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The use of mass media for propaganda and political purposes in the U.S.A.: theories and cases

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of the relationship between media and power has always been one of the strong themes of critical sociology: it concerns both the various generations of studies on the effects exerted by the media as well as research into the organizational processes of the culture industry (e.g. in research into the mechanisms of news production)¹.

Nowadays, mass media are anchored in our lives and are an integral part of most of our daily activities. Over time, thanks to the advent of the Internet, the branch of mass media has expanded, making room for social media, with which we coexist and share information every day. In the history of mankind, there has never been such an exposure of human beings to communicative relationships. This proposed study attempts a sociological analysis of the influence of mass media on society over the years, with a particular focus on society in the United States, from the mid-20th century to the present day. The study focuses primarily on the use of the mass media by politics for political propaganda purposes, and on the manipulation of public opinion. The development and rise of mass media in the United States began earlier than in Europe, thanks to the advanced experimental mechanization after World War I. In addition, some studies on the influence of mass media on society have been carried out precisely through events that took place in the United States, such as the study entitled *The People's Choice*, which is analyzed in this dissertation. This is the reason why this country was chosen for the study.

The first chapter analyzes the concept of *culture industry*, with a focus on the new technically

¹ Colombo, F. (2012), *Controllo, Identità, Parresia. Un approccio foucaultiano al web 2.0*, Comunicazioni Sociali, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, p. 197.

mediated cultural forms of the media, such as radio and motion pictures, referring then to the production of products of a cultural nature and the paradigm according to which this new 'mass' production of culture reduces it to a mere consumer commodity; then the chapter moves on to the concept of the *Manufacturing Consent*, referring to the book by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman. These definitions are analyzed to better understand how the new mass media have influenced and changed society. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the effects of the media studied on the recipients of the messages, distinguishing between short-term effects and long-term effects, theories that have developed since the 1930, a historical period in which the mass media were believed to have a great influence on individuals, they were referred to as the 'omnipotent media', not least because of the propaganda on radio and newspapers carried out by totalitarian regimes. Theories of media effects have been analyzed to show how the historical context in which mass media are placed also reshapes the influence and perception that recipients have towards them.

In the second chapter, I went through the specific study, *The People's Choice*, which consists of the summary of an empirical research in the field of public opinion that analyzed what conditions determined the political choice of voters during the presidential campaign. This analysis is interesting because it disproves the idea of the "all-powerful media" extolled in those years, emphasizing instead that 'informal' social relations have more relevance in influencing individuals during campaigning.

The last chapter presents the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal from 2018, one of the biggest political scandals to date, concerning the illicit collection of personal data from Facebook by the company Cambridge Analytica. Regarding this case, there was also a suspicion that the company somehow facilitated Russia's propaganda work against Hilary Clinton in the 2016 election campaign, during the presidential election between the Democratic Hilary Clinton and the Republican Donald John Trump.

The past-present contraposition has been useful to examine how the use of mass media has changed over time, and on which channels it has concentrated the most, depending on the period being considered. Indeed, today political propaganda has also moved to social media, which have become an ideal place for freely exchanging ideas and information.

1. THE EFFECTS OF THE MEDIA IN THE NEW MASS SOCIETY

1.1 The culture industry

The term *culture industry* is a socio-cultural paradigm first introduced and used in 1947 by two philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Marxism, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. One of the concerns was the new technically mediated cultural forms of the media.

In their work, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*² (English title, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, 1947), in a critical and pessimistic view of the new mass society, this concept is used to indicate the process of reduction of culture to consuming goods. The birth of the culture industry is neither a precise event nor a category, but a series of processes that link mass culture to the advent of the media.

In their general outlines, the expression *mass culture* is discarded and replaced with *culture industry*: the aim is to exclude from the outset the interpretation put forward by advocates, who claim that what is involved is a culture that arose spontaneously from the masses themselves - that is, the present-day form of folk art. Contrariwise, with the notion of culture industry, the two sociologists wanted to focus on the ambiguous complexity of capitalist ideology that seemed to suppress the dialectic between culture and society. Through this perspective, there is no longer any room for critical thinking or cultural differentiation but all that is proposed is characterized by homogeneity and standardization³.

The culture industry differs from the folk art in its most basic principles: in all its fields the products that are considered for mass consumption are manufactured – more or less according to plan. This

² Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. W. (1947), *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Amsterdam.

³ Bonazzi, M. (2016), *The Ambivalent Creation of Truth in the Digital Age* [Italian Sociological Review, 6 (3), 431-447], p. 438.

is due as much to present-day technological resources as it is to economic and administrative concentration. In this phenomenon the masses are a secondary element, an accessory to the machinery. The consumer is not the subject, but the object. In the two philosophers' view, the term *mass culture* that has been imposed upon the culture industry does nothing but minimize the phenomenon.⁴

The term "industry" should not be taken literally. Indeed, it refers to the standardization of the thing itself, and not strictly to the process of production. This system, linked to processes of distributional rationalization in order to meet the needs of a mass market, is defined industrial since it is assimilated to the organisational forms of industry.

1.1.1 The culture as a standardized commodity

According to Adorno and Horkheimer⁵, the industrial-scale manufacturing of products such as magazines, books and radio programs reduces culture to a standardized consumer commodity, and this can only have political effects on mass societies; the culture industry integrates by force even those two domains that have been separate for thousands of years: the domain of 'high art' and the domain of 'low art', referred to the folk art. The cultural products in the style of the culture industry are no longer *also* merchandise - rather, they are *wholly* merchandise. The hucksters of the culture industry base their activity upon the principle of the commercialization of their work - not upon its actual content.

Regarding the culture industry's products, their most striking characteristic is that they are all basically "cut from the same mold": indeed, what is presented as progress - its perpetual offering of the "new" - continues to be an exterior change of the same thing. Every element of the culture

⁴ Adorno, T. W. (1971-72) Vol.5, *The culture industry*, p. 9.

⁵ Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. W. (1947), *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Amsterdam.

industry "follows the same formula"⁶: every film, radio broadcast or popular novel draw upon the same stock of character types, plot structures, and narrowly conceived tonalities. And this style does not change over time, but always remains the same. This quality of ever-sameness does not apply to the surface content of popular culture, which is constantly changing, but to its form.

All the practice of the culture industry applies the profit motive to the autonomous products of the spirit. What is new in the culture industry is the immediate and admitted primacy of the effect, very well studied in its most typical products⁷. The development of the immanent problems of a particular work is sacrificed in favor of the production of something that can be quickly sold. Under capitalism the *effects* of cultural objects on an audience come to take precedence over their *truth* content. The industrial system helps transform cultural objects and the world they depict into autonomous, independent entities and structures that cannot be controlled by human beings.

The culture industry thesis proposes that, in the objects of mass culture, commodification reaches its most extreme with use-value being entirely replaced by exchange-value. This can be understood as referring to the fact that people are now only capable of evaluating aesthetic objects based upon their value in the marketplace. The critical theorists believe that in a world that has become strongly instrumentalized and rationalized, the only legitimate form that cultural objects can take is an utter rejection of all functionality and utility.

The culture industry does not hide the fact that its products are designed for sale; however, it also markets them as satisfying the needs and desires of its customers: people believe that they are engaged in a relation of immediacy or "pure use" with the objects of the culture industry.

Another notable feature of the culture industry for Horkheimer and Adorno is the growing concordance between its products and everyday life⁸: technological advances in areas such as film

⁶ Gunster, S. (2000), *Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form*, p. 42.

⁷ Adorno, T.W. (1971-72) Vol.5, *The Culture Industry*, P. 9.

