term manipulation even once. Before D’Almeida, Philippe Breton in his *La Parole manipulée* (2000[1997]) emphasised the manipulation of emotions, offering a

¹⁹ There are as many typologies or classifications of manipulation as there are authors. Vincent (1978) draws on anthropological literature to suggest three aspects of manipulation: manipulation of (legal) rules, manipulation of (material) resources, and manipulation of symbols (which he also calls mythification). Goodin lists twenty kinds of political manipulation, falling in the categories of lying, laying linguistic traps, rhetorical trickery, symbolic rewards, rites of rulers, and the politics of the obvious. Noggle (2020) draws the distinction between ordinary manipulation and global manipulation; he also names three main characteristics or forms of manipulation: bypassing reason, pressure, and trickery. D’Almeida (2018[2003]) distinguishes the ruse as an ancient model from manipulation as a phenomenon of pre-industrial modern culture. Breton (2000[1997]) refers to two kinds of manipulation, emotional, and cognitive. Wood (2014) distinguishes among three forms of manipulation: deception, pressuring, and employing emotional vulnerability or character defects. Goodin and Tilly’s *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (2006) mentions several kinds of manipulation, such as attitudinal manipulation, behavioural manipulation, instrumental manipulation, populist manipulation, etc.

²⁰ There is nothing accidental about associating manipulation with psychology. The link was established as early as 1927 by American political scientist Lasswell, according to whom propaganda was an expression of opinion or intentional action, whether by individuals or by groups, with the aim of influencing the opinion or action of other individuals or groups, based on predefined goals or using psychological manipulation, and has since been further developed by other authors (see Ellul, 1990).

partly modernised reading of Chakhotin and developing a comparable understanding of manipulation. However, by adding cognitive manipulation, he also stressed the rational dimension of manipulation as grounded in criteria other than those of *psychisme*.²¹ Furthermore, Breton disputes an antagonistic understanding, placing supposedly rational argumentation in communication (1996) as opposite to supposedly irrational manipulation (2000[1997]).²² Manipulation, in short, is a rational practice, and it is rational because it is essentially constituted and driven by an economic logic of action. Robert Goodin, in his *Manipulatory Politics* (1980), similarly treats political manipulation as a calculated act in terms of the rational strategising of manipulatory practices or in terms of the rationally deceptive exercise of power. When today we speak of marketing of one sort or another, this is really euphemism for manipulation.²³ With this euphemistic rebranding, manipulation's gain-oriented aims can easily be thrust upon communication, so that even the media are called into question as not only producing and transmitting communication and information but also manipulation and disinformation. This is the case because the media have crucially facilitated the flourishing of BBC (*bricolage-bousillage-courtage*) *economism*,²⁴

²¹ Emotional manipulation is comprised of two key components: appeal to emotion and creating an effect of fusion. Cognitive manipulation involves manipulative framing and setting up baseless causality. Both types of manipulation may be analytically observed based on research into the following parameters: demagogic seduction, seduction with style, manipulation by means of clarity, aestheticisation of the message, recourse to fear, appealing to authority, repetitive messaging, false intimacy (i.e. privatisation of relationships), deceptive framing, intrusive/forced framing, abusive reframing, baiting, mental ruts, naturalising the real, deformed depictions, experimental manipulation, amalgamation (i.e., misleading collation of opinions), persuasion levers, etc. (Breton 2000[1997], 78–124).

²² According to Breton (2000[1997], 11), the relationship between argumentation and manipulation is really the relationship between respecting others, more specifically respecting others' freedom, and depriving them of freedom in order to force them to change their mind.

²³ Almost "all areas of marketing are subject to accusations of manipulation" and even "the concept of marketing is sometimes used as a synonym for manipulation", as discussed by Sunstein (2015) and Gatignon & Le Nagard (2015).

²⁴ Based on the calculative principles of patchworking (Fr. *bricolage*), bungling, botchering, tinkering, tampering (Fr. *bousillage, gâchage, bâclage*), broking, jobbing, dickering (Fr. *courtage*). Here, however, these wonderfully evocative terms, rich with nuances of meaning and with the variety of literary and popular uses in their respective languages, are reduced to their common denominator to describe systemically and institutionally-economised structures of economic practices of exploitation of interest via constant importing and exporting of interest. The BBC economy is constituted through practices of self-interested copy-pasting, patchworking, and manipulation of

generating ripe conditions for manipulation to be produced and performed. For a striking case of such abusive encroaching by manipulation on the media we need look no further than the writings of French journalist Alain Woodrow (1991) and his observations on how, in the context of the 1991 Gulf War, Western television programmes of the time exhibited a peculiar black-and-white approach, manipulatively producing and distributing negative information and disinformation.²⁵ In a world ruled by deep manipulation, even “white lies”, human hacking, neuromarketing (which is literally a marketing approach to the brain, selling things to the brain), “phishing”²⁶ and “freedom of choice”²⁷ have to be similarly regarded with scepticism, as if they were monsters alighting from an already-manipulated future like self-fulfilling prophecies from an already-experienced past with its impossibility of equitable, non-discriminatory, non-exploitative, non-exclusionary and non-destructive communication.

This concise overview of ideas of manipulation suggests the following paradox: in relation to communication, manipulation both is and is not communication. It *is* communication, since communication is how manipulation comes into being in the first place (and is the only medium through which manipulation may be transmitted), and it *is not* communication,

various components of primary or internal interest, where the individual components of that internal interest are shown as if they were not part of its substance (i.e. disorganisation of interests of the same kind or of components of the same kind within an interest), while some other components of that same interest are associated with other interests, which are secondary or external (i.e. amalgamation of different interests or of components of different kinds within an interest) even though the internal interest's components do not necessarily stand in a direct, substantive relation with the external interests, given that they were an inherent part of the internal interest's structure from the outset. In short, the BBC-er strives to make their internal interests acceptable by substantively and structurally entangling them with or “exporting” them into external interests, while what is understood by them as acquired from external interests is imported into their own internal interest, and what is understood by them as damaging to their internal interest is exported outwards.

²⁵ A recent “lab dissection” of how the media shape tastes, preferences, desires, fears, and objects of loathing as a result of “mass manipulation within everyone’s reach” was undertaken by French neurobiologist, journalist, and contributor to a media analysis broadcast Sébastien Bohler (2008).

²⁶ For more on hacking, biohacking and human hacking see Hadnagy (2011); for more on neuromarketing see Georges and Badoc (2010); for more on phishing as the ability of economic agents in the shape of markets, corporations, and industries to use a variety of tricks and ploys to manipulate and deceive, see Akerlof and Shiller (2015).

²⁷ For an exploration of how behavioural economics has misguidedly and unethically turned the “freedom of choice” into paternalistic nudging (i. e. manipulation of choice) see White (2013).

because it involves its regression or even suspension.²⁸ The key illusion to be dispelled first is the present-day notion, based on influential economic ideologies, that manipulation is a general (essential), virtually transhistorical (and therefore perennial) practice, one that has always existed and is intrinsic to human communication. Manipulation is neither a natural given nor a psychological essence of humans as communicating beings but rather a specific ideological formation resulting, as has been shown in this section, from specific historical and social processes. We have seen, first, that models and types of manipulation were not ahistorical phenomena; second, that these were relatively permanent inventions and progressive elaborations, in the sense that manipulation is, again and again, constituted as an imposing up-to-date technology *per se*. And finally, the types and modes of manipulation listed are not naturally attention-drawing; the naturalised visibility of their “communication” is part of a broader process in social, economic, and cultural development: the transformation of the worker-citizen into a consumer,²⁹ the establishment of the punditocracy,³⁰ the emergence of advertising, and the rise of mystifying industries of economic bias of communication, of technologies of attention, and of far-reaching manipulation with attention.³¹ These are how

²⁸ In their attempt at systematising procedures of manipulation, Beauvois and Joule (1987, 11–12) state that there are two ways to win a person over: by using power or by using manipulation. How, then, should a person act in a world where “everything is manipulation” (to paraphrase Watzlawick’s proposition that “everything is communication”) if that person has no wish to manipulate? Pierre Raynaud (1996), finding the proposition that everything is manipulation appealing, suggests cultivating an “art of manipulation” (*l’art de manipuler*) when there is no other option but to choose manipulation as a “necessary evil”. Similarly, Breton attempts to list some points in favour of manipulation (Breton, 2000[1997], 190–194), despite finding it much easier to list reasons and ways to fight it: by decoding it and detecting individual responsibility for it (195–198). Another of Breton’s books (2008) develops an ethical vision of persuasion without manipulation, by means of arguments. After all, for some people manipulation is a useful or beneficial phenomenon (Kirschner, 1999[1973]) and some see nothing positive in it (Hribernik, 2010).

