The Invisible War:

Defending the Human Brain Against High-Engagement Psychological Warfare.

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Abstract

The modern media ecosystem, driven primarily by profit-first engagement algorithms, has created significant issues in terms of information distribution. This paper argues that the public is subjected to pervasive psychological manipulation, primarily through the control of fear, hate, and polarization, with no simple choice to opt out while still being informed. This has cascading and concerning consequences, including measurable harm to the mental well-being of children, the fragmentation of social cohesion, and the systemic erosion of the democratic process. It also forces manipulative content and misinformation to be vilified as a problem. The paper examines the expectation that individuals should defend themselves against multi-billion-dollar manipulation engines. Censorship infringes on free speech and often fails to address the root cause. Instead, this paper proposes the implementation of an Ethical Journalism Standard (EJS), modeled on the MPAA film rating system, which has been shown to satisfactorily balance free speech with the need to protect children and society since 1968. The EJS would not ban or suppress default feed content. It would provide a label for journalism that adheres to the established Journalist Code of Ethics, and allow Ethical Journalism content to be selected, like how parents select a TV station of G-rated content. This empowers the public's right to access factual information, to make informed choices about the information they consume and share, and to give informed consent about the future of their country. It also gives manipulation a place to be celebrated as a skill. By elevating credible, ethical content, society can foster a healthier information environment, safeguard children, and restore confidence in governments and media that is essential for a functioning democracy, while simultaneously embracing the right to free speech manipulation as a skill to be celebrated.

Keywords: media, fake news, propaganda, manipulation, democracy, ethics, journalism, brainwashing, MPAA, rating system, society, free speech, censorship, child protection.

Introduction

In this paper, many things are discussed. Fundamentally, this is about understanding the depth of manipulation, the reality of how harmful it can be, and the ethical dilemma of allowing it to continue as the main way the public are directed to interact with journalism. Understanding how manipulation works is the first thing that needs to be covered. The next step is to establish the basis for how content moderation was been addressed decades ago. A comparison of the perceived dangerous content that sparked regulation in the past, shows how it differs significantly from the content that is prevalent in the media sphere of the current era.

The paper then explores the issues in the current system and the toll it can take on ethical people. At this stage, the paper paints a clear picture of the difference in harm between the content of the past and the content now. The next part explores who is responsible for aspects of media manipulation. This is compared to other victim blaming in similar contextual situations involving manipulation and harm, so that the full picture of the current situation is realized.

The next section introduces a solution that echoes proven successful strategies from the 1960s. By putting together these proven strategies, a solution appears which is easy to implement, cost-effective, and with minimal intrusion on the current system, yet it can have a tremendous impact for not only a significant reduction in harm but also the increase in freedom of speech and the transition of manipulation being perceived as bad to something that can potentially be safely encouraged and celebrated. The pros and cons of such a system are explored.

The next section describes what is needed to initiate action to bring about change. It explores difficulties regarding modern public pressure compared to the public pressure that was prevalent in the mid-twentieth century. In exploring difficulties with today's system, solutions are offered as examples to help pave a path toward a potential strategy for change in the current system.

Overall, the paper covers what media manipulation is, the historical evolution of Film and TV content management, modern cases of harmful content, comparing the past and present harms, a potential content management system for present-day media distribution, implementing a content management system in today's political environment, and the conclusion about how human rights need to be honored.

What Is Media Manipulation

Before people can effectively evaluate a news story, a political campaign, or a social media trend, they must first understand the biology of their own mind. People are currently living through a period of "Cognitive Warfare,"[1] where the battlefield is situated within the realm of cognitive processes, rather than physical territory. Most people have no idea that even if they know critical analysis, and they know for a fact that a source is of questionable credibility, the headline still has a lasting impact.[2,3] This impact could potentially have lasting effects even when the headline is proven to be false due to cognitive dissonance[4] and confirmation bias.[5]

Media manipulation is not merely lying. It is a sophisticated set of psychological keys designed to unlock specific biological responses in the mammalian brain. When these keys are turned, the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functions such as reasoning, is effectively bypassed.[6]

To understand the basics of manipulation, it's beneficial to recognize the four primary elements currently being used by media distribution platforms and content creators (even if they are morally good people wanting to help the world with no ulterior motives). Here is the main way a social media post manipulates someone, as described by Chase Hughes:

1. Focus

The human brain is an efficient pattern-recognition machine. People tend to ignore the mundane to save energy. Manipulators know that to capture attention, they must break the script. This is often done through sudden, shocking imagery, loud sounds, or outrageous headlines that violate social norms. Something that creates a potential threat or a potential reward. It's when people predict the mundane everyday safe routine, but something odd happens, throwing a spanner in the works, making their prediction wrong. Their automatic behavior script causes the brain to jump out of the automatic process and focus to work through the unexpected stimuli.