⁸ Gunster, S. (2000), *Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form*, p. 43.

are deployed by the culture industry to systematically reduce and eradicate the distance between art and life. Any tension or contradiction between culture and reality has been eroded and destroyed by the sophisticated technology and the techniques of the culture industry.

1.2 The Manufacturing Consent

According to the American philosopher and linguist Noam Chomsky, the culture industry bases its social function on obedience, by letting consumers' desires and expectations correspond to the proposals produced by the "Manufacturing consent", with the aim of creating false and induced needs. Noam Chomsky is one of the most radical critics of the "power of the media" in the era of totalitarian regimes (1988, 1989, 1996). Based on this thinking, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman (an essayist and expert in economic politics and media) wrote their coauthored book, "Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the Mass Media" (1988)⁹. Herman and Chomsky have written or coauthored no less than a dozen books devoted, in whole or in part, to scathing analysis of the distortions, double standards, and outright falsehood - the 'propaganda', as they call it- routinely disseminated through the mass media. Chomsky in particular has sought to play the role of *public intellectual*, intervening in a wide range of political controversies, most concerning U.S. foreign policy. In their work¹⁰ they elaborate a "propaganda model" of the mass media, by defining a typical form of it as "dichotomization": with this term they refer to the result of a deeply imbedded double standard in the reporting of news. He sees the distribution of standardized cultural products as a threat to the highest value of culture with the result to deprive individuals of the ability to problematize life in its multi-faceted issues.

⁹ Herman, E. S., Chomsky, N. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York, Pantheon Books.

¹⁰ Ibid.

This phenomenon can be explained with a practical example: the U.S. government and its allies are automatically presumed to desire peace and democracy and to oppose terrorism; these premises will never be applied, on the other hand, at least not uncritically, to news coverage of enemy states or groups judged dangerous by dominant economic and political elites. In other words, one hypothesis of the propaganda model is that the media will treat victims of political violence and terrorism in a dichotomous manner: victims of enemies' states will be treated sympathetically, as *worthy victims*, whereas victims of the United States and its clients will be slighted as *unworthy victims*.

According to Chomsky, the goal of totalitarian cultures was to control and dominate individuals in order to distract them, providing them simplifications and emotionally captivating illusions through a controlled system of communication, in order to address the users to harmless or irrelevant issues from the social point of view¹¹.

Then, as now, the role of social media is quite different from that of informing citizens and disseminating news. The main media are big companies owned by even bigger companies, and they sell a product on the market: the market is advertising, the product sold is the audience.

The propaganda model specifies verifiable mechanisms that account for systematic media bias. The propaganda model consists of five so-called filters, which filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. The five filters are (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner health, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms: access to media ownership is limited by the amount of investment required, as control of the media has over time passed into the hands of large corporations; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the

¹¹ Bonazzi, M. (2016), *The Ambivalent Creation of Truth in the Digital Age* [Italian Sociological Review, 6 (3), 431-447], p. 439.

media on information provided by government, business and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media, where "flak" means negative reactions to a media service or program: in the U.S.A., associations have sprung up in which the sole purpose is to trigger controversial attacks (American Legal Foundation, Media Institute, Center for Media and Public Affairs, Accuracy in Media in the 70s/80s); and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism: Communism has always been the supreme evil because it undermines class privilege and the superior status of those with economic power. The anti-communist ideology thus placed a control on the media, leading them to frame the world as dichotomized into communist and anti-communist powers.¹²

The doctrinal system produces propaganda in agreement with state institutions, big business, the cultural and educational world. Like all propaganda, it aims at hitting a precise target, which is divided into two parts: the first is the political class, a small group of educated and cultured individuals who often have the task of administering a state; the second is what Walter Lippmann calls the simple spectators, the majority of individuals, *the lost flock*, to be pampered and pampered. They are expected to obey and receive the right indoctrination, in exchange for soap operas, films, Super Bowl, Champions League etc.¹³

1.3 Theories of media effects

Sociology has studied the effects of the media on the recipients of messages, identifying two different types: short-term and long-term effects. The former deal with theories that interpret the social role of the media from the point of view of manipulation, influence and persuasion of the target audience, and only consider the communication concerning persuasive purposes. The object

¹² Herman, E. S., Chomsky, N. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York, Pantheon Books.

¹³ Lippmann, W. (1922), *Public Opinion*, New York.

of the analysis is the greater or lesser ability of the mass media to guide the attitudes and opinions of the recipients of the messages. With long-term effects, the main idea is that of 'powerful media'. Media theories have evolved over the years, and this can be reconstructed in cycles:

- Until the 1940s media were acknowledged as "omnipotent"; this phenomenon is due to the fact that the first decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of mass society and the masses were seen as magmatic and easily manipulated social formations.
- Between the 1950s and 1960s their power was reduced, giving rise to the short-term and limited media effects.
- In the 1970s, the idea of powerful media returned, with the focus on long-term effects.

Research on effects targets audiences: they are observed to determine whether they remember, understand and transform into actions or attitudes the content of the messages. It is, however, up to the issuer to create messages that induce in the recipients their memory, understanding and action corresponding to their communicative intentions.

1.4 Short-term effects of the media

Short-term effects concentrated on 1930s, in a period (between the two World Wars) characterized by totalitarian regimes that used film and radio as propaganda instruments capable of mobilizing millions of people. Indeed, the reconstruction of the various approaches with which the tradition of mass communication studies has dealt with persuasive messages shows how, starting from the Second World War and then also during the Cold War, the concern with propaganda instruments was prospective. As the ideological war needs have disappeared, the theme of persuasion has almost entirely shifted to marketing, which today provides much of the communication circulating in the most obvious form of advertising. The interest in this topic is relevant to emphasize how social

contexts have conditioned the objects, methods and directions of development of mass communication studies from its origins.

During these years, the hypodermic theory was developed¹⁴. The word "hypodermic" indicates the message reaching the recipient as a needle does, metaphorically, striking under the skin of each member of the audience individually, and then penetrating deeply. This approach considers therefore media as powerful persuasive tools that act directly upon a passive and motionless mass. Within the short-term effects, the limited effects of the media were distinguished in the following decades (between the end of the 1940s and the 1960s). Limited effects of the media were studied with the focus on electoral or commercial campaigns; they overturned the claims of the hypodermic theory, stating that their power relates only to the influence of the messages on the individuals, and not on their manipulation or persuasion. Indeed, alongside the validation of ideas already held, there are other important psychological mechanisms by which individuals, in the act of exposing themselves to media content, unconsciously make selections, i.e., choices about what to read or watch, what and how to understand and what to remember. Moreover, the true starting point is the degree of interest of the addressee: a reader or viewer is not exposed to just any message but chooses it according to his or her political or aesthetic tastes. In this view, propaganda has more impact on those who already agree with its contents, and those who are not interested do not even expose themselves to the relative messages. Limited effects study the immediate effects of mass communication, believing that the effects of the media influence behavior immediately. However, these studies have had negative outcomes on the whole since these 'immediate' effects cannot always be found, as we shall see in the next chapter with *The People's Choice* case.

Another explanation why the effects of the media were considered limited is the theory of selective perception: everyone of us unconsciously selects the meaning of a message, that means that we can

¹⁴ Lasswell, H. (1927), *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, New York.

understand more than what is in the communicative intentions of the issuer. To make it clearer with an example, audiences with racist views adopt different strategies in order to continue to think as they did before, despite having come into contact with messages that contradict their stereotypes. Let us now focus on the framework of social relations in which the recipient is embedded: it is no longer a question of evaluating the relations of an individual when faced with a message that he or she can selectively interpret and remember, but of understanding how each of these processes is also influenced by the network of social relations in which he or she is involved. The idea that the sender-receiver exchange ends in a direct relationship, like a needle or a bullet hitting each member of the audience individually, is eliminated. On the contrary, a primary form of social organization is the presence of opinion leaders who help circulate the messages conveyed by the mass media among the members of their group by establishing a bridge between them. Through these premises, the two-stage communication model takes shape: the medium affects the opinion leader in a privileged way, who then filters the information and in turn transmits its contents to the other members of the group. The latter therefore expose themselves less to the media and are also less interested in obtaining the relevant messages.

