

Foreword

Gerald Sussman

In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, a former marine and military analyst for the Rand Corporation, after personally concluding that state secrecy and official propaganda about Vietnam were anathema to democracy, released thousands of pages of 'top secret' documents that exposed crucial details of the sordid history of U.S. policy toward that country going back to 1945 - *The Pentagon Papers*. A few years later, he was featured in the American documentary film *Hearts and Minds*, a hard-hitting indictment of America's militarized nationalist culture that undergirded the imperialist invasion of Vietnam. Commenting on the lies that each U.S. president since Truman had told about Vietnam, Ellsberg said: "It's a tribute to the American public that their leaders perceived that they had to be lied to. It's no tribute to us that it was so easy to fool the public."

Since Machiavelli, the most famous political consultant, it has been understood that successful authoritarian rulers exercise power not only through the imposition of fear but also by deception and the manipulation of public awareness, the manufacture of state legitimacy, and the active fostering of social and political consent amongst citizens - what Antonio Gramsci described as cultural 'hegemony'. It is no less a requirement in states with other forms of centralized power. The U.S. state's reliance on cultural hegemony has become all the more important during the past 40 years of declining real income for most Americans, the permanent loss of good paying jobs, and the now highest concentration of wealth since the eve of the Great Depression. The preservation of state power and political legitimacy under these circumstances requires a regime of expert political and commercial surveillance and heightened promotional activity (propaganda). With the

panoptic vision of the Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, and other security agencies, thousands of Americans, involved in anti-war, environmental, social justice, animal protection, and other dissident organizations have come under an Orwellian purview of state security apparatuses. Even more pervasive is the corporate world's commercial surveillance of citizens that can track people via Internet, i-phone, credit card, GPS systems, CCTV, credit card purchases, and other electronic eavesdropping technologies.

In a capitalist economy based on information exchange, where more activity is focused on selling rather than making things, the role of surveillance and various forms of promotion (advertising, marketing, PR, sales management, branding, and the like) are central to wealth accumulation. The promotional industries have been rapidly expanding, while manufacturing employment is now below 10 percent (and only 11 percent of GDP). Moreover, the public is now more systematically integrated into the sphere of production, constantly giving out their identity information, voluntarily and involuntarily, in the creation of value. In the propaganda society, promotion is not just conventional persuasion; it is a central factor of production. Propaganda is *systemic*.

Industries also no longer rely on passive consumer behavior. Online crowdsourcing, appealing to people either desperately in search of minimally paid work or happily offering up their ideas for design, marketing, or engineering for nothing, has converted computer users into a labor force. In this form of labor, typically there are no benefits, no retirement savings, and no standard wage, just the status of having contributed to a corporate project or product. These patterns of exploitation represent the growing casualization, informalization, and precarity of labor. With little fixed capital, online businesses convert citizens into their 'prosumers' - exploited both at the producer end and as consumers doing the 'work' of consumption, such as by having themselves tracked online or in physical purchase centers by checking themselves out and thereby acting as unpaid cashiers and baggers at the point of sale. Online marketing has rapidly increased the velocity of circulation of goods from production to consumption, reducing investment costs and risks.

The maintenance of consumer ideology on which the propaganda society rests is still largely supported through mass media, whose role is to deliver audiences (the real merchandise) to advertisers. Mainstream media, including their news operations, do this by serving up platters of celebrity worship, spectacle, sensationalism, and other diversions that are designed to constantly reproduce the mood to consume. Vertically integrated corporate media, released from restraints by neoliberal

economic mores, serve as agents of other corporate interests on whose ad revenues they depend. Among its many egregious practices, many TV news stations have permitted the airing of government- and commercial PR firm-produced video news releases, with actors posing as journalists, tricking unadvised audiences into watching fake news. Worse, advertisers and their television hosts shamelessly market consumer goods directly to children, bypassing parental filters, and prescription pharmaceutical products directly to adults, bypassing physicians. It is no wonder that network news is awash in pharmaceutical advertising.

Most workers in the entertainment industry have fared no better than other people. In local TV newsrooms across the country, advances in production technology have enabled stations to eliminate most behind-the-scenes personnel, allowing one 'operator' to put the news on the air by pre-programming a computer to advance, like an assembly line, the various segments of the newscast. This means piling demands that were once discrete tasks distributed to multiple employees on to an individual worker. One example of the workflow consolidation is seen in the deployment of a system called 'Ignite', produced by broadcast equipment-maker Grass Valley. Ignite has eliminated the jobs of camera operators, audio technicians, graphics generators, video rollers, and technical directors, replacing the human element of production with a computer and letting go many newsroom employees.

The same sort of consolidation is seen in the 'one-man-bands', TV journalists that are sent solo to cover stories, having to drive the station truck, hold the camera, set the lighting, interview the respondent, and send the story by microwave back to the studio, before rushing back to the station to put up a web version of the story online as well as deal with audience twitter and email feedback. This goes on day in and day out. The on-air product is often sloppy, and, worse, vacuous of any real news value. The days of investigative reporting are virtually over at most stations, replaced by quick and dirty stories, often nothing more than puff pieces serving the wishes of advertisers.

Media also play a central role in mythologizing electoral democracy. The political scientist Murray Edelman considered elections and other political events in America as *spectacles* that distract and disable people from political engagement and any meaningful form of citizenship. The cooptation of the electoral process by professionalization and corporate financing forecloses popular participation in politics. As a result, Americans have become mere spectators of government and the electoral process, which defies any serious notion of living in a real democracy. The cost of the federal electoral spectacle in the 2012 campaign was estimated to reach over \$8 billion, two-thirds of which

ended up as 30-second TV and radio political spots, for which political media consultants collect a cool 15 percent commission. As former Beltway political adviser, Bob Squier, once put it: "You'll find people in my business tend to use the word 'viewer' and 'voter' almost interchangeably." For broadcast stations, the national election season is a bonanza - paid political ad revenues rank third only behind automobiles and retail advertising.

Because it is so profitable, TV stations have a perverse incentive to radically reduce news coverage of campaigns in order to force candidates to invest more money in political advertising to get their messages across. The logic is flawless, with the result that news coverage of candidates has in fact radically declined since the 1980s, especially after the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision to unleash spending in the name of 'free speech' by unregistered special interest groups. Political consultants, whose regular employment is shilling for corporations, consider elections off-season work. In the corporate state, they're the nexus between the political parties and their candidates, the media, and the business tycoons. As long as media continue to turn elections into mass distractions, most people will have a hard time understanding who's really running the show and whose interests their 'representatives' (at least half of whom are millionaires or multimillionaires) actually serve. The 'horserace' is a popular but false image of election campaigns, as horserace winners are not determined by how much money is bet. American elections with all their hoopla and drama, would be better conceived as stockmarket investments, no different than pork belly futures transactions. In the ideal, systemic propaganda is designed to keep Humpty Dumpty on the wall and consumer-denizens in the mall.