



MANIPULATION AND PERSUASION IN THE INFORMATION AGE: AN ETHICAL-CULTURAL, SOCIO-PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *In the information age, the forms, methods and scope of manipulation and persuasion are expanding, posing a serious threat to the individual, society and culture. The article studies the conflict of manipulation and persuasion with moral norms, values and cultural traditions, as well as their impact on the principles of social justice, equality and democracy. The ethical, cultural and socio-philosophical foundations of combating manipulation and persuasion in the information age are analyzed, in particular, such areas as ensuring information security, increasing media literacy, developing critical thinking and promoting moral values. It is significant that the article is aimed at a deep understanding of the ethical, cultural and socio-philosophical problems of manipulation and persuasion in the information age and finding ways to solve them.*

Keywords: *information age, manipulation, persuasion, ethics, culture, society, philosophy, information technology, information security, media literacy, critical thinking, moral values, social justice, democracy, information attacks.*

The modern information age has created factors that directly affect human thinking, morality, and behavior. In this process, the concepts of manipulation and persuasion have become the basis for serious attention not only to the means of communication, but also to their moral, philosophical, and cultural roots.

Manipulation is a method of influencing a person's mind, emotions, and decision-making process in covert ways. This method is often used by an interested party to undermine a person's freedom and conscious choice. The manipulator often



tries to direct a person towards their own goals, taking advantage of a person's lack of trust in information or knowledge.

As a result of the rapid development of information technologies, the processes of manipulation and persuasion are taking on new, complex forms. The influence on the human mind through social networks, mass media, and algorithms based on artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly stronger. Whereas persuasion should be based on open and fair communication, manipulation, on the contrary, is carried out through secret and unequal relations and reduces the freedom of human choice.

Especially today, the intensification of the process of manipulation has a negative impact on the inner freedom and subjective independence of a person. People are increasingly dependent on the flow of external information, which prevents them from fully understanding their moral and legal responsibilities. In such cases, a person is seen not as a unique subject, but as a simple object of external influences.

Therefore, it is necessary to clearly define ethical criteria and boundaries in the processes of manipulation and persuasion. In particular, informed consent, respect for human dignity, the rejection of false or misleading information, and the reliance on the principles of openness and justice are among the important ethical principles.

Today, new forms of manipulation, in particular algorithmic manipulation, are becoming increasingly widespread. Social media channels are transmitting deliberately targeted information to users. Fake news, covert propaganda through influencers, and manipulative methods based on neuromarketing and cognitive psychology are also becoming increasingly popular.

These processes have important moral and cultural consequences for society. Manipulation weakens a person's ability to think independently, undermines the atmosphere of trust in society, increases cultural passivity, and weakens social consciousness. People are increasingly skeptical and distrustful of information.



In such circumstances, media literacy is becoming an important defense against manipulation. A media literate person has the ability to analyze information, identify its source, evaluate its content, and draw the right conclusions. This creates the opportunity for members of society to think critically, form an independent position, and make informed decisions.

In the modern information society, methods of influence are becoming increasingly complex. The unclear boundary between manipulation and persuasion makes it difficult to determine their moral status. As Anne Barnhill, professor at the Berman Institute for Bioethics at Johns Hopkins University, notes, modern ethics does not clearly define manipulation, and both broad and narrow interpretations of this concept lead to errors. The purpose of this study is to determine the essence of manipulation and explain its place in modern communication based on theories such as Kant's categorical imperative and Van Dijk's discourse analysis.

Anne Barnhill argues that modern ethics does not define manipulation precisely enough, interpreting it either too broadly or too narrowly¹. The philosophical literature often includes any influence that is not rational persuasion as manipulation, although she believes that there are also influences that are not rational but not manipulative. Marcia Baron, a professor at Indiana University, Bloomington, argues that there are two main perspectives in the philosophical literature on manipulation. The first is about freedom and moral responsibility, which mainly studies the impact of manipulation on the freedom of the manipulated person. The second is about what types of manipulation are acceptable without special interest or ulterior motives, which is mainly viewed from the perspective of the manipulator. In the first case, the common view is that the person who is induced to do something through manipulation is not responsible for his actions². At the same time, Baron emphasizes that there is no manipulation without a manipulator, that is, a person can be a victim of the environment, but the claim that “the environment

¹Barnhill, Anne, What is Manipulation? In: Coons, Christian – Weber, Michael: Manipulation: Theory and Practice. Oxford University Press, New York. 2014. -P. 51-72.