The figure of the opinion leader gives rise to a network model that in embryonic form anticipates what emerges from studies on digital media. The opinion leader has become part of persuasive strategies in two ways: the first sees him/her as the main recipient of the message; in the second way the opinion leader is constructed as part of persuasive communication strategies through the figure of a testimonial within a spot (when a footballer, entrepreneur, singer, film star or digital influencer 'speaks' to us through the screen, they take on the role of opinion leader). In this regard, today we can see how the languages and styles with which the media, and especially TV, address their recipients have changed: the filter of the opinion leader becomes useless as this role is almost entirely absorbed by the media themselves, which increasingly fulfil relational functions that were completely absent in the programming of the 1950s.

Furthermore, studies on the limited effects of the media have also led to a reflection on threatening or negative messages, giving rise to boomerang effects, so called because they occur whenever the communicative intentions of the broadcaster are reversed into their opposite, interpreted negatively, and thus sent back. In fact, it is also necessary to evaluate communication errors that render the message ineffective and counterproductive, when, for example, no attention is paid to the order, strength or content of the arguments put forward. The boomerang effect is especially noticeable in messages that are intended to overcome certain stereotypes but which, for a part of the population, have instead reacted as a reinforcement of it. In boomerang effects, the flaw lies not in a bad or insufficient ability of the recipients to understand the message, but in the very composition of the message, which is contradictory. For example, a serious error in the design of communication strategies is co-determined by not having a realistic picture of the audience.

Another theory developed in the late 1960s focuses on the disagreement between the receiver's beliefs and behavior, from which the sender can benefit. We are therefore talking about the theory of cognitive dissonance, developed by the psychologist and sociologist Leon Festinger in 1957¹⁵. According to this theory, instead of being confronted with the resistance that the individual is able to offer to the persuasion of the message, the sender is given the opportunity to transform a psychological condition of uncertainty into a resource: generally speaking, individuals are accustomed to acting by maintaining a certain coherence between action and conviction, between behavior and beliefs; in some individuals, however, contradictions (dissonance) may arise between what one thinks is right, rational or opportune and what one does for pleasure, convenience or interest. This creates an emotional instability that the subject will try to overcome by reducing one of the terms of the contradiction. Festinger's example¹⁶ was related to toothpaste and chewing-gum advertisements, like the Daygum Protex advertising, which, according to the advertisement, can

¹⁵ Festinger, L. (1957), *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press.

¹⁶ Ibid.

replace toothpaste when the individual is away from home without the possibility of brushing his or her teeth. The Daygum Protex advertisement was considered misleading advertising by the antitrust authorities in 2013 and the Daygum company was fined. Cognitive dissonance appears to be an important communicative resource in areas where our world imposes obligations on us to which it is not always easy to respond, such as diets, hygiene, household chores, etc.

1.4 Long-term effects of the media

Long-term effects were discovered in the 1970s: they are studied by considering media when they are not coordinated for persuasive purposes, i.e. fiction, news and other media genres. From this point of view the media do not directly influence public behavior, but in the long term, prolonged exposure to mass communication changes an individual's attitude and perception of reality. One speaks, in this regard, of cognitive effects and cumulative effects. More recent research has also turned towards the study of the media as active agents in the process of the social construction of meaning.

Among the researches studying the cumulative effects of the media, the Agenda Setting theory¹⁷ is particularly relevant: it deals with news and news events, i.e. only one segment of the network of messages from the media. Generally, we are used to asking ourselves in which way the media suggest we think, Agenda Setting on the other hand produces its perspective shift by asking another question: no longer “how”, but “what do we think about as a consequence of exposure to media messages?” If we consider, for example, the news, it is the media that suggest to us what the news of greatest weight is: the media make a selection from the available news, foregrounding a series of issues worth talking about; the topics that make up the “menu of the day” are arranged in a

¹⁷ Shaw, E. F. (1979), *Agenda Setting and Mass Communication Theory*, Leiden, Netherlands.

hierarchical order of relevance that takes on different modalities in different media. Because of this phenomenon, the recipient becomes convinced that only what the radio, television or newspapers report happens (or is important), and that this happens precisely in the way it is shown or reported. However, the power of agenda is also limited by individual and social variables: the individual does not always use the agenda proposed by the media, especially if he or she has a stable hierarchy of topics that particularly interest him or her.

Another theory that studies the cumulative effects of the media, which is particularly relevant, is the Cultivation Theory¹⁸: it analyses the relationship between exposure time to TV and perception of social reality, considering the latter to be more “televised” as program consumption increases. In fact, the theory argues that those who rely on TV as their sole source of information and entertainment risk having a distorted representation of reality, for example in terms of the perception of the spread of crime in relation to the subjective risk of being affected by it. To this end, three types of viewers are identified:

- 1) Heavy Viewers: four or more exposure hours a day
- 2) Moderate Viewers: between two and four exposure hours a day
- 3) Light Viewers: less than two hours a day

Again, taking crime as an example, heavy consumers are convinced that it is collectively more widespread than it is in reality; furthermore, their concern about being victims is greater. In this case, a great deal of power is attributed to the medium, no longer of persuasion towards a particular topic, but of construction of an entire universe of perception of reality.

Long-term effects have also been analyzed in the context of media power: among these, the dependency theory is of relevance.

¹⁸ Gerbner, G. Gross, L., Morgan, M., Signorielli, N. (1986), *Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process*, Praeger Publishers, New York.

The dependency theory, which has been proposed since the mid-1970s, is an orientation that examines the set of relations that governs the relationships between the public, the media and the social system; therefore, the long-term effects it describes are not linked to particular initiatives and situations but represent the normal everyday life of each user.

The point of departure is the experience of relating to the world, in which each of us possesses two inseparable resources: direct knowledge, which is part of our everyday relationships throughout life (kinship, friendship, leisure, work...) and a broader collection of knowledge and information, which we derive from everyday media consumption.

In relation to the second resource, conditions of dependency are established: an increasing portion of social activities can only be experienced through the media, and can no longer be renounced in order to carry out even normal everyday activities.

Dependency touches both individual and systemic goals and resources, in fact the media-political system relationship, for example, is reciprocal: the media need the regulation of politics and political consensus depends on the space the media provide for parties and leaders. The same discourse is applicable to the relationship between media and the economic system: advertising keeps markets alive by promoting the consumption of goods and services; advertising revenues enable the maintenance and development of TV, radio, social media.

Dependency is not only linked to the relationship between the public and the media but touches the very existence of social systems: it is society as a whole that is dependent on the media. Individuals choose to expose themselves to certain mediums and messages also because of the dependency bonds they already possess towards them (e.g., choice of newspaper).

In the 1980s, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann¹⁹ analyzed how the media shift the focus of public opinion on the main issues that divide it. These considerations gave rise to the spiral of silence: the theory

¹⁹ Noelle-Neumann, E. (1980), *Wahlent Scheidung in der Fernsehedemokratie*, Würzburg Klotz, Freiburg.

states that an individual person would be disincentivized from openly taking a stand on an opinion that he or she perceives to be at odds with the majority opinion, and would therefore fall into a silence that increases the dominant orientation defined by the media to the detriment of people who believe themselves to be in the minority. The spiral of silence would lead to two types of consequences: individual and collective. It is an individual consequence that people decide to hide and conceal their opinions, relegating them to an eternal silence. On the contrary, according to the social consequence, ideas perceived as dominant would continue to spread with a *spiral effect*.