²⁹ See Ewen’s *Captains of Consciousness* (1976).

³⁰ See Alterman’s *Sound and Fury* (1999).

³¹ All that is required for this insight is a thorough knowledge of the history of communication, which is helpful for developing awareness both of historical regimes of constitution of communication (cf. Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1962; Rossi-Landi & Williams, 1981; Mattelart, 1994; Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer, 1994; Peters, 1999; Poe, 2011; Simonson, Peck, Craig & Jackson, 2013; Kovarik, 2016) and of effects of economisation, professionalisation, bureaucratisation, corporatisation, commodification, technologisation and mediatisation (see Wu, 2010; Lundby, 2014; Hepp et al., 2017), processes that are thought by some authors to have peaked in the

manipulation increasingly enters the visible sphere of communication, as will be shown below. There has been, in fact, a gradual progress in the visibility of manipulation.

3. Manipulation Cannot Not Alienate

For at least five or six decades, social and state economies have been closely interdependent with the expansion of the information and communication sectors. We have been told that ours is “the information era”, “the communication era”, “the era of new media”, “the digital era”, or “the viral era”, and the list of labels goes on, all pointing to information networks, new digital media, and new communication services as largely driving social and state economies. Whereas, at the outset, the new information-communications technologies may have seemed promising and full of emancipatory potential, they have turned increasingly menacing and objectionable, and their potential for democratic and ethical advances less and less attainable. Having recognised the value of communication and information, instances of power the world over, from governments through corporations, industries, brands, national collectives, and new media celebrities down to local potentates in the remotest areas, have taken to controlling, exploiting, and abusing their communications’ production, transmission, and consumption. It may sound a paradox, but we do seem to have this flowering of new communications to thank for the fact that we woke up one day to find ourselves in the era of *post-communication tyranny*³², where both public and private, professional and lay, personal and mass communications have been successfully cannibalised by manipulation, which has appropriated their economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, to borrow Bourdieu’s terms (Bourdieu, 1986).

Given the aura of inevitability of what has been labelled by communication theoreticians, researchers, and experts for various characterisations³³ of

1940s and 1950s, by others between the World Wars, at the turn of the century, or even well in the 19th century (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Kittler, 1986; Flichy, 1997; Standage, 1998; Neveu, 2011, 15–47; McChesney, 2007; Gehrke & Keith, 2015; Wu, 2017).

³² This refers to Ignacio Ramonet’s findings in his book *La Tyrannie de la communication* (2001[1999]).

³³ For instance, as “utopia of communication” (Breton, 1992), “ecology of communication” (Altheide, 1994), “tyranny of communication” (Ramonet, 2001[1999]), “new communication” (Winkin, 2000) “explosion of communication” (Breton & Proulx, 2005), “society of communication” (Neveu, 2011), “mediatisation of communication” (Krotz, 2007; Lundby, 2014), “phatic communication” (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016), “disruptive communication” (Bennet & Livingston, 2018), “post-

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communication, professional communicators, propagandists and information workers have been made even more dependent on economism in communication resulting in phenomena such as the growing trade in communication services, the proliferation of media industries, the commodification of communication, the growing number of information and communication workers, the unprecedented development of corporative uses of information and communications technologies, the increase in training for jobs in communications. As a side product of this overarching economic process, there arose a global quagmire of mystifying professionalistic communication, monetised digital communication, harmful datafied communication, trivial lay communication, and poor interpersonal communication as public or media-driven communication products. There is no doubt that communication is a cultural practice; however, these processes have transformed it into an eminent product – a market commodity.

In the early 1990s, renowned French communication expert Philippe Breton (1992) asked the intriguing question of why it is that communication has taken up so much space in our contemporary societies? Is it simply because of the unprecedented expansion and proliferation of “communication devices” (televisions, computers, mobile phones, tablets, etc.) and their intrusion into our everyday lives? Breton, unsatisfied with this trite explanation, suggests a much more radical proposition: communication has become the new utopia – a utopia whose triumphant, conquering march is partly owed to the fact that grand ideologies of the past, such as socialism and liberalism, are today in crisis. This is a utopia created by the “man without interiority” (*homme sans intérieur*), reduced to his single image in a society made “transparent” by nothing other than the tyranny of media-driven communication. That is not all: media communication may even be one of the most mystifying among economic models of communication, since it has absorbed a considerable part of the logic of corporatisation, commodification, bureaucratisation, and economisation of

truth communication” (Harsin, 2017), “messiness of communication,” “post-communication” (Waisbord, 2019), “computer-based communication,” “electronic communication,” “media-based communication,” “mediated communication,” “mobile communication,” “automated communication,” “digitised communication,” “digital communication,” “data-based communication,” “networked communication,” “integrated communication,” “transformative communication,” “modified communication,” “interactive communication,” “virtualised communication,” “virtual communication,” “participatory communication,” “instant communication,” “self-disclosing communication,” “self-communication,” “triggered communication,” “accelerated communication,” “viral communication,” “omnipresent communication,” “multimodal communication,” “management of communication,” “communication strategy”, etc.

communication, while still presenting as a form of communication that is public and civic-minded – and hence non-economic or even anti-economic. Instead of the media facilitating public communication in a society, their interaction with consumers, audiences, and publics really exhausts itself, to borrow a term from Baudrillard, in the act of “staging communication” – that is, of simulating public communication (Baudrillard, 1981).

The domain of communication has morphed into some sort of cognitive cocktail of communication and manipulation, with manipulation becoming its trademark and the flagship of communications industries involved in creating (fake) public image(s). In such a world of post-communication, both professional and lay communicators find wide-ranging possibilities and tempting occasions to turn into unpredictable BBC phantoms, producing a variety of *faux-semblants* or deceiving appearances. At the turn of the century, Breton was still proudly citing the self-reflection of ethical communication experts who possessed a certain amount of deontological awareness, such that made it possible for them to admit that there is always a gap between the constructed image and the actual “product” that is being promoted, and that there is, even more importantly, a tight link. Yet even then, Breton warned of strong pressures from clients and of compliance by communication service providers, because of which “communication turns into true manipulation” (2000[1997], 128–129) given the gap, kept open in the course of communication, between the reality of the phenomenon and its communicated image. Breton, then, seems to suggest that it is in this very gap, which, however narrow, is inherent to every act of communication, that there emerges a symbolic space that manipulation can inhabit most invisibly and most successfully, starting its march from there as renewed, refreshed, accelerated communication.

The principal problem with this gap, where manipulation dons the appearance of factual, reality-based communication, is that it is a highly dynamic, creative, and interest-based structure, hence one grounded in economism, where factual aspects of communication are in continuous “negotiation” (or rather: in competition) with BBC aspects, by which, by definition, it tends to be subverted and abolished – that is, with manipulation. In short, this gap, whose significance is, paradoxically, constitutive for any communication, is at the same time the symbolic locus of the production of all kinds of mystification. These could be called *communicamystifications*: mystifications caused by communication, with its external and internal contradictions and paradoxes. To make things worse, this gap itself has now become the most useful among the ingredients of communication, one that is the most pliable and adaptable to the market. It is precisely owing to this gap – to repeat: one that is inherent to any communicative practice – that

communication has truly become sought-after and profitable, whether as a lay or a professional activity.