²Baron, Marcia, The Mens Rea and Moral Status of Manipulation. In: Coons, Christian – Weber, Michael: Manipulation: Theory and Practice. Oxford University Press, New York. 2014. -P. 98-120.



manipulated him” is incorrect. Only people have the ability to manipulate. Because manipulation requires a certain intention. *Baron connects this with the concept of mens rea (criminal intent) in English law. “In manipulation, there is intention and negligence: the manipulator induces another to do something he wants in order to achieve his goal, but does so with disrespect”*³. According to Baron, negligence can be spoken of because the manipulator does not show respect in his relationship with others. Baron recommends distinguishing between manipulation, which is interpreted broadly and narrowly. While narrow interpreters consider it always bad, broad interpreters believe that this is not necessarily the case, since in this case the moral status of the influence is not limited to only negative aspects. Baron advocates a broader interpretation of manipulation, even if it leads to the classification of malicious manipulation in the same category as morally questionable actions.

Baron considers several types of manipulation in his previous work, but mainly distinguishes three main types:⁴

1. **Deception or trickery** (the intent of manipulation is completely hidden from the manipulated, and it involves lies or false promises);
2. **Applying pressure to submit** (this can be in the form of threats or immoral offers);
3. **Manipulation of the situation** (in which the person being manipulated cannot escape the situation, and the means of this can also be intimidation or reprimand).

Baron believes that the manipulator displays a form of arrogance and his goal is to limit the other person's options. However, this does not eliminate options completely, and this is an important difference. In coercion, the person being coerced has no other choice but to comply with the obligation, while in manipulation, this is not the case. The person being manipulated may decide to go against the manipulator's wishes, even though *the manipulator is influencing the person in this way in order to fulfill his own wishes*.

³Baron, Marcia, The Mens Rea and Moral Status of Manipulation. In: Coons, Christian – Weber, Michael: Manipulation: Theory and Practice. Oxford University Press, New York. -P. 103.

⁴Baron, Marcia, Manipulativeness. Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association. 2003.



Indiana University professor Allen W. Wood, in his study **“Coercion, Manipulation, Exploitation”** builds on Baron’s ideas and typology, where he examines manipulation from the perspective of moral philosophy, along with exploitation and coercion. According to Wood’s illustrative example, the manipulator turns another person the way a driver turns a steering wheel: with small movements. After that, the car is in motion, but now in a different direction. Similarly, the manipulated person: he pursues the goals of another, not his own. According to Wood, “manipulation is an interference or encroachment on someone’s free will, which does not limit or eliminate free will, but influences it in a certain way, thereby helping the manipulator achieve the desired result”⁵. Although Baron does not describe the commonalities between the different methods of manipulation, Wood believes that he is pointing out how manipulativeness becomes a sin through the manipulator's control over others. Ultimately, the manipulator sees people as a means to an end, thereby violating Kant's fundamental principle: “Try to see humanity, both in yourself and in any other person, always as an end, never merely as a means”⁶.

Although manipulation is often morally condemned and considered bad, Baron and Wood try to interpret it as broadly as possible. Because in some cases, even if manipulation occurs, it cannot be morally condemned. In their opinion, this is the case, for example, when a parent encourages a misbehaving child to be polite. However, it should be noted that the child is not yet able to control himself and therefore needs external influence, otherwise he will not be able to learn the basics of social etiquette. The peculiarity of manipulative behavior is that it influences people's decisions in such a way that it disrupts the rational decision-making process and eliminates the possibility of critical, error-free formation of this decision. Based on incorrect information, a person ultimately makes decisions that he would not have made if he knew the truth. Similarly, it is impossible to make the right decision under

⁵Wood, AW *Coercion, Exploitation, and Manipulation in Moral Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2014. -P. 31.