The facts being talked about and the messages about them interact to the point of mutually modifying each other, according to a spiral mechanism.

Labelling a person, for example, establishes a difference between them and the social environment to which they belong, which in most cases implies attitudes of social exclusion and rejection. These assumptions give rise to the labelling theory, which relies on a simplified interpretation of the relationship between media and social facts and attributes excessive power to the media. We are interested in this because the way labelling occurs is a long-term effect, conveying fear, social alarm and disinformation that feed off each other. The labeling theory is based on the concept of deviance²⁰, and according to this, society is the most important factor in the identification of deviance, indeed. The discourse thus shifts from the individual to the will of the public opinion: it is the community itself, in defining certain norms, that creates deviance. The deviant act, in fact, must produce a social reaction to be considered as such.

Thus, cultural relativism, taken up by symbolic interactionism, becomes the strong point of the current: there cannot be a deviant orientation in and of itself, being deviant constitutes a label that groups endowed with power attach to certain subjects because of their diversity. If a person's appearance or behavior conforms only to a social minority, they will be labelled negatively because

²⁰ Becker, H. S. (1973), *Outsiders. Studies in the sociology of deviance*, New York: The Free Press.

they do not meet the standards of the dominant society's norms and culture. The three cornerstones of labelling theory are:

- no act is inherently deviant, but depends on the social reaction it elicits;
- since every subject deviates and conforms, the dichotomy between deviant and 'normal' is discarded;
- "labelling" is a process that ultimately produces a sense of identification with the deviant image and the related subculture, whereby the deviant has a rejection of those who have rejected him or her.

An important role of distortion is played by the media, which in most cases foment a fragmentation of opinion that can even result in episodes of extreme violence.

1.4.1 Long-term effects of the media: knowledge gap and digital divide

Among the context of media power, an important observation began to be made in the 1970s, giving rise to the knowledge gap theory. What characterizes much of the common-sense discourse on the impact of the media in society is the idea that the new communication and information technologies reduce the knowledge gap that individuals have due to their social and cultural backgrounds. In early theorizations on the role of digital media, great potential for individual and social development was envisaged²¹. The knowledge gap model is based on the idea that the media have been seen as a means of disseminating culture, capable of overcoming social inequalities. However, this view disagrees with the empirical evidence: the data show that the increase in information in society does not lead to an equal and effective increase in knowledge on the part of all subjects, but this depends on the socio-economic level and the level of education of the individual. According to this theory, the mass media do not reduce, but rather amplify and strengthen social and cultural differences,

²¹ Stella, R., Riva, C., Scarcelli, C. M., Drusian, M. (2014), *Sociologia dei new media*, Seconda Edizione, cap. 5, p. 115.

even generating new ones. Social differences are in fact strengthened as the distance between the highest socio-economic stratum (the well-informed) and social groups with less socio-economic power (the less or uninformed) increases.

In this regard, the concept of the *Digital Divide*²² was also born in the 1990, to define precisely the gap that exists between those who have access to new technologies and those who do not have such opportunities. This expression originated during the presidency of Bill Clinton (1993 - 2001). Initially, it emerged as a phenomenon confined to the US and was used to refer to the different availability of information, the quality of the available means, and purely technical issues.

Alongside the enthusiasm for the increasingly advanced information technology, the discussion on the consequences that those who find themselves involuntarily excluded from the Net may find themselves in is becoming progressively more significant. The Internet is indeed available to every individual in every corner of the globe, but the existence of a gap between continents, nations, geographical areas and urban contexts, even between neighborhoods in the same city, continues to be evident.

²² Stella, R., Riva, C., Scarcelli, C. M., Drusian, M. (2014), *Sociologia dei new media*, Seconda Edizione, p.p. 116-121.

2. PROPAGANDA AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE U.S.A.: THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

2.1 A presidential campaign during the Second World War

The 1940 US presidential election, held on November 5th, was the thirty-ninth four-year presidential election. The presidential campaign involved the Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Republican candidate Wendell Willkie. The election was contested in the shadow of World War II in Europe, as the US was emerging from the Great Depression. Outgoing President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had been in presidential office since 1933, broke with tradition not to run for a third term. Republican candidate Wendell Willkie campaigned vigorously, but could not avoid Roosevelt's "comfortable" re-election. The latter would win the election for a fourth term in 1944 as well.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt came from a wealthy family in New York State. Although wealthy by birth, he was sincerely sensitive to the plight of the weak and disadvantaged, with whom he could empathize deeply, and was strongly critical of big business's obsession with absolute economic freedom.

Roosevelt was also a master in dealing with the mass media, which he made full use of to promote his popularity. He said of himself that he was "a man of the center slightly to the left"; he was pragmatic and open to experimentation.

New Deal is the term commonly used to refer both to Roosevelt's reform policy and the period in which it unfolded, between his ascension to the presidency and his entry into the Second World War (1941)²³.

Willkie led a crusade against Roosevelt's attempt to break the two-term presidential tradition, arguing that "if one man is indispensable, then none of us is free". Willkie also criticized the incompetence and wastefulness of Roosevelt's New Deal welfare programs. He claimed that, as president, he would keep most of Roosevelt's programs, but he would make them more effective. However, many Americans continued to blame entrepreneurs for the Great Depression and the fact that Willkie symbolized "Big Business" hurt him.

2.2 *The People's Choice: an overview*

In connection to the presidential elections of 1940, from the standpoint of mass communication research on how people encounter and respond to the media, *The People's Choice* case depicted the importance of group ties as intervening variables between media and audience influence. Early in 1940, before television was available as a mass medium, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet developed an elaborate research design to study the impact on voters of that year's mass-communicated presidential election campaign²⁴. Amid a burgeoning interest in statistics and population sampling, it constituted the first systematic effort to trace voters' behavior across the duration of a presidential campaign and to follow up on this data years later. This study of American political behavior was conducted in Erie County, Ohio, which was selected because for every presidential election in the 20th century it had deviated very little from the national voting trends

²³ Bergamini, O. (2010), *Storia degli Stati Uniti*, Editori Laterza, Bari; cap. 4, p.p. 165-166.

²⁴ De Fleur, M. L., Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (1989), *Theories of Mass Communication*, White Plains, NY: Longman, p.p. 181-186.

and because it was of a size that permitted close supervision of the interviewers. From May to November 600 people were kept under constant observation through seven interviews, and their various changes of voting intention were traced, starting with preconvention attitudes, following through the reactions to the propaganda barrage of the campaign, and ending with the actual vote. This study used for the first time a panel technique: a large-scale survey research consisting of repeated interviewing of the same people - to ascertain what conditions determined the political choice of voters during the presidential campaign of 1940. Moreover, the panel method made it possible to locate changes almost as soon as they occurred and then to correlate change with the influences reaching the decision maker.

Unlike the usual public opinion polls, the repeated-interview techniques enable the social scientists to record the effects of propaganda statistically and to infer the possible causes for change of opinion²⁵.

Some of the panel members did not change their political opinions during this period; others shifted and wavered in a variety of ways.

The People's Choice was not considered a simple opinion poll report, but "the running story of attitude formation and change in the same people in a critical time of persuasion, pressure, and decision"²⁶.

2.2.1 The analysis

As students of opinion and social action, Lazarsfeld and his associates were concerned chiefly with the nature of those who change or shift their opinions. The "changers" were compared with the "constants" and detailed information was gathered on the reasons of this change. The respondents were also interviewed regularly on their exposure to campaign propaganda presented in newspapers,

²⁵ Fischhoff, E. (1947), *Social Research*; vol. 14, pag. 123.