What happens when this gap starts to widen even in public communication? If public communication does not produce itself – that is, if it does not constitute itself as a public good – but rather produces the manipulation that really governs professional communicators and propagandists themselves, along with their professionalistic ideologies, then it is in the multiplication of mystifying realities that lies the success of such communication, as hinted at by Stevens' confession. Such communication, the aim and purpose of whose existence are directly linked to the successful production of mystification and manipulation, is a peculiar form of domination, exploitation, and repression. However, this form of domination is harmful and problematic, the more so the more pseudo-communication usurps the mantle of “true communication” or even of “professional communication”. The point of mystifying forms of communication is to blur the line between mystifying and non-mystifying transmission of messages. As a result, communication and pseudo-communication become inextricably nested within one another, so that our trust in pseudo-communication grows the more we are deceived, and there where we are most deceived lies the greatest potential for its professional rise.

It bears repeating: this is a way of communicating reality where the reality being communicated is a concrete artefact of the blocking of access to unmystified reality. As we can see, what happens in the course of the communication's transformation into manipulation is a peculiar *trans-functionalisation* of reality, where the status and function of communicating are themselves subject to change. Communication does not appear as a public good but rather as a market commodity – a BBC commodity corresponding and adapted to the economic laws of supply and demand on the communication services market. In fact, it is at the point where public communication takes on the role of a commercial activity that the aim of such professional communication is fulfilled: fetishistically,³⁴ it has drawn attention to itself.

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu is ruthless about communication making itself a fetish: “Communication is instantaneous because, in a sense, it has not occurred; or it only seems to have taken place. The exchange of commonplaces is communication with no content other than the fact of communication itself” (Bourdieu, 1998, 29). Drawing on Manuel Castells we could say that this is a form of *mass self-communication*, a considerable amount of which is “closer to 'electronic autism' than to actual communication” (2007, 247). This new form of horizontally-socialised communication in a digital communication environment involves a type of self-centred communication, “self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many” (Castells, 2007, 248). Attention: self-communication is not the same thing as self-reflexive introspection (the inward investigation necessary to establish an active dialogue with the other) but rather

Communication is all that must be seen; the reality outside of it, and in particular the way communication has been created and economised within a system of exchanging material and symbolic goods, is unimportant, or rather, must remain interestedly hidden from view in order for the illusion of public communication to successfully reach its audiences and publics. In mystifying communication, all that matters is the final goal, while the rest is unimportant and must remain excommunicated.³⁵ In a society governed by pseudo-communication – by manipulation and mystification instead of communication – pseudo-information³⁶ and pseudo-informedness thus take centre stage. In these circumstances, pseudo-communication triumphs over communication and mystified reality over actual reality. As a result, the actual consumer of public communication becomes a consumer of pseudo-communication, the illusion of communicating forcing itself on all as the most general form of public communication.

Yet keep in mind that what might delight communicators' clients in a post-communication era – after communication ceased to really exist per se, given its transformation into manipulation – is not their faith in the absolute power of communication to open up new worlds and mend old ones' failures. Quite the contrary, a much stronger source of delight may be the fact that their economic, political, or other interests can be “saved” by something that is not what it purports to be, even in circumstances where knowledge of economic laws and political principles is not necessarily there. Therein lies the economically-faked ideological power of communication: it has become a highly pliable commodity of manipulation. In a world of communication governed by manipulative, lucrative, gain-oriented interest, communicators and propagandists are merely the producers of communication as a commodity that colonises not only their professional lives but the entirety of social life. Hence, their customers, whether addressed as citizens or as consumers, become the consumers of an illusion of communication that in fact is not. In fact, what is involved here are communication models in which communication itself is simply a surrogate of communicating. In other words, this is pseudo-communication, whose central, often only, aim that justifies its means is not to

communication-turned-monologue (a mystifying addressing of the other by ignoring them).

³⁵ What is at the centre of excommunication is not simply non-communication nor an exclusion from communication (a departure from communication), as suggested by Galloway, Thacker, and Wark (2013, 16), but also – or perhaps primarily – an economic reanimation of anti-communication.

³⁶ For an illuminating read on the subject, see Schiller (2007) on the infrastructural and superstructural commodification of information, and on key paradoxes relating to how information-as-commodity both resembles and differs from other products.

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correctly, factually, transparently communicate the real but to mask or subvert it in such a way that actual reality is replaced by a mystifying version of it. To achieve this, all that may be needed are communicators à la Stevens, who are sufficiently unscrupulous and well versed in using “communication”, that is, manipulation – an entirely superficial or external operation of mystification, one that may be alien to the reality to be communicated – to provide a place for it to constitute itself in public or among the audiences that are being addressed. There is something deeply conservative lurking within this professionalistic interest (which is, as Stevens has told us, merely and purely business) in furnishing a social issue with, to allude to Goffman (1959), an appealing façade, a suitable appearance. The fact is that there is no need for reality as such to change; an external impression that suitable communicating can leave on this reality is enough for reality to seem to have changed. And in case limited or small-scale communicating is not enough to achieve this key transformative ideological effect, communicating must be accelerated and, above all, multiplied.³⁷

In communicating with audiences and publics by manipulating them, professional manipulators in the style of Stevens not only construct reality but appropriate it, expropriating others and particularly those lacking the social power to visibly, significantly participate in creating reality. Ethical Marxists would no doubt call this *alienation of communication*, even if the way it takes place in a digital communication ecosystem is more subtle and personalised, on a capillary scale. To put it in the spirit of the Marxist tradition: professionalistic communication could be said to have become largely alienated from the reality it is commissioned to communicate, and to have moved into the realm of a pre-economised ideological *Gleichschaltung*, that is, into a highly specific yet omnipresent digital orbit of what is economically admissible, desirable, expected, or even required. Stevens is even decidedly willing to admit to this. As far as he is concerned, he is probably willing to insist that the choice of systematic manipulation of the masses for “business” reasons involves no ideology – merely business. As if turning manipulation into serious business, an economic transaction, was not based on an ideology of economism. As if doing something because it is supposedly business needed to be dressed up as something *economically sublime*. On the contrary, Stevens’ book is perfect proof

³⁷ As it is often said, borrowing from Huxley: truth must only be told once; a lie must be told a hundred times to become truth. And it must be told systematically, according to a structured protocol and in a professionalised way. Moreover, the explosive hypertrophy of communication and “communication” was a key moment in the emergence of the “society of communication” (Neveu, 2011), as suggested by Philippe Breton and Serge Proulx (2005).

of the fact that there is nothing economically sublime about manipulation (from manipulation with timing and attention to perfidious ways of achieving domination or monopoly in the form of imposed logics of social classification, mechanisms of hierarchy, ritualised exchanges etc.); rather, and above all, it is an economically exploitative practice.

Nor is there anything communicationally sublime about it, even though it is often justified and abetted by various professionalistic, expertistic, or even academic acts of legitimation. It is a mystifying model of communicating, often based on abuse of anti- or pseudo-communication,³⁸ indirectly and more or less unavoidably in the service of power holders' organisation and production of society – yet this is a society where professionalised communication is a superb product of the illusion that the world of professional communication, understood here in all its versions³⁹ of economistic communication, is empirically grounded in notions of factual, equitable, appropriate, transparent, and sustainability-oriented communication. To be clear, mystifying communication in its various forms does not simply involve the *falsification of reality*, but also the *alienation of reality*. More than that, it involves the alienation of communication itself. Economistic types of communication are a perfect representation of the dominant economic system, exclusively focused on its own economic interests. It is within these parameters that most activities of professional communication take place. If what is produced by professional communicators as propagandists is not communication but rather BBC

³⁸ The level of sophistication in the functioning of disinformation that can be achieved in a disinformation ecosystem was demonstrated by Adam Klein (2017) in his analysis of 25 US websites spreading hate and lies, performed before the historical November 2016 election of Donald Trump. Rather than speaking of “fake news”, “misinformation”, and “post-truth”, the author uses the evocative concept of “information laundering”, borrowed from the world of banking and finance (money laundering), to show how the illegitimate currency of hate speech becomes publicly circulated knowledge. The fact is that search engines, website links, and social media platforms allow “*false information and counterfeit movements [to be] washed clean by a system of advantageous associations*” (Klein, 2017, 26). A well-known tactic used by communication and information fraudsters is to build a legitimate cognitive basis for their lies and disinformation, most commonly by merging the communication channels used for disinformation with professional communication channels, that is, with legitimate websites dealing with news, politics, history, science, etc. Disinformers succeed by not lying completely and in everything, but rather by lying only partially and situationally, while complementing the half-lie with information from reliable, competent sources – yet repackaged in such a way that the partially truthful information provides building blocks for an entirely distorted image of reality.