⁶Kant, I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785). 1998. - P. 48.



pressure. According to Baron, a virtuous person acts in precisely the opposite way to manipulative actions, because he “attempts to reason with another person rather than to persuade them to act differently through flattery or deception ⁷.” Wood disagrees with Baron that manipulative behavior can be justified by the grandeur of the goal. Similarly, he disagrees with Baron that manipulative behavior is less reprehensible if the goal does not serve the manipulator’s personal interests. For there are many malicious influencers who, even if they have no personal interests, manipulate another person and limit their free will.

The American philosopher and professor at the University of Michigan, Robert Noggle, distinguishes between traditional and global manipulation in the literature on free will. The first deprives the victim of free will and autonomy only to a limited extent, while the second completely. Noggle believes that two questions should be asked in this regard: identification (what forms of influence can be considered manipulation) and evaluative or moral (how should the moral place of manipulation be assessed, is any manipulative action immoral?). There are three types of answers to the identification question: the first, manipulation is an influence that distorts rational reasoning; the second, considers it a form of violence; the third, considers it a form of deception. Greenspan can cite an example of a hybrid form of this view, where manipulation is located as a hybrid influence between coercion and deception⁸. The answer to the second question, the evaluative question, is more complicated. The downside of manipulation is that when it is used, the manipulated person is harmed, and the manipulator benefits. The manipulator violates the autonomy of the manipulated person. In addition, he sees and reifies the target person as an object. However, according to Noggle, there are many more research questions on this topic: for example, how someone can manipulate a specific person or a situation that affects a person, as well as how to deal with unintentional manipulation (for example, people who have been raised to have manipulative

⁷Baron, Marcia, Manipulativeness. Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association. 2003. -P. 48.

⁸Greenspan, Patricia, The Problem with Manipulation. In: American Philosophical Quarterly, 40(2): 2003, -P. 155–164.



behavior and are not aware of it), but he also raises the question of whether certain circumstances can predispose people to manipulative behavior? According to Greenspan, women who are discriminated against in order to achieve their goals often resort to manipulation of their male partners.

Noggle defines manipulative actions as attempts to shape the beliefs, desires, or feelings of others in such a way that they fall short of the ideals that govern their own beliefs, desires, and feelings. Manipulation is often harmful because the manipulator encourages the manipulated person to do things that are not beneficial to him. For example, cigarette advertising encourages people to smoke, which has been shown to cause cancer and death. However, according to Noggle, it is not always harmful. Manipulation can also be done for a good purpose. It can be considered bad because it uses immoral methods and objectifies another, but this argument is also unreliable because it excludes many morally harmless methods of influence. For example, trying to dissuade someone from doing something dangerous or making them feel guilty about doing something immoral is not the same as manipulation.

Similarly, if we consider other methods of influence, such as rational persuasion, we can see that someone can use logical arguments to persuade someone to do something that is not only beneficial, but also harmful. For example, if someone tells someone that sunbathing is good for the body because it produces vitamin D, but also does not tell them that too much sunbathing is bad for the skin, this argument is not considered valid. The difference between right and wrong influence is whether the influencer wants the other person to make some mistake in thinking, feeling, suspecting, or paying attention, or whether the influencer wants to deceive and persuade the other person to do something that is not good for him, thereby depriving him of the opportunity to make the right decision. So the question is not how the influencer is influencing the other person, but what his intention is.

While Noggle and his colleagues approach it primarily from an ethical perspective, the Dutch linguist Van Dijk has delved into the manipulative nature of political discourse in his modern discourse analysis. In his opinion, the language that



politicians systematically use to persuade public opinion is also manipulation. He says: “Manipulation involves not only power, but more precisely, domination through the abuse of power ⁹.” It is a deliberately hidden, self-serving, speech that serves the interests of the speaker (manipulator) and implies an asymmetrical relationship between the participants. The basis of this relationship is trust, which the manipulator often gains through his sincere arguments. According to **D. Sperber**, professor at the Central European University in Budapest, anthropologist, philosopher, and **D. Wilson**, professor at the Center for the Study of Mind in Nature at the University of Oslo, two types of intentions can be distinguished in the process of manipulative communication: informative intention and communicative intention¹⁰. When a manipulator informs his audience, he also conveys an intention to them, but this does not always coincide with his manipulative intention. Therefore, the manipulative intention is always hidden and not part of the communicative intention, because the lie must not be revealed.