When a script is broken, the viewer's mammalian brain enters a state of high alert. In this split second of disorientation, the viewer is engaged and trying to make sense of the stimulus. The manipulator introduces subsequent messaging while the brain is in a state of focus, increasing the likelihood that the information will be accepted as the brain attempts to resolve the stimulus.[6]

2. Authority

Humans are biologically hardwired to defer to authority. This was demonstrated in the Milgram obedience experiments, where many participants were willing to deliver what they believed were severe, dangerous, high-voltage electric shocks to strangers because an authority figure instructed them to continue.[7]

Modern media mimics the "lab coat." Polished graphics, deep "announcer" voices, academic titles, and the setting of a news desk serve as the visual and auditory cues of authority. Primarily, authority comes from a person's conviction in their beliefs and their confidence, through their behaviors, effects, and habits. They may appeal to authority or state an identity truth that the viewer is guaranteed to agree with, where the viewer thinks, "Yeah, this person knows what they are on about." If a viewer finds themselves believing a claim simply because of how the person is dressed or the prestige of the logo behind them, they are probably being manipulated by the Authority element.[6]

3. Tribe.

Survival for early humans depended on the tribe, since being cast out meant death. Consequently, the human brain triggers a negative response when it disagrees with its perceived "group." Manipulators can exploit this by framing every issue as a binary choice: *Us versus Them.*

They can use "Tribal Identity Association" to make someone feel that if they don't agree with a specific point, they are betraying their people, their country, or their morality. Once someone is tethered to a tribe, they are more likely to ignore facts to maintain their standing within that group. This is peer pressure scaled to a global level. The mammalian brain does not want to feel rejected or left out.[6]

4. Emotion

Neutral information is primarily moderated by the prefrontal cortex, which handles analytical reasoning. In contrast, information that triggers fear or rage prioritizes activation in the amygdala, which can diminish the regulatory oversight of the prefrontal cortex. High arousal emotions are the most effective.[8–10]

Manipulators prioritize fear and hate because these high-arousal emotions create a "tunnel vision" effect. When someone is afraid, they tend not to look for nuance, but for a way out of the danger.[6] In this fearful state, they may be willing to do almost anything to survive or to keep their children alive, even to potentially wish the death of enemies.[11] Manipulators can also use flattery to evoke elation (the high of feeling "right" or "superior"), thereby triggering the reward emotions of viewers who consume the propaganda.[12] If a piece of media makes someone feel an immediate surge of fear, rage or a smug sense of victory, it is probably hacking their biology.[6]

5. Cognitive Dissonance

One of the most dangerous forms of manipulation is the gradual one. Manipulators rarely ask someone to change their core principles overnight. Instead, the manipulators ask for a slight "identity agreement" with a category or a label. They may make out that a small, unethical thing is okay when compared to the good it does, and they shift the bar ever so slightly. The target accepts that new shift in identity. Then, after thousands of shifts, the target may be willing to accept something that seems preposterous to someone coming in to see this for the first time. However, from the target's point of view, they may not see what the problem is. They may have become accustomed to this new worldview and had it reinforced more and more over a long period of time.[6]

Once the target takes that first step, they are more easily going to accept more identity changes. The act of accepting statements from this person as the truth, now becomes permissible. Even if the target knows they are being manipulated, their brain will still tend to go through the process automatically, on a subconscious level. This continues until one day, the manipulators put the target in a state of Cognitive Dissonance, which is a mental discomfort caused by holding two conflicting beliefs. The target is part of the movement. They want what the group wants. And normally, this next step seems wrong, but because the target has adopted a shifted perspective of who they are, these new steps seem to fit. To resolve this discomfort, the manipulator offers the target a "way out", which is a new logic that justifies the identity shift. Salami-slice by salami-slice, the target is moved further from their true self until they find themselves supporting actions or ideas that the "original self" would have found abhorrent. This is the mechanism of radicalization. And everyone experiences this to some degree. The question is, even if the target is aware of it, and it still affects them, how much more would it affect people who have no idea this even exists?[6]

When Manipulation is Acceptable

To remain a free thinker, people must know that everything is manipulating them in some way and to a certain extent. The motive is the key. Is the purpose to manipulate them into being a better version of themselves? To be a better person for the world? Or is it manipulating for profit and power? A personal trainer will manipulate someone into pushing themselves harder. A doctor will manipulate someone into eating healthier and exercising. An analytical method for identifying manipulation is to determine the specific problem the content creator is attempting to solve. The problem they are trying to solve is directly related to their purpose.[13] This often assists in understanding the motive and the context of the message. It's okay for someone to be manipulated into being the best version of themselves, with maximum self-efficacy, maximum peace, and maximum value for their existence and the betterment of the world.

A Basic List of Common Manipulation Techniques:

- **Divide and Conquer:** Pitting social, political, or demographic groups against each other, polarizing them to prevent unified opposition.[14]

- **Maslow's Hierarchy Exploitation:** Appeals to fear (safety), insecurity (belonging), or survival (physiological needs) to drive attention, compliance and motivation.[15]

- **Confirmation Bias Exploitation:** Presenting information that reinforces existing beliefs, increasing loyalty and disengagement from critical thinking.[5]

- **Psychological Priming:** Subtle cues or language that prepare audiences to interpret later information in a desired way.[16]

- **Herd Mentality / Social Proof Exploitation:** Suggesting "everyone agrees", in order to pressure conformity and to silence dissent.[17]

- **Dunning–Kruger Exploitation:** Empowering the least informed with simplified talking points to create the illusion of competence.[18]

- **FATE Model:** Manipulating Focus, Authority, Tribe, and Emotion to control how audiences attach to and act on ideas.[6]

- **Identity agreements:** A technique where the manipulator encourages the subject to adopt incremental identity statements, which gradually shift the subject's self-perception away from their original baseline values.[6]