³⁹ As mass communications, media communication, computer-based communication, corporate communication, telecommunications, etc.

economy and propaganda, that is, the pseudo-communication they are governed by on the market of communication services, then the success of such production of communication lies in the proliferation of mystification, which they perceive as something imposed on them – a mystification of their own creation, or co-creation, yet one they pretend was never theirs, so that the mystification itself becomes evidence of their complicated enmeshment in the world of economic constraints. In order to justify their pseudo-communication strategies to themselves and to others, communicators must provide legitimation grounds for carrying out pseudo-communication as manipulative *communication work*.⁴⁰ To draw on a distinction established by Christian Fuchs,⁴¹ this is achieved by an act of imaginary alienation of their own *work of communication* (communication as a specific and productive form of professional work), re-imagined as being merely *communication at work* (communication as a form of professional coordination of the social production of relations), which is intended to produce a deceptive effect of separation, whereby communicators are separated from their own pseudo-communication, in other words, from their manipulation, considered by them as simply their “duty on the job” – their “business”. In short, when fabricating, lying, pretending, manipulating etc. in the service of someone or something, they are supposed not to be their authentic selves but rather a mere channel for the process of manipulative production of professional communication services on behalf of someone else.

This self-deception would seem to be based not only on the logic of an economy of manipulation, but also on the religion of manipulation economy. The problem, then, is not simply an economic one, but also one of pseudo-faith-based or rather myth-based acceptance, not only of the necessary existence of the market religion and related economic constraints and survival strategies, but of the presence of something *economically sublime* in the very economic fabric of society as a communicating society that promises and guarantees social development and welfare precisely through the act of effective, prompt, and

⁴⁰ According to Christian Fuchs: “*Communication work is a particular form of work that creates information*” (2016, 199).

⁴¹ Fuchs (2016, 197–199) develops the concept of communication in relation to the concept of work by drawing a distinction between *communication at work* and *the work of communication*: the former describes communication as a way of producing understanding about the world and others, in the sense that any human production is social production and therefore itself, as such, is a communicational or communicative relation; the latter speaks to the productive aspects of communication, in the sense that communication is in itself productive and therefore a specific form of work, whereby people as social beings *do* something – that is, they produce meanings that give rise to statements, texts, discourses, etc.

profitable multi-modal communication, networking⁴², and BBC-ing. The faith in the “economically sublime”, then, goes beyond the usual stories about communication breakthroughs, strategies, the market and the survival of those who “communicate for money”, or, even more directly, who “communicate money”; rather, it involves powerful impossible myths of the communicationally sublime that have grown around “new communication needs” (such as the myth of the inevitability of professional communication; the myth that appropriate communication can resolve any issue, even if said issue is not, at its base, one of communication; the myth that proper communication support brings a quantifiably competitive advantage to the market; the myth that professionalistically-imposed communication is automatically competent, high-quality communication, etc.) – myths that even professional communicators as BBC-ers, manipulators, and propagandists are forced to believe from time to time, even if their belief is accompanied by discomfort or disbelief. I say “forced to” mostly because their faith in models of communication that involve hardly or even no deeper, substantial connection between communication practitioners and communication service owners really cannot remain wholly unshaken.

In this anti-utopia, this “brave new post-communication world”, to paraphrase Aldous Huxley (1932), where the focus of academically-trained communicators, propagandists, and strategists of various types of communication is really on lucrative effects to be achieved through professionalised communication, and where the majority of communicative practices are concentrated around economic interest in using suitable communication to fulfil the needs of individual holders of social roles at local, national, international, and global levels, the vision of the empirical possibility of factual, ethical, appropriate, truth-based, and sustainable communication increasingly turns out to be a utopia of the post-communication world. This is after communication theorists, practitioners, and researchers have succeeded in persuading us about the importance of “strategic communication”, “effective communication”, “marketing communication”, “crisis communication”, “goal-oriented communication”, “target-oriented communication”, etc.⁴³ All these

⁴² Slovenian communication theorist Tadej Praprotnik (2018, 43) writes that the basic organisational principle of modern neoliberal societies is no longer communication but networking, or rather ostentatious display of being networked.

⁴³ I tend to approach all these types or models of communication with some reserve or scepticism as far as their conceptual level is concerned – but not the operational level. The fact is that such notions are both concepts as well as discursive formations whose constructions are in no way self-evident and neutral, whether in their theory or practical applications. Rather, they result from processes of interested production whereby notions are transformed into concepts, while what is defined, described, or

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specialised types or models of communication, the precondition of which is an *economistic constitution of interest in communication*, are presented to us as being crucial for communicating and even surviving in the contemporary world. In other words, the economism of such types of communication lies in the idea that something called “the economy of communication” can be forced on people as if professional communication, to reverse-paraphrase Dan Schiller (1996, 169), existed in its essential separation and distancing from amateurish, everyday

operationalised may not necessarily be limited to what is declared conceptually, or correspond to that at all. All too often, harmful social phenomena or cultural practices are accompanied by serious theoretical justification, whose aim is not necessarily to address and theorise these phenomena or reflect upon them, but to provide an academic prescription or scientific alibi for their legitimacy in practice. This is a form of sophisticated, at times almost “unspeakable” intellectual manipulation (for the manipulative role of *homo academicus* see Kotnik, 2016, 159–188; 2019, 292–297). Taking into account both the context of US communication theorist John Durham Peters’ definition of his discipline’s conceptual problem, stating that “*Communication’ has come to be administratively, not conceptually, defined*” (1986, 528) and the context of what US critical communication theorists Christopher Simpson (1994) and Robert McChesney (1997) have foregrounded as the ethical problem of a politicised and economised discipline, and in the light of the history of intriguing relations between US federal government and academic community, Simpson shows to what extent contemporary communication research and its central stars such as Wilbur Schramm have been closely linked – even if perhaps by accident – with one of the most questionable aspects of the Cold War military-intelligence complex, with its psychological warfare programmes. These government-financed programmes would later guarantee the academic triumph of prejudiced, mistaken, and simplified ideas of communication that can still be found here and there in so-called “mainstream”, “orthodox”, “conventional”, or “traditional” communication science, in marketing research, media marketing as well as, increasingly, in the neuroscience of information and communications technologies. Later, Robert McChesney joined in in pointing a critical finger at communication scholarship, arguing that communicology, not up to the challenges of the new media system, had left the appraisal of the system to the growing movement for media reform, so that this movement played a double role, as both a key actor in the system and a replacement for a critical, disinterested, academic scholarship on the media. The appeal on communication scientists to intensify their efforts to conceptualise their object of study issued by Waisbord (2019) should also, in the post-communication era, be accompanied by a more systematic self-reflexive analysis of the responsibility of the academic communication “post-discipline” in the transformation of the majority of professional, academically-trained communication into unscrupulous mystification and manipulation in all sectors of society, where such communication occurs not only as a specialist, expert form of professional communication with clients, consumers, publics, and audiences, but further intrudes as a representation of academic professionalisation in practice.