According to Van Dijk, there is legitimate manipulation: he also includes education and persuasion in such cases, thereby distinguishing it from illegitimate manipulation: “The crucial difference in this case is that in persuasion the interlocutor is free - he can believe or act as he pleases, whether he accepts the persuader's arguments or not, while in manipulation the recipients usually play a passive role: they are the victims of manipulation”¹¹. In the latter case, the recipients cannot see the manipulator's true intentions, since they do not have the special knowledge necessary to resist him. That is, the difference between manipulation and persuasion depends not only on the features of language, but also on the structure of social interactions. Group membership, status, possession of material and symbolic capital and resources determine power relations within society. According to Van Dijk, power can be maintained through control. Usually this is the power of action. “A” controls (limits, hinders) the actions of “B”. Discourse is also a type of action, through which power can be exercised, that is, through context, topic or style. Some

⁹Van Dijk, Theun, Discourse and Manipulation. In: Discourse and Society 17 (2). London, Sage. 2006. -P. 360.

¹⁰Sperber, Dan es Wilson, Deirdre, 1986, 1995: Relevance.Communication and Cognition. Oxford, Blackwell.

¹¹Van Dijk, Theun, Discourse and Manipulation. In: Discourse and Society 17 (2). London, Sage. 2006. -P. 361.



of them, for example, the media or public discourse, are accessible only to the elites of society (politicians, writers, journalists), that is, they can indirectly influence the minds of people through the messages they convey through the media. Thus, manipulation is, on the one hand, a social phenomenon, because it involves power relations between individuals and groups. On the other hand, it is a cognitive phenomenon, because it requires the mental abilities of the participants. Third, it is a discursive phenomenon, because manipulation is carried out through text, speech and, not inconsiderable, visual images ¹².

The study showed that it is wrong to interpret manipulation as a negative phenomenon only. As Baron and Noggle point out, there are different forms of manipulation, some of which can be approved. The main difference is that legitimate manipulation has an overt purpose and does not violate the autonomy of the recipient, while illegitimate manipulation is carried out with ulterior motives.

The categorical imperative of the German philosopher I. Kant remains relevant in modern communication - any process of influence must pass the test of whether it can be a universal law. Van Dijk's discourse analysis shows that in order to identify manipulation in political and social relations, it is necessary to analyze not only the features of language, but also social power structures.

Increasing media literacy, developing critical thinking skills, and understanding ethical responsibility are effective ways to counter manipulative influences in modern society. Conduct new research into the future of artificial intelligence technologies, which will lead to new forms of manipulation.

Conclusion.

The rapid development of information technologies poses new ethical challenges for humanity. The widespread occurrence of phenomena such as manipulation and persuasion in the information age is a serious threat to the individual, society, and culture. To respond to this ethical challenge, it is necessary to clean up the information space, increase media literacy, and develop critical thinking.

¹²Van Dijk, Theun, Discourse and Manipulation. In: Discourse and Society 17 (2). London, Sage. 2006. -P. 359–383.



Manipulation and persuasion conflict with moral norms, values, and cultural traditions. They aim to limit people's free will, change their minds, and force them to make decisions that are contrary to their interests. This can lead to distrust, discord, and injustice in society.

The information age is a battleground between traditional and popular values. Through manipulation and persuasion, various forces are trying to promote their values and change the moral and spiritual direction of society. To win this battle, it is necessary to strengthen national and universal values, increase cultural immunity, and ensure moral stability.

Media literacy is one of the most important tools to combat manipulation and persuasion in the information age. Media literacy helps people to critically evaluate information, identify sources, and distinguish false information from truth. Therefore, improving media literacy should become an integral part of the education system.

Cleansing the information space from manipulation and persuasion is a common task not only of the state, but also of all members of society. To fulfill this task, it is necessary to improve information legislation, promote the responsible use of information technologies, combat information attacks, and form a culture of ethical communication in society.

Suggestions and recommendations.

1. Development and implementation of the national program "Information Hygiene" aimed at increasing the population's immunity to information attacks and reducing the risk of becoming a victim of manipulation.

2. Using artificial intelligence technologies, develop AI algorithms to detect false information, block fake accounts, eliminate information attacks, and warn the population, apply them in the field of information security, and train relevant specialists in the field.

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