- **Noam Chomsky's 5 Filters of Media:** Mass media shapes public opinion by filtering news through corporate ownership, advertiser influence, reliance on elite or official sources, punishment of dissent via "flak," and fear-based narratives that unite audiences against a common enemy while deflecting attention from deeper issues.[19]

- **Media Bias Framing:** Framing a story to support one interpretation by emphasizing or downplaying certain aspects.[20]

- **Gatekeeping / Selective Exposure:** Journalistic control over what counts as "newsworthy," which filters public awareness and reaction. Showing only stories or perspectives that align with the outlet's goals or audience leanings.[21]

- **False Balance:** Giving equal weight to unequal sides (e.g., fringe versus consensus) to appear unbiased while distorting reality.[22]

- **Emotionally Loaded Language:** Using charged words to provoke strong feelings and bypass logical processing, changing the way the content is emotionally viewed to change the perspective throughout the text.[23]

- **Exaggeration / Hyperbole:** Misrepresenting the scale of an object or event to create a sense of crisis or amazement (e.g., describing a narrow sports loss as a devastating defeat). The use of extreme, non-literal overstatement to shift perception, such as claiming a singular event "changes everything."[24]

- **Smear Campaigns:** Repeating negative claims, whether true or not, to damage reputation through association.[25]

- **Doubt Seeding:** Repeatedly casting suspicion without evidence to discredit individuals or ideas.[26]

- **Weasel Words:** Using vague terms like "many believe" or "some say" to imply authority without citing evidence.[27]

- **Dog Whistle Language:** Words or phrases that carry hidden meanings to specific groups while seeming innocuous to others.[28]

- **Loaded Questions:** Asking a question that assumes guilt or intent, framing the subject negatively, no matter the answer.[29]

- **Anchoring Effect:** Introducing a shocking or extreme value first, making subsequent ideas seem reasonable by comparison.[30]

- **False Dilemma (Black-and-White Fallacy, False Dichotomy):** Presenting only two options, often extreme, to shut down nuanced discussion (e.g., you are with us or against us).[31]

- **Ad Hominem Attacks:** Attacking a person's character instead of addressing their argument (e.g., That guy must be insane if he thinks he knows better than professors or government officials).[31]

- **Authority Fallacy / Manufactured Expertise:** Using titles, lab coats, or trusted figures to give credibility to weak or misleading arguments.[31]

- **Slippery Slope:** Arguing that one small step will inevitably lead to a catastrophic result without proof.[31]

- **Bandwagon Fallacy:** Claiming something is true or good because it's popular or widely accepted.[31]

- **Red Herring:** Distracting from the real issue with unrelated information.[31]

- **Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc:** Assuming cause based on sequence (A happened, then B, so A caused B).[31]

- **Strawman Framing:** Misrepresenting an opposing argument to make it easier to refute or ridicule.[31]

- **Semiotics:** Using images, symbols, colors, or camera angles to create emotional or cultural meaning. Lighting & Color Framing are often used with dark or desaturated tones for enemies, and warm light and strong colors for heroes, which creates subconscious moral cues.[32,33]

- **Editing & Montage Bias:** Omitting information, silencing of key facts and events, or voices are left out to subtly shape narratives without outright lying. Selecting shots or clips out of context to manipulate interpretation.[34]

- **Soundtrack Manipulation:** Background music designed to evoke fear, sympathy, or urgency and alter perception of facts.[35]

- **Clickbait / Curiosity Traps:** Emotional or shocking headlines that provoke clicks regardless of the actual content. Different from Emotionally Loaded Language in that the headline is designed to be unusual and create a knee-jerk reaction that demands a user to click to find out more.[36]

- **Overload, Normalization & Desensitization:** Repeating shocking content until the audience stops reacting and becomes numb or apathetic, accepting the unacceptable bad behavior as the acceptable norm.[37]

- **Virtue Signaling / Moral Licensing:** Making morally good gestures so audiences feel the speaker is righteous, or utilizing morally positive gestures to provide social or psychological cover for exploitative behavior.[38]

- **Operant Conditioning (Reward/Punishment):**[39] Reinforce compliant behaviors (likes, shares) and punish deviation (censorship, deplatforming).

- **Algorithmic Filtering:** Showing users only content they're likely to engage with, creating echo chambers and increasing polarization.[40]

- **Variable Reward Schedule (aka Intermittent Reinforcement):** A behavioral psychology principle where rewards (like positive emotions, dopamine spikes, or satisfying content) are delivered unpredictably or inconsistently. This creates a powerful loop of anticipation and craving. Commonly seen in addictive platforms and slot-machine-style behavioral design, especially in social media, mobile games, and news feeds.[41]

The Historical Evolution of Film and TV Content Management

To understand how to regulate modern digital media, it's necessary to first examine the significantly successful transition from state-mandated censorship to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system. This was not a change sparked by a single boardroom meeting. It was a decades-long war between the absolute right to free speech and the desperate, often chaotic, public demand to protect the moral fabric of society (specifically the well-being of children).[42]

1. The Era of the Censor (1900s – 1952)

In the early days of cinema, movies were not considered "free speech."[43] They were viewed as mere spectacles or carnivals.[44] Because of this, local and state governments across America established "Censorship Boards." These boards had the power to physically cut film strips, ban movies entirely, or demand script changes based on local religious or moral standards.[42]