forms of interpersonal communication. Even more, these types or communication models are presented to us as important ingredients or even authentic versions of “public communication”, even if what they really are happens to be stand-ins and intruders. According to partisans of such communication models, these types of communication are particularly important today because of the endemic “lack of interpersonal communication”, the “void of face-to-face communication”, the “disintegration of intersubjective communication”⁴⁴ that has become our new, everyday human condition after the decentredly communicating subject took to incestuously “personal” communication with computers and other machines with identities, that is, technologies transcending themselves towards electronic and robotic personhood.⁴⁵ Even communication amateurs⁴⁶ (and there are many of us, using various digital communication channels) have become rather tempted by the idea of the necessity of strategic, market-, crisis-, and goal-oriented, targeted, and effective communication⁴⁷ when warned by communication experts that the vacuum created by the absence of such conscientiously expertised forms of communication can easily be filled by manipulation, misrepresentations, misperceptions, fake news, misinformation, disinformation,⁴⁸ false information, malinformation, pseudo-journalism, and other such forms of deception and falsification of reality. It is now obvious that

⁴⁴ In light of the interactional psychology of communication (Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967) – now somewhat distant in time – arguing that all behaviour is really a form of communication (according to Watzlawick’s famous thesis that “*one cannot not communicate*”), today’s arguments about the absence or the crisis of interpersonal communication strike the reader as somewhat acommunicational. “Radical” psychological interactionism assumes that interpersonal interactions constitute meta-communicative frameworks of sorts and that communication exists even in extreme cases where it seems to have disintegrated (in cases of pathological, schizophrenic. or paradoxical communication).

⁴⁵ This has been written about extensively by Sherry Turkle (2011 and 2015).

⁴⁶ Whereas French sociologist Patrice Flichy (2010) sees amateurism as introducing refreshing creativity in digital communication, American businessman and controversial commentator of the digital revolution Andrew Keen (2007 and 2008) branded it as devastating to communication, adding a touch of typical American concern for capitalism by mentioning its destructiveness to the economy.

⁴⁷ From “efficient communication” (Huisman, 1982) it was a relatively short step to “efficient manipulation” (Breton, 2000[1997], 144–155; Azzopardi, 2011).

⁴⁸ For a better understanding of the distinction between information (which conveys an objective knowledge about reality), misinformation (unintentional spreading or mistaken promotion of false information as if it were true), and disinformation (intentional, planned deception), see Habermas (1984 and 1987) as well as Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble (2018, 3).

the global⁴⁹ quagmire of post-communication in which we have no choice but to live – since the option of cool observation from a detached extra-territorialised position is closed to us – can be neither understood nor cleaned up if we entirely ignore the BBC-ing role played in it, both in the past and now, by the prophets of strategic, market-oriented, effective, goal-oriented, targeted, crisis-oriented, and other such economism-based models of communication in politics, business, media, and the public sphere. These types of communication and the theories according them scientific or expert legitimation continue, to this day, to pragmatically appeal to the need for “top-down communication” and to the advantages supposed to follow from this for both collectives and individuals. But what is needed today is a new political theory of *non-economic communication*, one not organised around the communication problem of manipulative power play to uphold governments, corporations, brands or famous names, and hence not organised around problems of communicative domination and hegemony. To paraphrase Foucault (1980), all stripes of communication hegemonists of manipulation ought to be beheaded. As far as the theory of economistic communication is concerned, this has not yet happened. The head, still firmly on the shoulders, continues to feed us the illusion of the necessary existence of communication from a position of power – an aloof position where someone has appropriated the prerogative to communicate with people, and, by extension, the prerogative to manipulate them while supposedly “merely and exclusively communicating with them”. In the time of COVID-19, various manipulators have been attempting again, in the name of data post-fascism, the corruption of the digital mind, deep manipulation, and viral mystification, to persuade us of the necessity, the desire, and the obligation of someone “on top” to protect us. The power holders’ veiled, subtle interestedness involved in this manipulation is becoming increasingly vocal and ruthlessly transparent.

4. Manipulation Cannot Not Manipulate

The world of post-communication has become a quagmire of BBC-ing, of fetishistic, narcissistic, auto-referential, pseudo-phatic, and pathological interests in having as much communication as possible, regardless of actual needs for it and regardless of its quality. Ours is a world that has turned manipulation into the essence of communication. No more an excess in

⁴⁹ For a historical and critical reflection on communicational aspects of globalisation processes, in particular how communicating has become established as a global practice, see Wilhelm (1990); Mattelart (1996); Taylor (1997); Hugill (1999); Kraidy (2012); Hamelink (2014); Wilkins, Straubhaar & Kumar (2014); Volkmer (2014).

communication, manipulation is now at its centre: the centre of a degraded and degenerated communication. For a memorable recent instance of this we need look no further than President Trump's 2020 notorious daily coronavirus briefings turning into a reality show of Trumpist propaganda in full view of the global public. Whoever has followed them as a viewer of US TV programmes, along with reading his tweets, will have acquired the impression of an endless parade of manipulation practices unfolding before their eyes: false claims (such as regarding Trump's right to override governors' decisions on social restrictions), cascades of recklessness (from insisting that the epidemic is a plot by the Democrats and by China to calling it the "Chinese virus," from misrepresenting testing capacities or lying about them to blaming Democrats for the lack of testing, from suggesting light as a possible cure to promoting disinfectant as treatment), dark calculation (from offering money to a German biopharmaceutical company in order to secure a vaccine "only for the US", to exploiting the pandemic to score an electoral win), wildly inconsistent messages (with Trump saying one thing at his press conferences and something else entirely on his social media; with the president pinning the responsibility for testing on state governors alone, while his vice-president was trying to reassure them about the abundance of testing supplies; turn by turn glorifying the private sector over the state and announcing a take-over of the private sector by the state), compulsive claims and retractions (on federal vs. gubernatorial authority to close and open state borders; on social distancing, which was first refused, then social distancing guidelines announced), distractions (from underestimating the pandemic to blaming the WHO for its delayed response to it), complete reversals (from praising China's "efforts and transparency" in containing the outbreak to accusing it of misinformation and lack of transparency, from thanking China for its help to blaming the WHO for its support of China, from avoiding to take presidential responsibility to claiming "total authority"), misinformation and disinformation ("We've done more testing than any country anywhere in the world"), playing both sides (while his administration was delivering recommendations for social distancing and isolation, the president was tweeting for people to revolt against the very policies they recommended) – and the list is far from complete.

What has been shocking is neither the way Trump's manipulation unfolds with no moral reset, no communication memory, and with a complete lack of touch with the reality of the pandemic, nor even the way he has managed to self-invent, reset his tactics, and re-impose himself in the eyes of the media with each new manipulative act, regardless of his previous statements and regardless of how, in hindsight, these have confirmed one thing above all: that with Trump, information, truth, and fact were never present at all. What has been shocking was how Trump managed to virtually stand the frame of reference for

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public communication on its head, to the point that the journalists and reporters present were required, even in the face of his unscrupulously *transparent – evident – manipulation*, to remain duly lenient (or at least to maintain a show of leniency), considerate, and restrained in their questions, criticism, or praise. In other words, journalists' reactions to Trump's manipulations have become an obligatory ingredient in Trump's reality show of pandemic manipulation. Thus, the president's briefings went from supposed communication of the pandemic to battles over the interpretation of the pandemic of his manipulations. Watching his reality show on a daily basis made us increasingly aware and considerate of the paradox pointing to the transformation of manipulation from a veiled, camouflaged, hidden, and calculative strategy into open, supremely organised lying and deception. As has already been said, manipulation used to need specific methods of "cultivation". These were needed to hide its masking mechanism – so that it could remain concealed, a practice taking place behind the scenes. Today, manipulation pulls its strings on the open stage so to speak, revealing itself as manipulation in real time. It has no moral compass; anyone with the ability and the desire to see can clearly see how unscrupulous manipulators target us and how the fact that their manipulation does nothing to deny itself has absolutely no bearing on their ability to carry on, as if they had not been caught in the act of manipulation.

