

MEDIA POWER TOOLS

Understanding the 10 Filters re: the Digital Age's (Propaganda Model of News)

Filter #1) Advertising: The lifeblood of our corporate commercial media culture, advertising –the ceaseless “to be you gotta buy” consumer-happy promotion of goods and services– provides the majority of funding for U.S. print, radio, television and web news media. Advertisers have tremendous power to shape stories that provide U.S. our news and (dis)information content. “He who pays the piper calls the tune,” as the nursery rhyme goes.

Filter #2) Ownership: Many corporate commercial U.S. news and (dis)information outlets are in turn owned by much larger corporate entities that have a vested interest in maintaining the U.S. imperial status quo. As Ben Bagdikian’s Media Monopoly research has chronicled, 90% of our media content – radio, movie, TV, web, magazine and newspaper outlets – are now ultimately owned by 6 transnational corporations with “little to tell but everything to sell,” in the words of George Gerbner.

Filter #3) News Makers: So much of our daily news content is shaped by the most visible persons and organizations deemed “newsworthy”–the POTUS, the FLOTUS, and the SCOTUS, to name but three examples from U.S. news and (dis)information culture. Even a seemingly mundane “news” story – “President Trump tweets the word “SAD!” while rearranging his sock drawer with Jared and Ivanka!”–often trumps more vital stories that go underreported.

Filter #4) News Shapers: Prestigious U.S. think tanks, foundations, and public relations firms are in the business of producing “research” designed to generate news and (dis)information for the voracious 24/7 news cycle. News organizations often find it easier and less provocative to simply source their information from these “news shaper” rather than conduct their own independent investigative research.

Filter #5) Flak: Also called “negative criticism,” this fifth filter refers to attacks on individual journalists or news organizations who stray beyond the boundaries of the accepted news and (dis)information status quo. The past few decades are littered with the careers (and occasional corpses) of U.S. journalists who got too close to power in their dogged pursuit of a story they deemed the public had a right to know but offended the wealthy and powerful.

Filter #6) “Deep State” Disinformation: The “Deep State” has for decades secretly partnered with both news organizations and think tanks to “seed” stories into mainstream news and (dis)information channels designed to promote U.S. imperial agendas, protect corporate interests, and advance the goals of what retired U.S. general and departing Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower famously called the “military industrial complex” in his 1961 farewell address. In the Age of the Internet, the concept of the “Deep State” is now cracking into mainstream cultural conversations in ways never seen before, and this phenomenon bodes well, perhaps, for independent news analysis and information access. Certainly, the Deep State “filter” is difficult to spot, as it demands a deep and abiding knowledge of U.S. history and politics, and the ability to see beyond media-manufactured false binaries–Red versus Blue, Democratic versus Republican, “liberal” versus “conservative,” “for us or against us.”

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“Journalism’s job is not impartial ‘balanced’ reporting. Journalism’s job is to tell the people what is really going on.” - George Seldes

Filter #7) Algorithms: Contributing to our “Age of Digital Disorientation” is the widespread use of proprietary corporately-controlled news and (dis)information platforms built on sophisticated ever-evolving computer code programs known as algorithms. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon and other powerful global digital media corporations are constantly exploring new and novel ways to harvest consumer data and capture networked content for their true customers—advertisers and the third party data harvesting companies who collect and share consumer information, often in secret. News and (dis)information provides vital content within the algorithmic mix, revealing intimate details about users’ personal data and their connections with others.

Filter #8) Filter Bubbles: Best considered in conjunction with the algorithm, the “filter bubble,” a term coined by Eli Pariser, is another important digital news and (dis)information filter that impacts all of us as news consumers. Each of us develops a “filter bubble” through repeated news and information searches online, as a combination of platform-specific algorithms and our own personal search choices construct a particular digital “reality” for each of us over time. Understanding the presence of our own “filter bubble” and taking active steps to push our search for news and information beyond the routine, habitual, or even comfortable is a vital element of critical 21st century media literacy education and thoughtful news consumption. Otherwise, we end up wrapping ourselves up in our own “news reality” that merely reflects our own agreed-upon tastes, choices, and consumption habits. By extension, our “trusted friends” (a popular phrase in the world of digital media marketing) simply become foils for networking back to us what we already think we know. Spotting the “filter bubble,” like developing an awareness of algorithms, is vital for 21st century CMLE and independent news consumption and production.

Filter #9) “Behavioral Microtargeting”: What if private corporations could partner with political campaign strategists to reach into the web and use social media platforms to “massage” a citizenry’s thinking, influence voter choices on particular issues, or encourage voters to support a particular candidate? Cambridge Analytica, a U.K.-based consulting company, claims they can engage in this sort of “behavioral microtargeting,” using an astonishing 5,000 pieces of individual data on each of 220 million American voters. We can’t know for sure, since their data is proprietary, but the use of “psychographic” data is sure to gain notoriety in the years ahead, and must be considered as a primary filter in shaping thinking and behavior regarding our news and (dis)information habits, particularly as our civic spaces become ever more intertwined with our digital spaces.

Filter #10) Sock Puppets: Imagine if corporations or governments could create thousands of fake social media accounts to create, share, promote or attack a particular candidate, campaign or ideological position? Already happening. “Sock puppets” is the term given to these fake and often anonymous social media accounts, which can be unleashed into digital and social media spaces via the power of the algorithm and then used to spread messages, stories, and real or imagined claims (including so-called “fake news” stories) virally through various networks.