The industry's first attempt to appease these boards was the Motion Picture Production Code (The Hays Code), established in 1930. It was a "command-and-control" set of rules: no "lustful kissing," no sympathy for criminals, and no profanity, etc. It was an all-or-nothing system. If a film didn't have the "Seal of Approval," it simply wasn't shown. This was the peak of pre-emptive censorship.**[42]**

2. The Great Shift: *Burstyn v. Wilson* (1952)

The dissolution of state-level censorship began with a 1952 Supreme Court case involving the film The Miracle (1948). The state of New York had banned the film because it was seen as sacrilegious. The Supreme Court's ruling changed history. It declared that motion pictures were a "significant medium for the communication of ideas" and, for the first time, were entitled to First Amendment protections. This ruling removed previous legal barriers to content that local authorities had categorized as sacrilegious or immoral.[45] In this massive social vacuum, the government could no longer ban films for being immoral, but the public was becoming increasingly alarmed by the undesirable content reaching their children as the 1960s approached. The desire to protect society didn't disappear, it was just rendered toothless.

3. 1968: The Birth of the Rating System

By the mid-1960s, the Hays Code was practically dead. The financial and critical success of unapproved films proved that the Hays Code seal of approval was no longer a prerequisite for market viability. Some of the public were in an uproar, and Congress was threatening to step in with heavy-handed regulations.[42]

Four subsequent movies had a major impact on the creation of the MPAA rating system. The *Pawnbroker* (1964), *Blow-Up* (1966), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).[42] How inappropriate these films were is discussed later.

In 1968, Jack Valenti, the newly appointed head of the MPAA, realized that the industry had to pivot. He dismantled the concept of "approving or disapproving" a movie's content. Instead, he introduced a system of Categorization and Cautionary Warnings.[42]

The initial ratings (G, M, later PG, R, and X) shifted the burden of responsibility. The MPAA essentially said, "We will no longer play the role of the moral dictator. Instead, we will provide you with the information you need to play the role of the parent, so you can easily make an informed choice."[42,46]

4. The Success and the Flaws

The Success:
The MPAA system was arguably one of the most successful self-regulatory acts in history. It allowed filmmakers the freedom of expression to explore gritty, violent, and sexual themes while providing the public with a filter to manage exposure to potentially sensitive content. It has prevented a fractured, state-by-state legal disaster and stabilized the industry for over 50 years.[42] It proved that labels and the ability to filter by those labels, is more powerful than bans or rampant freedom to create any content they wanted.

The Flaws:
The system has faced significant criticism:

- The "Black Box" Problem: The rating board members were anonymous, leading to accusations of inconsistency and lack of accountability.[47]

- Bias: Critics have long argued that the MPAA is far more lenient toward extreme violence than toward sexual content or LGBTQ+ themes.[48,49]

- Market Dominance: A film with an "NC-17" rating is effectively censored in the commercial market, as many theater chains refuse to show it and newspapers refuse to advertise it.[42,50]

- Self Censorship: To get a wider audience, films will often reduce the extreme content to avoid a more restrictive rating.[47]

5. Why the MPAA Exists: The Protection Imperative

It is crucial to understand that the MPAA was not born out of a love for ratings, it was born out of necessity. Without a system to protect society from content it deemed dangerous, the industry would have been dismantled by a tidal wave of local bans and lawsuits, or there would have been children repeatedly exposed to inappropriate content, or both.

Society is supposed to have an inherent, overwhelming desire to protect its most vulnerable members. But media manipulation has many people fighting over the wrong things,[51] blaming individuals and making the public hate individuals for the problem.[52] Many people have no clue how dangerous this content really is, since many are not actively using critical thinking, and many are spreading misinformation without even knowing they are doing it.[53,54] The MPAA was the "pressure release valve" that allowed free speech and social protection to coexist without the tension. As people look at the digital disagreement of today, where fake news is about 70% more likely to be shared,[54] they see a world without a pressure valve. Even a highly ineffective solution that only works 50% of the time would reduce fake news to about 35% of the news content instead of about 70% (rough estimations). The war of free speech and protection[55] is extremely prominent, and so it should be. It's just not a false dichotomy.

Case Studies in Historical Content Regulation (1948–1967)

To understand the shift toward the MPAA rating system, one must analyze the specific content that contemporary regulators viewed as a threat to social stability. These films represent the primary legal and moral friction points of the era.

1. *The Miracle* (Il Miracolo, 1948)

This 43-minute film became a focal point for legal debates regarding sacrilege. By portraying a woman who believes her child was miraculously conceived, the film was interpreted by religious authorities as a mockery of the Virgin Birth. Regulators argued that such content undermined the religious foundations of social order.[56] The resulting legal battle led to the Supreme Court declaring that films are protected speech, which removed the government's ability to ban content based on religious offense.[45,57]

2. *The Pawnbroker* (1964)

This film features a scene where a woman exposes her breasts to a Holocaust survivor. The depiction was significant because the few seconds of nudity was serious and deliberate rather than comedic or subtle. Contemporary critics argued that this scene violated established standards of public decency.[58] At the time, regulators feared that allowing nudity without consequence would erode the distinction between artistic expression and obscenity, potentially leading to the normalization of sexually explicit content in public spaces.[57]

3. *Blow-Up* (1966)