This turnabout may have opened the path to revisiting a key point in Freud's theory of the unconscious (1915). As far as manipulation is concerned, the following principle has long held sway: we are not bothered by manipulation until it is identified, or rather, until we have realised that we are being manipulated. The moment, however, that manipulation is revealed and we realise we have been manipulated, it starts to bother us, since we can no longer pretend that we never noticed the manipulation. There are parallels to the unconscious: as long as the unconscious remains repressed, hidden from our awareness, we can pretend it does not matter; once it erupts, however, and enters our awareness, the now-visible unconscious causes discomfort, even an uncanny feeling. This is because the unconscious's entry into our consciousness reveals the very mechanism of repression – and in a way, this is the mechanism of our unconscious manipulation. The key to this manipulation is the Id's ability to trick the Ego despite the Ego's active intent to dominate the Id. In the era of classical manipulation, the principle of hiding, veiling, and repressing manipulation was key for its social legitimacy and success. For that reason, more attention had to be paid to its concealing, masking, and camouflaging, while revelations of manipulation tended to provoke surprise and discomfort. The revealing of manipulation provokes surprise either we because were previously unaware of it or even believed it to be impossible.

In the era of deep manipulation, however, the act itself has come to appear as something unsurprising, not a source of discomfort. In brief: what we should consider to be impossible or what once seemed impossible has become perfectly feasible, a fact which astounds us even more than in the past when manipulation had to be exposed to become visible. Why is it that *transparent manipulation*, manipulation literally unfolding before our own eyes, still has the power to astound, even if not necessarily to surprise? It would seem that what is going on is the following game of self-deception, regularly performed on ourselves as well as others: despite knowing very well that infamous manipulators build their lives upon that “craft”, their methods themselves somehow still have the power to amaze because we do not believe or (still) refuse to believe that such manipulation can be carried out in such a transparent way, and yet its perpetrator comes out of this social game as a winner. Could one ask for better proof of how mistaken this deliberate blinding of oneself is than the rise of Donald Trump?

Clearly, in the post-communication world, Trump is no longer one concrete person but rather embodies a type of *unscrupulous messianism*⁵⁰ neither embarrassed by nor denying the fact that it generates a quagmire of manipulation as post-communication refuse. Manipulation has become Trumpist in that the various Trumps whom many among us can recognise in our own personal and professional lives need no longer appeal to the historicity of manipulation, to the alleged fact that people have always lied, pretended, fabricated reality, forged texts,⁵¹ spread disinformation, in short, manipulated and participated in a BBC economy. Trumpist manipulators have no need of such historical advocacy nor of reflecting upon it, since they can much better contribute to the history of manipulation by performing it themselves, every day, and hence ahistorically. If it sounds cynical, this is only because we are obliged, each and every time we are faced with transparent manipulation, to put on an act of *interested blindness* and pretend not to see said manipulation if we are to remain supposedly civilised, mannerly, and considerate to our fellow citizens.

⁵⁰ Exhibited within the so-called “Trump culture”, so not necessarily related to Donald Trump as an individual human being or particular social actor, but rather to the political, social, and media culture that he represents and fosters.

⁵¹ “*Forgery of a kind is as old as textual authority*”, according to US historian Anthony Grafton (1990, 8), whose study shows how textual forgery from antiquity to the present has always been a rival, an adversary and a trigger for both creativity and a more deliberately critical approach to textual sources. French historian Roger Chartier, on the other hand, provides an important antidote to a possible ahistorical illusion of a past where the media did not lie, falsify, and manipulate, or did so significantly less than now (for extensive “coining” and inventing of news in early 17th century see Chapter 5, “Inscrire et effacer”).

For it is precisely at the point of our culturedness and culture-mindedness that transparent manipulation puts us to a perverted test. Have you never happened upon a manipulator whose manipulation of either you or others was based on the assumption that it would be taken for granted? Have you really never happened upon a candid and ruthless manipulator whose manipulation was carried out not only with the awareness that its author cannot control its circumstances, indeed has not even attempted to do so – but also that this is well known by us, the recipients and consumers of the manipulation?⁵²

In attempting to understand the manipulator's positioning with regard to manipulation, two main starting points can be pinpointed. First, the manipulator evaluates others "according to his own image", in the sense of "everybody manipulates, so why not me" (in short, the manipulator translating their manipulation into an opportunistic/conformist excuse for their manipulation). Let us call this the pseudo-pluralist position (but do not forget: while this cognitive rationalisation includes the possibility of manipulators themselves falling target to manipulation, this does not necessarily mean that manipulators are emotionally ready to accept the fact that they can also be manipulated). Secondly, the manipulator only allows their own manipulation, not tolerating it in, or refusing it to others, as if saying "only I may do this but not others" (in short: manipulation becomes the manipulator's exclusive prerogative or property). Let us call this the authoritarian position. In both of these cases, however, the following problem may occur: the manipulator might count on you, the target, to take their visible manipulation for granted and accept their game, even when they wish to manipulate you. The manipulator's lack of ability or effort to keep their manipulation procedures under permanent control has now become your burden: you are made an accomplice in carrying out their manipulation. In short, the notorious manipulator always works from the assumption that others *accept* their manipulation. The authoritarian manipulator assumes, moreover, that others *must accept* their manipulation. As for reactions to it, there are three possibilities. Ideally for the manipulator,

⁵² When transparent manipulators openly ridicule themselves, delegitimise themselves in their weird self-disclosure, and undermine their communicative credibility, we are faced with a kind of abusive malapropism, engaging gaslighting, destabilising the target, disorienting the victim, making people crazy, or producing crazy moments deliberately. Such ridiculous situations therefore appear to look like the manipulators' bizarre responses to challenges that call for communication in interpersonal relationships but fail to achieve standards of seriousness, relevance, or credibility. This crazy-making malapropism has also, of course, become, as Slovenian social anthropologist Irena Šumi (2017) lucidly points out, a political form that reached one of its climaxes with Trump.

others remain unaware of the manipulation.⁵³ However, this may not be ideal for the narcissoid manipulator, who enjoys seeing others implicitly express the fact that they know they are being manipulated. The narcissoid manipulator easily translates this into an excess of manipulation, a peculiar sort of pleasure that comes with the awareness that their manipulees are subdued and firmly in their power. The second possibility is for others to be aware of the manipulator's manipulation but tolerate it for one reason or another, often in ways that remain unspoken.⁵⁴ But what if the manipulator's game is refused – which is the third possibility? If the manipulator is exposed and their game is explicitly rejected, such a manipulator will be “justifiably” insulted or angry, since they had attempted your manipulation thinking they had your consent thereto. The ruthless manipulator walks on the brink of an abyss of interpersonal relationships, yet ignores having no firm ground under their feet. Ruthless in their pretence that they can walk over such an abyss, they are immune to stumbling over the ruins left behind by their own manipulation (imposing their manipulation as their way to make sense of the world and its reality, to put it in Lacanian terms); they never stumble until the moment they are explicitly faced with their manipulation, and even more precisely, until the long tail of their manipulation curves back and delivers a lash (this feedback functioning, again in Lacanian terms, as an external experience of their manipulation, disturbing or even disorganising their reality of manipulation). In short: a simple reminder of their manipulation is enough to provoke their potential personal hurt, offence, or ire. Faced with their own manipulation as it appears in the eyes of the manipulee, they are literally forced to look into the product of their own manipulation. This is the most delicate moment for the manipulator, when – still in the spirit of the Lacanian distinction between reality and the real (Lacan, 1977) – the real erupts into their reality of manipulation. Whereas the manipulator's reality of manipulation is built as a symbolic or imaginary construction, the real hits them as something that is missing from that reality, or rather, undermines that reality. Such a manipulator is unbothered by us knowing that we are being manipulated (at times even desiring to share their manipulation with us – a mark of benevolence in their eyes; at other times attempting to force us into the game of co-creating manipulation – a mark of their superiority to us in their eyes). They are, however, supremely bothered by having their manipulation clearly demonstrated, disapproved of, condemned,

⁵³ Similar to what Goodin (1980) views as “unknown interference”, i.e. the deceptive exercise of manipulation.