²⁶ Horsley Smith, G. (1948-1949), *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 737.

magazine and radio during the contest between Wendell Willkie (the Republican candidate) and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (the Democratic candidate). Furthermore, the repeated interviews allowed to obtain a great deal of information about each respondent's personal characteristics²⁷. In this case, as Lazarsfeld and his associates explain²⁸, the voting decisions were reinforced by a continuous and partisan selection of media content, reassuring those people that their decision was right. However, early vote intentions were reversed by the mass communicated messages in only a small proportion of the cases. Thus, conversion was not a widespread effect. The index of political predisposition was based on some key variables: socio-economic status, religious affiliation, age and residence, which are factors of social differentiation. People who have certain characteristics in common are more likely to belong to the same social group: for instance, people tend to associate with others of their own age rather than with people considerably older or younger. The group which they form is likely to be rather homogeneous in political outlook and behavior²⁹.

Instead, the role of informal social relationships (such as family and close friends) seemed to have played a particular role in influencing people during the campaign. As a matter of fact, about 10% more people engaged in some sort of informal exchange of ideas with other persons than were exposed to campaign materials directly from the media. Even though it was firmly believed at the time that social relationship was on the decline in the emerging urban-industrial society, the researchers wanted to understand what part of this form of person-to-person communication played in modifying the influences of mass communication³⁰.

²⁷ Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H. (1948), *The People's Choice*, Columbia University Press, New York and London.

²⁸ Ibid., p.p. 72-76, 87.

²⁹ Defleur, M. L., Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (1989), *Theories of Mass Communication*, , White Plains, NY: Longman, p. 191.

³⁰ Katz, E. (1960) "Communication Research and the Image of Society: Convergence of Two Research traditions.", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 65, No. 5, p.436; De Fleur, M. L., J. Ball-Rokeach, S. (1989) *Theories of mass communication*, cit., p. 191-192, , White Plains, NY: Longman.

Looking at the data collected from the analysis on the mass media, as might be expected, the analysis showed that the Democrats were more influenced by the radio, and the Republicans by the newspaper. Roosevelt's "good" radio personality and Willkie's "bad" radio personality actually paid off.³¹

The People's Choice has achieved the rather rare status of a standard teaching aid in at least three academic disciplines: psychology, sociology and political science³².

Research on mass communication started immediately after World War I in the United States was focused on persuasion, that is, as explained in the previous chapter, on the ability of the mass media to influence, usually to change opinions, attitudes, and actions in a given direction. After the study of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, the traditional image of atomized individuals, connected with the mass media but not with each other had to be reconsidered. The analysis reveals the importance of personal contacts and stresses the advisability of finding a better ratio between campaign expenditures on formal propaganda and on the organization of face-to-face influences – the local "molecular pressures".³³ As the authors point out: "In the last analysis, more than anything else people can move other people. From an ethical point of view this is a hopeful aspect in the serious social problem of propaganda. The side which has the more enthusiastic supporters, and which can mobilize grass-root support in an expert way has great chances of success".³⁴ They have made it clear that the public opinion of a people, their social and economic background, the extent to which they are moved by the mass media of communication, and their ultimate political actions, are all closely interwoven phenomena.³⁵ An index of political preference, made up of religion, socio-economic level and residence, permitted a high degree of prediction as to how undecided people would, after

³¹ Fearing, F. (1945), *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 1, p. 124.

³² Horsley Smith, G. (1948-1949), *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 737.

³³ Fischhoff, E. (1947), *Social Research*; vol. 14, No. 1, p. 120.

³⁴ Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H. (1948), *The People's Choice*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, cit., p. 158.

³⁵ Fearing, F. (1945), *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 1, p. 124.

weeks of indecision, finally decide to vote. Elihu Katz set forth this position in the following terms: “What research on mass communications has learned is that the mass media are far less potent than had been expected. A variety of studies indicates that people are not easily persuaded to change their opinion and behavior”.³⁶

We discover that political communications of all types are primarily important in campaigns not because they change political attitudes, but because they translate latent predispositions into political action, and the social-economic characteristics of the group are the primary factors which determine political preferences. For instance, the banker, or the bishop, are already Republicans; the chief effect of the campaign is to arouse in them an earnest desire to vote that way.

2.3 The two-step flow of communication

This analysis of the process of decision-making during the course of an election campaign led the authors of *The People's Choice* to suggest that the flow of mass communications may be less direct than was commonly supposed. It may be, they proposed, that influences stemming from the mass media first reach “opinion leaders” who, in turn, pass on what they read and hear to those of their every-day associates for whom they are influential. This hypothesis was called *The two-step flow communication*.³⁷

The opinion leaders of a community could best be identified and studied by asking people to whom they turn to for advice on an issue at hand and by investigating the interaction between the advisers and the advisees. Thus, the research suggested a movement through two basic stages: first, from the media to the “opinion leader” who frequently attended to mass communications; second, from

³⁶ Katz, E. (1960), *Communication Research and the Image of Society*, cit., p. 435-436.

³⁷ Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H. (1948), *The People's Choice*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, p. 151.

those persons through interpersonal channels to individuals who had less direct exposure to the media and who depended upon others for their information. This form of “personal influence” became immediately recognized as an important intervening factor that shaped the way people selected media content, interpreted it, and acted upon it.³⁸

An examination of the evidence in the 1940 study led to the original formulation of the hypothesis. Three distinct sets of findings seem to have been involved. The first had to do with *the impact of personal influence*. It is reported that people who made up their minds late in the campaign, and those who changed their minds during the course of the campaign, were more likely than other people to mention personal influence as having figured their decisions. The political pressure brought to bear by everyday groups such as family and friends is illustrated by reference to the political homogeneity which characterizes such groups. What’s more, on an average day, a greater number of people reported participating in discussion of the election than hearing a campaign speech or reading a newspaper editorial³⁹.

The second ingredient that went into the formulation of the hypothesis concerned *the flow of personal influence*. Given the apparent importance of interpersonal influence, the next step was to ask whether some people were more important than others in the transmission of influence. the study sought to single out the “opinion leaders” by two questions: “Have you recently tried to convince anyone of your political ideas?”, and “Has anyone recently asked you for your advice on a political question?”. Comparing the opinion leaders with others, they found the opinion leaders more interested in the election. And from the almost even distribution of opinion leaders throughout every class and occupation, as well as the frequent mention by decision-makers of the influence of friends, co-workers and relatives, it was concluded that opinion leaders are to be found

³⁸ Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H. (1948), *The People’s Choice*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, p. 49,151.

³⁹ Ibid., p.p. 135-152.

on every level of society and presumably, therefore, are very much like the people whom they influence⁴⁰.

A further comparison of leaders and others with respect to the mass media habits provides the third ingredient: *the opinion leaders and the mass media*. Compared with the rest of the population, opinion leaders were found to be considerably more exposed to the radio, to the newspapers and to magazines, that is, to the formal media of communication⁴¹.

This hypothesis aroused considerable interest. It was a healthy sign, the authors felt, that people were still most successfully persuaded by give-and-take with other people and that the influence of the mass media was less automatic and less potent than had been assumed.

However, of all ideas in *The People's Choice*, the two-step flow hypothesis is probably the one that was least well documented by empirical data. And the reason for this is clear: the design of the study did not take into account the importance which interpersonal relations would assume in the analysis of the data. Given the image of the atomized audience which characterized so much of mass media research, the surprising thing is that interpersonal influence attracted the attention of the researchers at all⁴².