The narrative includes a scene involving casual sexual activity between a photographer and two young women. The primary concern for regulators was the lack of moral consequence or redemptive arc in the story. In the context of the 1960s, this was perceived as a celebration of sexual permissiveness. Only breasts and a flash of pubic hair were shown, but the rest was implied.[59,60] Authorities argued that depicting promiscuity as a harmless lifestyle choice removed the ethical framework necessary for maintaining traditional social structures.[61,62]

4. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966)

This film focuses on a dysfunctional, alcoholic couple who utilize intense profanity and verbal cruelty. The use of phrases previously banned by the Hays Code, such as "Goddamn", "Screw you" and "Up yours", represented a significant breach of mid century civility standards.[63] Critics argued that the film degraded the institution of marriage by bringing private domestic dysfunction into the public sphere, thereby challenging the idea that media should serve to elevate social standards.[57]

5. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

The film concludes with a graphic, slow-motion sequence of the protagonists being killed by gunfire. The scene used blood squibs but did not show dismemberment. Throughout the movie, the characters are portrayed as charismatic rebels rather than traditional villains. Regulators argued that the film glorified violence and criminal behavior.[64] By turning violent offenders into cultural icons, the film was seen as a threat to the social consensus that prioritizes law and order over antisocial rebellion.[57]

Modern Cases of Harmful Content

The transition from the mid-twentieth-century media environment to the current digital landscape represents a fundamental shift in how information is processed by the public. While the 1960s model lost the centralized gatekeeping to manage social friction (loss of power to enforce the Hays Code),[42,57] the modern era is defined by Continuous Cognitive Engagement (the relatively unrestricted attention economy).[65] This system is optimized for high-arousal response rather than reflective analysis. The abandonment of traditional neutrality in favor of engagement-driven algorithms has streamlined the categorization of information, reducing the cognitive load required for consumers to interpret complex social issues. Effectively, people are somewhat told what to think. American news media "tries to place every social problem or action neatly inside one category or another, in practice, creating a binary"[66] that promotes a societal view of news in terms of false dichotomies (Ground News is a classic example of rating all news topics on a scale of left and right wing).[67] This environment fosters instances of extreme polarization by prioritizing content that confirms existing biases and vilifies opposing viewpoints.[68]

1. Narrative Consolidation and the Iraq War (2002–2003)

In the period preceding the invasion of Iraq, high-frequency repetition of intelligence claims regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) created a consolidated national narrative. Major news outlets prioritized official briefings over dissenting analysis. This created an information environment that facilitated public consent for a large-scale military invasion.[69] The resulting conflict led to significant loss of life, including hundreds of thousands of combatant and civilian casualties, and established long-term regional instability.[70] This case illustrates how sustained narrative framing can override critical institutional checks. By comparison, the 9/11 official death count was 2,977 people.[71] Iraqi civilian deaths were the equivalent of suffering about one hundred 9/11 attacks (rough conservative estimates).

2. Radicalization and the 2017 Congressional Baseball Shooting

The June 2017 attack on Republican members of Congress illustrates the physical risks of digital dehumanization. The perpetrator consumed a consistent diet of inflammatory political content that portrayed elected officials as existential threats rather than political opponents. This rhetoric shifted the individual's psychological baseline, allowing for the rationalization of political violence as a necessary defensive act.[72] The event resulted in life-threatening injuries to Representative Steve Scalise and others,[73,74] demonstrating that sustained psychological priming can manifest as domestic terrorism.

3. Institutional Distrust and Public Health (2020–2021)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the proliferation of contradictory messaging significantly eroded public trust in medical and scientific institutions. High-engagement content frequently minimized the severity of the virus or questioned the efficacy of established public health measures, facilitating widespread rejection of scientific guidance.[75] At least 232,000 deaths among unvaccinated U.S. adults were vaccine-preventable after vaccines became widely available,[76] however, these are not all attributed to misinformation. Experimental and platform-level evidence indicates that anti-vaccine misinformation on Facebook measurably reduced vaccination intentions by several percentage points.[77] Taken together, this implies that misinformation plausibly contributed to tens of thousands of preventable deaths in the United States alone, even under conservative assumptions, with global impacts likely substantially higher. This underscores the role social media platforms play in shaping public welfare and their corresponding ethical obligations.[78] In terms of human cost, the harms associated with pandemic misinformation plausibly exceed those of major terrorist attacks by orders of magnitude, despite receiving far less sustained institutional scrutiny.

4. Digital Mobilization and the Events of January 6

Research on the January 6 attack highlights the central role of digital platforms in mobilizing and framing the event.[79] Coordinated activity on platforms such as Twitter amplified claims of a "stolen election" and encouraged perceptions of a patriotic imperative to act, with coordinated narratives coalescing around hashtags like *#StopTheSteal* and related conspiracy content.[80] Scholars note that these online narratives intersected with offline political rhetoric and contributed to large-scale participation in the attack, which resulted in an armed breach of the U.S. Capitol, multiple deaths, hundreds of injuries, and one of the most extensive criminal prosecutions in U.S. history.[81]

5. The Normalization of Violent Rhetoric

There has been a measurable escalation in the intensity of political language, moving from binary voting slogans to the use of dehumanizing labels such as "fascist".[82] Kamala Harris was more cautious saying Trump "falls into the general definition of fascist" and the media also said Trump wanted "the kind of generals that Hitler had."[83] This follows an established societal pattern of moral panic,[84] which is designed to shape public perception of a target as a danger to society.[66] This panic can create a sense that the enemy must be stopped at all costs, and has led to things like the witchcraft trials and wars.[85] This moral panic can encourage a normalized mindset where political opponents are viewed as obstacles to be removed rather than participants in a democratic process.