⁵⁴ Similar to what Goodin calls “unwelcome interference”, i.e. manipulation exercised contrary to the will of its objects or targets, yet without their objection or even with their consent, which Sunstein (2015) calls “manipulation with consent”.

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or contradicted. In this they see the loss of our trust in the shared knowledge of their manipulating. If you have the misfortune to thus refute the mad manipulator, you may fall target to their deranged fascism. But let's disregard this pathological⁵⁵ version. Since many are unequipped with the knowledge or the will required for a brutal confrontation with manipulators' shady games, the post-communication world is teeming with ruthless Trumps. They are found in our own families; we have no choice but to coexist with them in the workplace, they address us from television and computer screens. It is a stroke of irony that it took Ex-President Donald J. Trump for such notorious manipulators in our everyday lives to acquire a memorable name.

The problem, however, goes deeper than superficial cynicism. In the past, realising you had been unknowingly manipulated was a source of discomfort. Today, in the era of the triumph of Trumpist manipulators, the discomfort stems from the fact that we see manipulation yet have to pretend we do not, so as not to trouble any interpersonal relationships, potentially provoking unavoidable conflicts. In other words, the function of transparent manipulation is considerable de-sophistication, de-cultivation, and naturalisation of the barbarism of deep manipulation. The contact with the unconscious sparked Freud's uncomfortable insight into the social and psychological condition of the human being as not at home in their own house, despite having always believed in this illusion. Today, in the era of manipulation that is at the same time deep and transparent, another illusion should be laid to rest: now the media and the information-communication technologies have supposedly shed light on our unconscious, enabling its conscious exploitation, the subject of the present day should feel no more at home in their own media-illuminated house. In other words, the subject should feel no more at home in the house of transparent manipulation than was the case when manipulation was systematically concealed by various technologies.

In the era of post-communication, what has changed is not merely the models, types, or techniques of manipulation, but also – and crucially – the frame of communication. Before, in the era of classical manipulation, manipulative practices operated within the framework of a relatively established and situated ecosystem of communication and information, where conditions of reality were determined and legitimised by truth and fact. In this type of ecosystem, then, manipulation appeared as a parallel world of excess, aligned with the principles of truth and fact. In such a world, an encounter with the mirror of truth within this dominant fact-based ecosystem at least brought some

⁵⁵ American psychiatrist Justin Frank (2018), putting "Donald Trump on the couch" to psychoanalyse him, identifies the following pathologies: lying, narcissism, destructiveness, racism, sexism, and misogyny.

social consequences for disinformers, manipulators, and pseudo-communicators. Today, in the era of manipulation, this is hardly the case any longer, since the conditions of this new ecosystem ruled by disinformation and manipulation are no longer legitimised by truth and fact, but by post-truth communicated with sufficient intensity, perfidy, and persistence – bluntly: lie – , and by post-fact – bluntly: pseudo-fact. The key problem in the functioning of the post-communication quagmire lies in the fact that it generates and accumulates more and more post-factual strategies of manipulation and calculation and less and less factual, ethical, and truth-based communication. The relationship between manipulation and communication has become problematic because communication is directly neutralised or even destroyed by manipulation. In any post-communication quagmire, whether local, national, or global in its scope, constant hyper-production of disinformation as information, fake media images as actual images, corrupt communication as professional communication strategies, fabrications as representations, and communication as manipulation are used in order to (to put it in Lacanian terms) virtually cut people off from “the real” or from communication or even from any deeper sense of “symbolic” representation of reality-based, factual, ethical, and sustainable communication, while the quagmire itself is established as a frame of reference for both interpersonal and mass or media-driven forms of communication. In an even more Lacanian turn, the fiction of post-communication has the structure of the truth of communication; communication has acquired the structure of manipulation.⁵⁶ The term for this is deep manipulation; it is what guarantees the basic conditions for performing transparent manipulation.

Transparent manipulation does not just fall like manna from the heavens, nor does it have anything to do with the aforementioned Enlightenment function of social transparency. The transparency of manipulation may, at first glance, seem charming, but deceptive is what it really is; it gives the illusion of having adapted to a society appreciative of transparency in communication and action. However, the manipulativeness of transparent manipulation starts at the point where transparency replaces transparent communication and action rather than supporting them. This trick takes place in specially constructed social circumstances. The visibility of transparent manipulation can only realise itself with audacity and shamelessness in the protected conditions of the post-

⁵⁶ To reverse-paraphrase Lacan’s statement that truth itself has the structure of fiction as not being “*exactitude but the effect of discourse*” (1990, xxvii): post-communication, that is, a fiction of communication or simply pseudo-communication, is very much part of the order of the real in communication, precisely because post-communication is actually an effect of communication that is often real even if fictive – but not fictional.

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communication quagmire of deep manipulation. Only this allows it to be transparent and to go unpunished in its “transparency”. In fact, there is a two-way process of mutual fertilisation between deep and transparent manipulation. On the one hand, transparent manipulation needs the protection of deep manipulation in order to be able to realise itself without fear of retribution; on the other hand, the communication and mediatisation potentials of deep manipulation can be realised most visibly and ruthlessly if it takes up the place of transparent manipulation. To summarise: transparent manipulation takes place against the background of deep manipulation, whose infrastructure is based on big data technologies, pseudo-scientific factories of lies, viral mystification industries and fabricating digital media, which have colonised all the spheres of social life, from politics, business, media, mass communications, and in general the entirety of the public sphere, all the way to interpersonal communication.

These are precisely the circumstances where deep manipulation, systemically moving along various media, big data, and communication channels, takes on the form of multiplied public communication screens of transparency. Not only has multimedia production of deep manipulation strategies behind the cover of various internet communication tools’ multimedia machinery resulted in the erasure of once sharply drawn dividing lines between truth and lie, reality and fiction, communication and manipulation, but it has produced new paradoxes and contradictions. One of these is linked to the fact that transparent manipulation hides its own crucial economic role – its functioning as a commodity and as a means for the accumulation of gain-oriented and manipulative capital (which amounts to double manipulation). The main ploy of the neo-liberalist capitalism of manipulation⁵⁷ is its accelerated generation and multiplication of transparent manipulation, which serves to paralyse people or get them to immediately forget manipulation as soon as it happens. It serves, in short, to have the wild spectacle of manipulation no longer be seen as a system of domination, subjection, and exploitation but rather as a media curiosity, as sensational disclosure, even as bold frankness (manipulation as corruptness with a human face) and ultimately as our “natural state of communication”. The post-communication world, then, has to be imagined as a disinformation and pseudo-communication ecosystem of planetary proportions whose dominant structure is determined by the production, reproduction, and distribution of hypocrisy, (self)deception, manipulation, mystification, and lies. In other words, as the possibilities for

⁵⁷ For a historical, sociological, and economic account of how neo-liberalism, having established a strong relationship with mass manipulation, led to the degeneration of liberal economy, see Bifarini (2019).

communicating widen, so do the possibilities for manipulation to prosper. With the growth and acceleration of the quagmire of manipulation, acts of manipulation are forgotten as they happen. Still, this immediate repression of acts of manipulation has brought about a fundamental transformation of the entire ecosystem of the *memory of communication*. The transformation is far-reaching enough that transparent communication has come to count for less than transparent manipulation, the latter's social benefits entirely – and of course, manipulatively – parasitic on the symbolic capital of the former, which has been burdened with new inhibitions in the name of the “new normality of communication”. In other words, the Trumps of today are not the inventors of deep manipulation but rather its outcome. They are the accelerated product of several decades' worth of manipulation's economisation, professionalisation, technologisation and mediatisation, whose infrastructure has been contributed to by many engineers, inventors, scientists, technologists, academics, policymakers, politicians, economists, businesspeople, and, yes, also and above all, by the media.⁵⁸

Some five decades ago, controversial French situationist Guy Debord (1971[1967]) wrote about the society of the spectacle as a systemic capitalist manipulation that had transformed the spectacle of manipulation into a political, economic and media agenda, without being willing to seriously face its domination. And the most spectacle-prone sector of society, the one that has elevated the idea of manipulation to the rank of legitimate public speech – the media – have been happily promoting the spectacle in politics all the while preferring to deny their own policy of the spectacle of manipulation. The media support, distribute, multiply, and popularise a considerable proportion of deep manipulation, making it visible and developing media narratives of social legitimacy based on a permanent battle between good and evil, truth and lie, heroes and villains, as well as, of course, victims to be protected and saved. The spectacular function of deep manipulation lies precisely in the glory and the misery of media reproduction and exploitation. Ironically, the media cannot even be accused of not having contributed to the “democratisation” of transparent manipulation by making sure that each manipulative act, statement or gesture could reach consumers. They certainly make it possible for all to either produce or consume, love or hate manipulation. This would seem to have been reason enough for strong transference to develop between media users and media as infrastructures of manipulation. A new psychoanalytical situation would seem to have arisen here: just as the psychoanalyst is supposed to offer the client the right circumstances to relax and freely associate, so the media and

⁵⁸ For an answer to the question of how the media became the “original sin” of manipulation, see Gili (2001).