Because every man in a random sample can speak only for himself, opinion leaders in 1940 voting study had to be located by self-designation, that is, on the basis of their own answers to the two advice-giving questions cited above. In effect, respondents were simply asked to report whether or not they were opinion leaders. Much more important than obvious problem of validity posed by this technique is the fact that it does not permit a comparison of leaders with their respective followers,

⁴⁰ Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H. (1948), *The People's Choice*, Columbia University Press, New York and London., p.p. 50-51.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴² Katz, E., Lazarsfeld, P.F. (1955), *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, pp. 15-42; Friedson, E. (1953), "Communications Research and the Concept of the Mass," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 18, pp. 313-317; and Janowitz, M. (1952), *The Urban Press in a Community Setting*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

but only of leaders and non-leaders in general. The data, in other words, consist only of two statistical groupings: people who said they were advice-givers and those who were not. Therefore, the fact that leaders were more interested in the election than non-leaders cannot be taken to mean that influence flows from more interested persons to less interested ones. To state the problem drastically, it may even be that the leaders influence only each other, while the uninterested non-leaders stand outside the influence market altogether. Nevertheless, the temptation to assume that the non-leaders are the followers of the leaders is very great, and while *The People's Choice* is quite careful about this, it cannot help but succumb. Thus, from the fact that the opinion leaders were more exposed to the mass media than the non-leaders came the suggestion of the two-step flow of communication; yet, manifestly, it can be true only if the non-leaders are, in the fact, followers of the leaders⁴³.

In conclusion, if word-of-mouth is so important and word-of-mouth specialists are widely spread, and if these specialists are more exposed to the media than people whom they influence, then perhaps "ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population"⁴⁴.

2.3.1 The role of the opinion leader in the social media era

The media and communication systems in recent years have seen major changes in their forms and the routines that govern them. In the current section we will see how these technologies intervene in identity processes and human relations, and how the role of the opinion leader has changed with the advent of social media.

⁴³ Katz, E. (1957), *The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.p. 64-65.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

In the past, men and women have always been accustomed to thinking of themselves as publics, consumers, citizens, typical figures of mass communication who found in time and space limits to their sociality. Today, we are surrounded by communication technologies and we invest our many energies in practices that change our position within the communication paradigm: this has been emphasized even more with the social change of the web, which has seen the emergence of tools that enhance relationships between individuals. Individuals thus become part of a mass personal communication and, in a more or less conscious manner, realize that they are active players in communication thanks to the accumulation and dissemination of practices that enable self-representation. The language of the media is made one's own by hybridizing it with that of everyday life, thanks to the opportunities that digital media make available today.

Among the most interesting novelties to have appeared in the media landscape is that subset of digital media: social media, an expression of what is also called the *participatory web*. The term *social media* mostly emphasizes the communicative component of the new platforms, emphasizing their role in mediation rather than that of information technologies dedicated to the mere management of information. Added to this characteristic is the orientation of digital media towards user participation⁴⁵. If we therefore want to continue talking about opinion leaders, today we can say that it is not only the opinion leader who influences the mass, but the mass itself is influenced to influence another mass, and so on. This is the basis for the *influence networks* model, adopted by Duncan J. Watts and Peter Sheridan Dodds⁴⁶. In the *influence networks* model we have a mass of easily influenced individuals who in turn influence through sharing other influencers. This process, therefore, limits the influence that the opinion leader initially had, and gives more power to the mass, which through the propagation of information, manages to involve more and more people.

⁴⁵ Stella, R., Riva, C., Scarcelli, C. M., Drusian, M. (2014), *Sociologia dei new media*, Seconda Edizione, cap. 4, p.p. 85-87, 101.

⁴⁶ Watts, D. J., Dodds, P. T. (2007), *Influential, Networks, and Public Opinion Formation*, Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 34, No. 4

In conclusion, social media and the internet in general meet this model because they are based on the relationship between followers, through the sharing of material by followers they are able to propagate the content to their other followers, thus creating a vast network of influence.

The dissemination of information that the web is capable of conveying to its users has no limits, individuals can disseminate news through social media, and at the same time they are given the opportunity to gather news from innumerable sources, such as data provided by public, reliable research, or rumors extrapolated from social networks, which are not always reliable. Thus, the media are no longer the sole medium of information, but suffer from a great deal of competition between all the offerings that the Internet can provide to its users.

3. NEW MEDIA, PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION

With the arrival of participatory and social web, Internet users can now generate data in a complex network and without any obligation to the pursuit of objectivity or journalistic standards as pillars for content creation. In the transition from the old to the new media, the general question of the relationship between media and power has been somewhat reversed: *broadcasting* and more generally the mass media are excellent examples of social control based on content, on the 'bottlenecks' of its diffusion, on the ability to deform news by shaping it ideologically; but they lack the ability to control the public in general, and the individual receiver in particular. Vice versa, *narrowcasting*, and Web 2.0 in particular, make the possibility of control over content very complex, but they provide an increasing technological capacity for control over users⁴⁷.

The very founding concept of paleolithic chatrooms and Usenet newsgroups, and later Facebook and the latest blogging sites, was to provide a forum for people to share with each other; newer sites simply broadened and deepened the sharing. All of this sharing may help create communities, but it also destroys privacy. Operators of various social media are well aware that their profits may increase as we expand our willingness to share personal information about ourselves, and most of the business models developed for social media sites are designed to make users reveal more information about our lives, thoughts and opinions. Every bit of information we disclose is another databite to be mined and measured, sorted and sold.

For this reason, social media are not simply a collection of online places that allow private information to escape, but social media sites are organized to draw as much participation and information out of us as possible.

Prior to 2013, legislatures in the United States appeared to be more concerned about the data they

⁴⁷ Colombo, F. (2012), *Controllo, Identità, Parresia. Un approccio foucaultiano al web 2.0*, Comunicazioni Sociali, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, p. 198.

could glean from social media than protecting privacy of the average citizen in the online world. Much of the rest of the industrialized world has a very different point of view about personal information that is experienced in the U.S.A.⁴⁸

3.1 Getting data from the network: a brief definition of Big Data

As explained previously, everyone's life now also transits online: when we surf, comment on a post on a Social Network Site or make a purchase on Amazon. All this is also of great importance for social research, because the activities that take place on the Internet leave traces, which can be studied by social scientists through the analysis of huge amounts of data from which information can be extracted and forecasts on specific trends can be made.

Knowledge about society has recently taken a new direction, with groundbreaking studies of digital media. Examples include analyses of Twitter, Facebook, Google and smartphone use. These studies have been made possible by the availability of unprecedented amounts of data – although they are often limited by the fact that the data originates from private-sector companies.

That of datasets defined as Big Data is one of the biggest changes in the landscape of knowledge and social research. Big Data is a term applied to datasets of a magnitude beyond the capacity of commonly used software to collect, manage and process data in a reasonable amount of time. *Big Data* can be defined as research that represents a step in change in the scale and scope of knowledge about a given phenomenon. Note that this definition does not rely on 'size' per se, but on size in relation to the given object or phenomenon being investigated – where the object may have so many data points that, previously, collecting and analyzing data on a sufficiently large scale was difficult, impractical or impossible. Hence the definition concerns how big data research advances beyond

⁴⁸ Claypoole, T., F. (2014), *Business Law Today*, p. 2.

previous research about particular types of objects.⁴⁹

The challenge for the social sciences is to understand how to make use of this data with new techniques that support research, analysis and understanding.