This normalization of demonizing a group, is evident in digital trends where individuals openly advocate for or celebrate acts of violence against public figures.[86] The motive for the 2025 assassination of Charlie Kirk was said to be "I had enough of his hatred," and a bullet casing was said to have the words "Hey fascist! Catch!"[87] In Abraham Lincoln's case, the shooter didn't "save the dying antibellum civilisation of the Old South."[88] There is no shortage of this same rhetoric used by the republican side against liberals.[89] Regardless of how factual these media claims are, the act of portraying a political enemy as a threat to society causes a political view in some people that political violence is acceptable and necessary.

6. Developmental Impacts of Algorithmic Consumption

The current media ecosystem utilizes intermittent reinforcement and dopamine loops to maintain user attention.[90] This environment optimizes for immediate reaction rather than the slow cognitive work required for social cohesion. The long-term result is a generation that has reduced critical thinking ability and is more susceptible to polarization and less capable of navigating nuanced social disagreements.[91,92] Furthermore, these psychological states are often mirrored by parents, who inadvertently transmit specific ideological frameworks and threat perceptions to their children.[93,94]Any builtin prejudice and polarization within the ideologies may impede the development of social cohesion within the subsequent generation. The financial incentives of major platforms encourage the utilization of behavioral modification techniques. This results in a population that is increasingly susceptible to algorithmic influence and platform dependency, commonly identified as social media addiction.[95] This isn't just about manipulating people into spending more time on the platforms, but is also actively altering the way people's brains work[96] in order to make the manipulation more effective. The more easily manipulated society is, the more people can be manipulated into spending more time looking at news feeds and advertisements. The goal is to make people more susceptible to manipulation, and then to manipulate them (into generating more revenue for them), more easily.

7. The Market Logic Causing Censorship

The incentive structure of the modern attention economy prioritizes high-impact news events regardless of their potential for societal harm. In this framework, even catastrophic events such as large scale civil unrest or international conflict are viewed through the lens of engagement metrics and market productivity. Content that fails to utilize high engagement manipulation is deprioritized by algorithms, resulting in a significant reduction in reach. While "shadow banning" traditionally refers to the deliberate concealment of a specific topic or specific account,[97] the practical outcome of algorithmic deprioritization is a functional erasure of objective reporting from the public square. Additionally, people share content that will generate likes and more attention, and avoid sharing content that could bring dislikes, therefore forcing them to censor their information based on how it will be perceived by their network.[98] Without a technical or regulatory mechanism to prioritize accuracy and restraint, the market drive for engagement may continue to exacerbate the problem.

8. Climate Change and Tobacco: Doubt Seeding.

This is the manufacturing of uncertainty. This is one of the most useful tactics, perfected by the tobacco industry in the 20th century. Faced with overwhelming scientific evidence that smoking caused cancer, their strategy, as revealed in their internal documents, was simple: "Doubt is our product."[99] The goal was not to win the scientific argument, but to create the public perception of an argument. By funding contrarian studies, promoting fringe "experts," and demanding absolute certainty before any action could be taken, they successfully paralyzed public policy for decades. Today, this exact playbook is used to stall action on climate change. Climate change was discovered before the ozone layer, which was fixed within ~20 years[100,101]. Doubt seeding also undermines trust in vaccines,[102] and creates confusion around any settled science that threatens a powerful interest.

Comparing the Past and Present Harms

A comparative analysis of the 1960s and the 2020s reveals a significant shift in how the public perceives and reacts to information. In the 1960s, the potential for media content to degrade social cohesion was categorized as an existential threat creating a moral panic.[42,66,84,85] This period was characterized by a high degree of public drive to establish a stable moral foundation for future generations. Content that contemporary audiences categorize as mild, such as brief nudity in *The Pawnbroker* or the profanity in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, was sufficient to catalyze the creation of the MPAA rating system.[42,57,58] While the initial causes for these regulations may appear minor by modern standards, the resulting system has provided a functional mechanism for informed consent for over half a century. The utility of the MPAA model is independent of the perceived triviality of the films that prompted its creation.

In contrast, the 2026 media environment is characterized by a measurable increase in public desensitization toward systemic harm. The effects (which are not causing a moral panic like nudity did in the 60s) include "depression, anxiety, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, suicides by facilitating unhealthy social comparisons, addiction, poor sleep, cyberbullying, harassment, hate speech, fake news, and polarization."[103] Yet society doesn't see anywhere near the same amount of outcry for something to be done.

During the 2003 Iraq War, government officials utilized a narrative of national security and the threat of weapons of mass destruction to generate public consent.[69] By 2025 and 2026, the rhetorical strategy for military intervention shifted. In recent statements regarding Venezuela, President Donald Trump explicitly identified the oil and resource infrastructure as a primary objective.[104] This transition from security-based justifications to explicit resource extraction occurred with a significantly lower level of public dissent than seen in previous decades.