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information-communication technologies of the present day allow (and even encourage) us to manipulate and be manipulated in ways that are increasingly “relaxed”, “spontaneous”, “authentic”, “uncensored”, that is to say careless, anti-intellectual, trivial, banal, and empty. It is largely the new media and information-communication technologies that we have to thank for “the new communicational conscious” coming to light, in all its manipulative external “unconsciousness” of course. In other words: in the present day we can manipulate transparently, authentically, and despicably, without any sense of guilt, shame, or fear of loss of face, because we know that there is a legitimate public infrastructure that makes this possible and that will tolerate, transmit, or confirm our manipulative transparency, authenticity, and despicability.

5. Conclusion: If You Manipulate, Manipulate Better!

The ancient Greeks believed that there were two animals equipped with what is needed to persuasively carry out a calculating *mētis* in the wild: the fox, with its ability to feign death; and the octopus, with its capacity for camouflage (changing colour), mimicry (fading into the background or taking on the forms of other animals), and shocking other animals (by emitting a veil of smoke or a cloud of ink) in order to mask its inert presence at the sea floor and catch its prey. The legendary cunning of the fox has lived on, transmitted through tales and folk songs, in the collective imagination of numerous societies and communities until the present day. The octopus, on the other hand, went long forgotten, with no one to celebrate its adventures and ruses. It was Victor Hugo who, in 1865, finally brought it back from oblivion in his poem *Les Travailleurs de la mer* [*Toilers of the Sea*], whose protagonist fights an enormous tentacled sea monster. In contrast with the fox, embodying the appeal of manipulation as a small-scale, pragmatic, relatively innocuous, individualised survival strategy, the image of the octopus has been transfigured from the Hugolian kraken into a technological and economic behemoth so that it has come to designate any branching organisation deemed to engage in occult domination by means of mysterious, non-transparent, BBC-based spreading. Paradoxically, thus economised, the animal serves as a mark of symbolic opposition to imperialism, economism, capitalism, and corporativism, materialising the manufactural, industrial, and later corporative dimensions of manipulation. The difference between the fox and the octopus is illustrated today, as imaginatively depicted by Fabrice D’Almeida, by the very distance separating ruse and manipulation (the former considered something tactical, instinctive, immediate, arbitrary, contingent, non-economic; the latter something strategic, protocol-based, systematised, institutionalised, accumulated, and economised). The fox, then,

has kept the age-old meaning as designating a mix of practices used by individuals to play with or adapt to the rules of the social game in inventive, cunning, and clever ways without necessarily committing any transgressions, at least not drastic ones. In other words, the fox is a symbol of obtaining advantages without destructively breaking the rules of the social game. The octopus, however, is perceived according to a different logic; its covert, lurking, manipulative character personifies a strategic intelligence constantly working to conceal just how harmful, depraved, and corrupt economic practices are, the gravest danger to them being the demand for their transparency (D'Almeida, 2018), that is, for their visibility and non-manipulativeness. This is because non-manipulativeness implies honesty, openness, clarity, straightforwardness, and integrity of conduct, and it has the power to discredit those who equivocate or break the rules of the social game. Yet manipulation, while concerning individuals, also transcends them, since any manipulator operates and co-operates in what has become a deep-reaching global phenomenon, a deep post-communication quagmire undermining the social contracts of the past as imagined by liberal thinkers. In the minds of the founders of political modernity manipulation may have seemed a lesser evil, a perverted secondary effect of dogmatic societies, for they believed that its potential violence could be blocked juridically, by means of the force of law in the name of community and collectivity. Now, however, we see that laws were powerless to stop the manipulation that used to caper at the edges, skulkingly, behind the scenes. Today it plays out in the centre, in the limelight, "onstage". As has been shown, in the circumstances of the post-communication quagmire, manipulation is no longer simply manipulation, but is increasingly, dangerously, becoming synonymous with limitless exploitation, vulgarisation, barbarisation, and destruction of everything that has been considered legitimate, universal, and for the public good. In the circumstances of the post-communication quagmire, manipulation constitutes a legitimate victory even if that victory is achieved in ways that are illegal, harmful, unjust, manipulative, or dishonest. For those who have consented to the triumphant logic of economic action in the post-communication quagmire, manipulation has all but ceased to exist as a category of consciousness or of conscience, having become their most inherent, "natural" way of approaching others, of communicating and establishing relationships. Essentially, deep manipulation masks the intolerable quality of our present-day world, whose laws of economic interest denature, or rather, alter the true nature of transparency, justice, inclusivity, participatoriness, equality, solidarity and other such benefits of universality.

In a society where manipulation has entered innumerable spaces of both public and private communication, which have become all but indistinguishable, any public communication is effectively, at the same time,

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simulated communication, that is, economically extractive communication, whose basic professionalistic intent is to be considered non-economic and non-manipulative. Communication simulated in this way has become the most fertile ground for erasing the dividing lines between economic and non-economic practices of communication, leading to the disintegration of public communication as a regulatory and self-regulatory cultural practice of credible, trustworthy⁵⁹ formation of interpersonal contacts and exchanges at both the collective and individual levels. Nevertheless, despite the mountain of communication refuse, growing with blinding speed in the quagmire of global multi-modal communication, I certainly do not want to give up the hope that *another world of communication* is possible. Potential solutions in the battle against deep manipulation and viral mystification are not much different from what is recommended to combat common tricks, ruses, deceptions, and behind-the-back dealings in interpersonal communication: observation, recognition, raising awareness, analysis, critical consideration, expressions of disapproval, and the choice to act differently – these are still, for now, the only tools we have in a world of increasingly sophisticated manipulation masked in increasingly complex ways, intent on replacing communication. If our societies had not preserved space for human ingenuity and calculating thinking, they may not have died out for lack of imagination and invention, but they would have lost a considerable proportion of their potential for imagination and invention. However: is it really the case that people's and societies' fundamental capacity for imagination and invention is to die out in the event we, as collectives and as individuals, renounce the harmful and destructive, economically-based deep manipulation? The answer seems self-evident if we circle back to sum up and re-evaluate the opening story about Stuart Stevens in light of all that has been said: the professional manipulator's confession is not the result of him not knowing that his actions were wrong, but proof that he had known all along that his actions were wrong; nevertheless, not only did he know that he was allowed to do the wrong thing, but also that the wrong thing was just what he was expected to do. To conclude by paraphrasing Stevens: Don't just blame Ex-President Trump, blame all the Trumps in our lives.

⁵⁹ The authors of *Trust and Communication in a Digitized World* (ed. Blöbaum, 2016) demonstrate, from the different perspectives of their respective disciplines, that trust is both an “*effective form of complexity reduction*” (according to Niklas Luhmann) and a sort of reduction in requirements based on perceived intention, integrity, credibility, competence, and reputation – whether in face-to-face or mass-media communication – yet the reputation in question is not given in advance but must be constituted ever anew, constantly tested, and affirmed in the practice of interpersonal contacts.

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