Big Data essentially has three characteristics:

- Volume: there are large amounts of datasets that cannot be managed with traditional databases;
- Speed: data flows and must be processed very quickly or in real time;
- Variety: these are data that are heterogeneous in nature (text, audio, video, click streams, GPS, etc.).⁵⁰

Big Data research has also enabled powerful advances in knowledge about the role of media in society, reshaping social science towards more quantitative approaches.⁵¹

3.2 Liquid Surveillance: the society of control

"In this volume," write Bauman and Lyon, "we analyze, in the form of a conversation, to what extent the notion of liquid surveillance can be of help in grasping what is happening in that world of monitoring, tracking, stalking, selection, control and systematic observation that we call surveillance. This is the main thread of our conversation. It confronts both the historical debates on the design of panoptic systems and the contemporary developments of a globalized gaze that seems to leave no place to hide, and at the same time is welcomed as such".⁵² Already these first words of the two great sociologists tell us a lot about the meaning of *Liquid Surveillance*, understood precisely as a set

⁴⁹ Schroeder, R. (2018), *Social Theory after the Internet*, UCL Press, Cap. 6, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Stella, R., Riva, C., Scarcelli, C. M., Drusian, M. (2014), *Sociologia dei new media*, Seconda Edizione, cap. 7, p.p. 193-194.

⁵¹ Schroeder, R. (2018), *Social Theory after the Internet*, UCL Press, Cap. 6, p. 126.

⁵² Bauman, Z., Lyon, D. (2012), *Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation*, Cambridge, UK-Malden, Polity Press, p. 8.

of capacities and resources aimed at a surveillance that spreads everywhere, in a perspective that involves social theory and new technologies. In fact, one of the key points of the discourse of Bauman and Lyon (who, although in the course of their conversations, show partially different points of view) is that in the contemporary and technologized world there will soon be no one who can take refuge somewhere in the hope of not being spied on. It is already a reality that in our 'liquid' world, so clouded with disorientation and moral bewilderment, so-called surveillance represents a key dimension in interpersonal relations and with constituted power.

A situation that is probably without return and which, as David Lyon points out from the very first pages, produces apparent paradoxes: “while the details of our daily lives become transparent to the organizations that monitor us, their activities are increasingly difficult to recognize. Considerations, moreover, taken up and deepened in emphasizing not so much the conspiratorial intentions of those who hold the levers of surveillance, but rather the aspects related to national security, market competition and the opacity resulting from the complexity of data flows within and between organizations.”⁵³

What Lyon describes is a world in which those who are part of the consumer society are themselves consumer products. Hence further paradoxes: if it is true that we are constantly monitored and evaluated, it is equally evident that it is the monitored who provide, mostly spontaneously, an immense volume of personal information. With the use of credit cards, doing research online and uploading files and messages on social networks, the details of our lives can be quietly monitored with the full consent of those under surveillance: if before, the intention prevailed to protect one's individuality from the outside and the stranger, now in the contemporary context, which is liquid and characterized by ephemeral human relationships, people prefer to fight loneliness or the fear of

⁵³ Bauman, Z., Lyon, D. (2012), *Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation*, Cambridge, UK-Malden, Polity Press, p. 23.

being alone by making themselves known and disseminating personal and highly personal data.⁵⁴

Foucault, a French philosopher and sociologist, in the mid-1970s has also analyzed this phenomenon at length, in which citizens voluntarily submit to power, and even assume its relational form in their own behavior. According to Foucault, the underlying reason for this acceptance in modernity is the search for security, which leads to giving up portions of freedom in exchange for reassurances about one's own life and well-being⁵⁵.

Thanks to the in-depth analyses of Bauman and Lyon, we can grasp the substantial differences with the power that has the *Panopticon* as its model: it refers to an ideal prison designed in 1791 by the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham. The concept of the design is to allow a single overseer to observe (opticon) all (pan) the subjects of a prison institution without allowing them to understand whether they are being controlled or not at that moment. The Panopticon seems to be a metaphor for the web and its dark side of dominance.⁵⁶ Whereas surveillance used to be in relation to a binding and monotonous routine, today the professionals of control, in wanting to identify the volatile desires of the surveilled with ever greater precision, tend to receive the enthusiastic collaboration of those who allow themselves to be manipulated. A seemingly innocent example is that of Amazon, with the recommendations received based on previous purchases made on the site: "...like surveillance, marketing is increasingly becoming a do-it-yourself activity and the result is that servitude is increasingly voluntary [...]. The example of amazon is very fitting and really points the way: it leads to the last segment of the Hegelian triad applied to the history of marketing".⁵⁷

⁵⁴ <https://www.sintesidialettica.it/bauman-e-lyon-la-sorveglianza-nella-modernita-liquida/>

⁵⁵ Colombo, F. (2012), *Controllo, Identità, Parresia. Un approccio foucaultiano al web 2.0*, Comunicazioni Sociali, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, p. 200.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

⁵⁷ Bauman, Z., Lyon, D. (2012), *Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation*, Cambridge, UK-Malden, Polity Press, p. 116.

3.3 Cambridge Analytica: a company overview

Cambridge Analytica was founded in 2013 by Robert Mercer, a US billionaire entrepreneur with very conservative ideas. Cambridge Analytica specializes in collecting huge amounts of data from social networks about their users: how many 'likes' they put and on which posts, where they write the most comments, where they share their content from and so on. This information is then processed by models and algorithms to create profiles of each individual user, with an approach similar to psychometrics, the field of psychology that deals with measuring abilities, behavior and personality traits. The more 'likes', comments, tweets and other content are analyzed, the more accurate the psychometric profile of each user. But in addition to psychometric profiles, Cambridge Analytica has over time acquired a lot of other information, which can be obtained from so-called 'data brokers', companies that collect all kinds of information on people's habits and consumption, thanks to the enormous number of traces we leave behind us every day. The result is billions of tiny traces, which can be put together and evaluated. The information is usually anonymous or provided in aggregated form by the companies so that it cannot be traced back to a single person, but given its variety and quantity, algorithms such as those of Cambridge Analytica can also trace it back to individual people and create very accurate profiles on their tastes and how they think. Cambridge Analytica has developed a system of 'behavioral microtargeting', which means highly customized advertising on each individual person. Its managers claim to be able to leverage not only tastes (which other similar marketing systems already do), but users' emotions. This is handled by an algorithm that was originally developed by Cambridge researcher Michael Kosinski, who had been working for years to improve it and make it more accurate. The model was designed to predict and anticipate the responses of individuals. Kosinski believes that 70 'likes' placed on Facebook are enough to know

more about a subject's personality than their friends, 150 to know more about the subject's parents and 300 to know more about their partner. With even more likes it is possible to know more about the personality than the subject does.⁵⁸

3.3.1 The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal

In mid-March 2018, the data consulting firm Cambridge Analytica was exposed in its extra-juridical dealings with the Trump campaign, where the company harvested more than 50 million Facebook profiles without consent and legal justification. These profiles would later be catalogued into psychological profiles, allowing Analytica to build an algorithm that skewed news results in Facebook users' news feed.⁵⁹

To understand Facebook's role in this affair, however, we have to take a step back to 2014, the year in which Alexandr Kogan, a researcher at the University of Cambridge, created an application called *thisisyourdigitallife*, which promised to produce psychological profiles and predict one's behavior, based on one's online activities. To access it, users had to log in via Facebook Login, the system that allows users to register to a site without the need to create new usernames and passwords, using instead a Facebook-controlled verification. The service is free, but as is often the case online, it is actually paid for with user data: the application that uses it gains access to email address, age, gender and other information contained in one's Facebook profile.

In 2015, some 270,000 people signed up for Kogan's application using Facebook Login, thereby agreeing to share some of their personal information. At the time, Facebook allowed app operators to also collect some data on the newly signed-up person's friend network; Facebook later assessed

⁵⁸ <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/03/19/facebook-cambridge-analytica/>

⁵⁹ Ünver, H., A. (2018), *Politics of Digital Surveillance, National Security and Privacy*, Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, p. 2.

that the practice was overly intrusive and changed its systems so that friend networks were no longer accessible to apps using Facebook Login.