This is because of the Moral Repetition Effect[105] similar to Degradation Desensitization[106] but instead of being desensitized to the degradation of the physical environment, people are desensitized to the degradation of the societal well being environment. When people are exposed to sensationalized moral panic style content over and over, the actual facts and reality of the day to day situation are lost in the emotion and over reactions. It's not a constant update of the damage of a problem where people can actually critically decide based on the facts. People in general, aren't accurately monitoring the harmful reality of media manipulation, and they tend to ignore emotional triggers (that should emotionally trigger people but don't because the triggers are normalized), unless the manipulation can twist the story into an extreme threat to the viewer.

The other reason is that protests are way more likely to fail these days. This comes from a number of reasons, including people in general being desensitized to protests and, in general, no longer caring about standing up to causes that would have been worthy in the past. It's also because people are demotivated to join protests when they have good reason to believe they won't accomplish anything.[107] It's no longer effective enough to just create a moral panic to emotionally enrage people into storming the streets, demanding a flurry of different demands.

This desensitization is further evidenced by the lack of systemic reform in response to tangible social harm. The current era has experienced regional conflicts with significant casualties,[70] governmental failures leading to preventable mortality,[75–77] and the radicalization of individuals leading to political assassination, such as the 2025 killing of Charlie Kirk.[87] Additionally, data indicates a rise in youth suicide rates and a widespread loneliness epidemic linked to digital manipulation.[103] Despite these outcomes, the public threshold for demanding regulatory change remains higher for these systemic issues than for issues based on emotionally charged media stories.

Since 2017, there have been various protests in the U.S.: Protests against redistricting, Anti-ICE protests, "No Kings" protests, May Day protest, "Hands Off" protests, "Stand Up For Science" rallies, 50501 protests, "Take Our Border Back" convoy protest, APEC San Francisco protests, UNGA climate protests, Tennessee gun reform protests, Stop Cop City protests, Abortion access protests, Abortion ruling protests, Electoral protests, Police brutality protests, Prison protest, Coronavirus protests, "Telegramgate" protests, "Lights for Liberty" protest, "Keep Families Together" protests, and Immigration ban protests.[108]

Although these are highly important, many of which are likely to have significantly less harm than media manipulation issues (in which some protests were directly influenced by media manipulation). In general, these recent protests (compared to earlier protests[109] such as the 1963 March on Washington for racial justice and support for civil rights legislation,[110] 1969 Second Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam,[111] and the 1970 protests for First Earth Day environmental conservation),[112,113] weren't trying to fix a consistent problem with as significant amount of harm over many decades. Moral Panic in the emotionally charged media stories seem to have a significant greater impact on protests in recent years (Nashville shooting protests 2023,[114] George Floyd protests,[115]) compared to the past which was more sustained concern about statistically growing harm. However, more research would be needed to analyze the complexities of the motivation and effectiveness of these different eras.

The prioritization of low-stakes cultural controversies in the media, over the psychological drivers of radicalization and suicide, illustrates a redirection (distraction) of public attention.[116] This indicates a divergence between historical levels of public mobilization and the contemporary tolerance for systemic instability. While societal consent remains a component of governance, the absence of transparency regarding the mechanics of media manipulation prevents the public from exercising informed agency. Without a comprehensive understanding of these psychological interventions, the population cannot determine the necessity of reform. Had regulators prior to the 1960s lacked awareness of the perceived harms within media content, the motivation for systemic intervention would have been absent. Just like today, no one would have stood up and demanded change.

The Integrity Trap

The psychological warfare previously described represents a significant systemic challenge for individuals attempting to maintain ethical standards in journalism and politics.

The current landscape is governed by an asymmetric conflict model. Engaging in this environment with factual nuance and ethical restraint often results in a significant tactical disadvantage, as these methods lack the reach and impact of high-arousal manipulation.

1. The Politician's Altering Principles

Ideally, most individuals who enter politics should do so with a vision of service. However, public opinion tends to hold a perspective that most enter politics for money and power.[117] It's potentially viewed as a job to be rich and powerful, not as a job where one can make the world a better place. Some research showed that people were more likely to get into politics if they perceived that their actions could benefit society.[118] If they do join politics with a desire to make the world a better place, they soon discover that the technical complexities of governance do not generate sufficient engagement to secure electoral success within an attention economy.

To be heard over the digital roar, a politician is forced to make a choice. The first option is to focus on policies and political work as the factual way they are represented in the media, adhering to factual reporting and fair play while risking invisibility to the electorate. The second is a focus on manipulation of public opinion to reach voters, and when elected, then work on the policies and political work. It's about which is the higher priority.

This creates a systemic filter that removes the most ethical people from leadership. As people perceive politics as a job ruled by selfish motives, and less about prosocial incentives, they are in general, less likely to run.[118] Those who maintain long-term political viability are often those who have adapted their communication strategies to the psychological requirements of the attention economy, often at the expense of their original ethical framework. They find themselves spinning media not because they are inherently evil, but because the "rules of the game" have made honesty a tactical liability. If a poker player plays while showing everyone their cards and refusing to look at the other players, that honest player won't have much chance to win. If the honest player wants to win at poker, they have to exploit the rules of the game better than their opponents. Unless the rules of an alternative game allow for honesty (open handed poker where everyone can see everyone else's cards) then players have no choice but to play the only game in town. Politicians only have one game available to them, which is the public opinion manipulation game.