However, Kogan's application was able to collect data on the friend networks of 270,000 people, and was able to store various types of information on 50 million Facebook profiles (estimated by the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*). Kogan was then able to build a huge archive, including information on where users live, their interests, photographs, status updates and places where they reported going.

As long as Kogan's app collected data on users' social networks, there was nothing unusual, because at that time the practice was allowed. Problems arose later, when Kogan shared all this private information with Cambridge Analytica, violating Facebook's terms of use: the social network prohibits app owners from sharing the data they collect on users with third-party companies. For violators, there are penalties such as the suspension of accounts, a measure that can lead to the end of one's entire business model. Apparently, for Cambridge Analytica the suspension came very late. Christopher Wylie, a former Cambridge Analytica employee, claims that Facebook had been aware of the problem for about two years. As the company's lawyers also claim, it was Cambridge Analytica itself that self-reported to Facebook, saying that it had discovered that it was in possession of data obtained in violation of the terms of use and had immediately ordered its destruction. The *Guardian* journalists claimed to have received strong pressure from Facebook in the days before the publication of the articles on the affair.

What needs to be emphasized, however, is that Kogan did not obtain the data by exploiting some error or hole in the code that makes Facebook work, he simply exploited a system that was lawful at the time and covered by the terms of use. The IT integrity of Facebook was therefore not violated in any way. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that Facebook's terms and conditions of use were 'flawed', since they permitted a disproportionate collection of information without people in the network of friends being able to realize it. The fact that the practice was lawful does not diminish its

scope or the effects it had in practice.⁶⁰

3.3.2 What does Trump have to do with it?

On 16th March 2018, Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller, who investigated Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US election and Trump's possible involvement, demanded that Cambridge Analytica provide documents on its activities. The suspicion is that the company somehow facilitated Russia's work to propagandize against Hilary Clinton, and in favor of Trump.

In the summer of 2016, Trump's committee entrusted Cambridge Analytica with the management of campaign data collection. Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's son-in-law, had hired an IT expert, Brad Pascale, who was then contacted by Cambridge Analytica to let him try out their technologies. We do not know exactly how much the company collaborated, nor with what tools, but from investigations over the years (judicial, parliamentary and journalistic) we know that the pro-Trump online activity was very organized and on a large scale.

Large numbers of fake accounts (bots) were used to spread posts, fake news and other content against Hilary Clinton, modulating their activity according to the course of the election campaign. The interventions were almost always in real time, for instance to fill social networks with comments during the TV debates between Trump and Clinton. Tens of thousands of advertisements were produced every day, on which to measure the response of online users and recalibrate them, favoring those that worked best. All activities on which Cambridge Analytica has been claiming for years to have great skills and knowledge.

Also, thanks to an investigation by the *Wall Street Journal*, since 2017 there have been consistent indications that Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security adviser, had close ties to Russia and

⁶⁰ <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/03/19/facebook-cambridge-analytica/>

activities to interfere in the election. In addition, Flynn had an advisory role for a company linked to online data analysis that helped Trump's election committee: that company was Cambridge Analytica, which cooperated with the US justice system during the investigation, but always denied having done anything illegal. According to critics, these moves were not just illegal, but they also affected the result of the US election significantly. Cambridge Analytica CEO Alexander Nix was directly involved with Steve Bannon, who was then a major leader within the Trump campaign and would later become the Vice President of the United States, albeit for a short while.⁶¹

The Federal Trade Commission officially closed the case in April 2020, approving the economic and legal settlement that had been proposed by Facebook.⁶²

The scandal has demonstrated the immense power relations within politics – surveillance – technology industry nexus, sending a warning sign across the digital world in terms of the safety of personal data, data sharing, data protection and data localization.

⁶¹ Chang, A. (2018), *The Facebook and Cambridge Analytica Scandal, Explained with a Simple Diagram*, Vox, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/23/17151916/facebook-cambridge-analytica-trump-diagram>

⁶² <https://www.punto-informatico.it/cambridge-analytica-caso-chiuso/>

CONCLUSION

Throughout this document, it has been attempted to analyze the processes of mass media influence among individuals.

The advent of mass culture divided thinking in society, between those who saw change as something positive and necessary and those, like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who saw in it a kind of 'mass homogeneity'⁶³. Therefore, the analysis begins by defining the term *culture industry*, which originated in the mid-1950s in the Marxist Frankfurt School, following the emergence of the new mass media. The topic consists of a critique of mass society, which, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, now saw cultural products as solely for profit, thus reducing culture to "a mere commodity of consumption". On this subject, the American philosopher Noam Chomsky and the essayist Edward S. Herman speak in 1988 of the Manufacturing Consent in the homonymous book they co-authored⁶⁴, in a pessimistic view of mass society, elaborating a *propaganda model*: the intent is to show how in today's neo-capitalist American society, the mass media are "powerful and effective ideological institutions that perform a supportive propaganda function of the system in which they are located, caused by a dependence on the market in which they are situated, by internalized assumptions, self-censorship and covert coercion".⁶⁵

The sociological study continues with the analysis of the effects of the media on the recipients of the messages and the various theories analyzed: the focal point here is to consider the historical period in which they were developed; the analysis of the theories on the effects are in fact a reflection of the socio-political situation of the periods taken into consideration, from the 1930s to the 1970s. We can see how until the 1940s media were acknowledged as 'omnipotent', because the

⁶³ Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. W. (1947), *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Amsterdam.

⁶⁴ Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky (1988), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York, Pantheon Books.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

first decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of mass society and the masses were seen as easily manipulated social formations.

The People's Choice has been significant to disprove the idea of the omnipotence of the media and emphasize the importance of social relations also for the exchange of political and social ideas: we can therefore see that political propaganda made through the mass media turns out to have failed in relation to the idea one had of it, and from this moment on the importance of social relations had to be reconsidered.

After that, a comparison with the new media and the birth of Social Networks was offered: the emergence of new media, particularly social media, has allowed individuals to be virtually connected at all times, giving them the opportunity to share bits and pieces of their lives on the various platforms, and to express their opinions on more or less any topic. This has also led to the problem of privacy, for before the mass media had control over the content they conveyed, but today, with the transition from “old” to “new” media, control is done directly over the users and their private data in particular. The sensitive data that we share on the Internet are very often used by social science companies and corporations for statistics and analysis, although the use of these is still restricted through laws protecting sensitive data. These analyses are now made possible thanks to the availability of an unprecedented amount of data, which was previously unavailable without social media and social networks. With the advent of new media, the definition of Big Data was also born, which is why it is analyzed in this paper. Concerning this topic, a definition of liquid surveillance is given, which is useful to explain, according to Bauman and Lyon, how the new forms of technology, Web 2.0 in particular, have limited the privacy of its users: with this term, the two sociologists offer us a pessimistic overview of modern society, characterized by surveillance that spreads everywhere, in a world in which we will end up, little by little, no longer having “a truly private life”.

In the last part of the paper, the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica scandal is studied, first giving an overview of the company Cambridge Analytica, and then analyzing the case, considered to be one of the biggest political scandals ever that occurred in 2018, when it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica had collected the personal data of almost 60 million Facebook accounts without their consent, using it for political propaganda purposes.

It was interesting to study the impact of mass media in society in different historical contexts, and to see how communication channels have changed over the years.

The study was also significant in explaining the mechanisms of influence of the mass media in society for political propaganda purposes, and to understand through which variables these actually influence the individuals using them.

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