2. The Erosion of Journalistic Standards

The tragedy of modern journalism is that the "Truth" is no longer the product; "Attention" is. A journalist may spend months uncovering a complex web of corruption, only to find that their story is ignored in favor of a 10-second clickbait clip of a celebrity scandal. They find that they are practically giving away what is extremely expensive to produce for very little in return.[119]

Journalists, who begin their careers with a commitment to the public's right to know, soon realize they must use hyperbole and clickbait just to keep their publication solvent. They are forced into a state of forgoing ethics, where they must use the very manipulation techniques they were trained to avoid. They are measured not by the accuracy of their reporting, but by the Click-Through Rate (CTR).[120,121] When someone's paycheck depends on how many people they can make angry or afraid, the "Truth" becomes an optional luxury.

3. The Moral Injury of the Professional

There is a profound psychological cost to this lifestyle. In clinical terms, this is referred to as Moral Injury, which describes the psychological damage sustained when an individual's actions or observations contradict their deeply held moral beliefs.[122,123]

Politicians and journalists living in this system often suffer from:

- Cynicism: A defense mechanism where they convince themselves that "everyone is doing it," so their own ethical actions don't matter.[124]

- Dehumanization: In order to conduct a character assassination or a highly biased report, the practitioner must dehumanize the subject, categorizing them as a strategic obstacle or as raw content for engagement.[125]

- Dissociation: A disconnect between their "public persona" (the shouting head on the screen) and their "private self."[126]

4. The Need for Separation

The current system offers no practical middle ground. There is no easily accessible mass audience "Safe Zone" where a journalist can write an ethical, balanced piece and be suitably guaranteed a massive audience akin to the audiences accessed through the standard media distribution systems. Additionally, there are no easily accessible mass audience safe zones where a politician can run on facts without being destroyed by a psychological operation from the opposition. Audiences are in a system which gives little choice other than view the content in an attention-grabbing environment that is designed to hijack their cognitive function.

As these ethical actors (not in it for the money or power) adopt the manipulative tactics of their opposition to ensure they can keep working, the cumulative effect contributes to the degradation of the social stability they initially sought to preserve. They are often trapped in a race to the bottom, and often are looking for a way out. They need a mechanism that allows them to separate themselves from the unethical practices they are currently forced to pursue. It would be a way to identify themselves as "Ethical Actors" and be rewarded for it, rather than punished. There is an audience for authenticity[127] and ethically sound journalists and politicians, but currently there is no implemented easy way to assist these audiences to find these ethical actors in the noise of media manipulation.

Without an easily accessible technical and ethical social space on major platforms for these ethical actors to find their audience, society will continue to lose its best people to the rules of the game, leaving us with a leadership and a media class composed of many who are now willing to burn everything down just to stay warm.

The Blame

For decades, the response to media manipulation has been a form of systemic Victim Blaming[128] (putting the responsibility on the victims to protect themselves by learning Media Literacy).[129] Society tells parents they must monitor their children's screen time.[130] Society tells the average citizen they should obtain the equivalent of university-level critical analysis just to check their morning feed so they don't fall for fake news.[131]

Although the scale of victim blame and perceived severity are different, this is similar to blaming a woman for being attacked because she made herself attractive[132] (research implies that media sexual objectification can inaccurately skew semiotic meaning for clothing),[133] or blaming 1960s parents because a malicious animator slipped an adult image into a children's cartoon. The burden of safety should never rest solely on the victim of the manipulation. Especially when they have no idea of the harm done to them. An abused person who was unconscious was still abused, regardless of whether they are aware of the harm or not.

Unlike tobacco, where mandated health warnings substantially reduced informational asymmetry between producers and consumers,[134] no equivalent disclosure exists for media distribution platforms. Survey data indicate that only 48% of adolescents perceive social media as harmful, while the remainder view it as neutral or beneficial.[135] However, perception of harm does not equate to a complete understanding of the mechanisms through which harm is produced. Smokers, without warning labels, may recognize general health risks like reduced fitness, but they may have no idea about the serious harms associated with smoking, like heart disease. In this same sense, adolescent social media users are unlikely to possess comprehensive knowledge of algorithmic manipulation, behavioral reinforcement, and attention-extraction systems and the associated harm. It therefore follows that the proportion of adolescent users who fully understand the harms associated with social media use is substantially lower than 48%, suggesting widespread exposure without complete informed consent.[136]

This can then extend to the broader media system and broader age groups to conclude that many have no idea how much they may be manipulated by propaganda and how much they may be exposed to other harms associated with media manipulation, especially when fake news is 70% more likely to be shared on platforms like X (formally twitter).[54] People, in general, don't know the full extent of the harms that are inflicted upon them, or the full extent of what is causing those harms. These harms are also much more difficult to comprehend than the more instinctive response to kids watching a movie with nudity.

In the sense of victim blaming, it's necessary to look at the similarities and how serious this is for media manipulation. The Australian Consumer Law prohibits misleading or deceptive conduct in trade or commerce. Such conduct may include false statements, the creation of a false or misleading impression, material omissions, or representations that lead an ordinary and reasonable member of the target audience into error. Conduct may also be misleading where silence or non-disclosure distorts the overall impression, where representations about future matters lack reasonable grounds, where statements that are literally true convey a false secondary meaning, or where opinions are expressed without an honest or rational basis. Where misleading or deceptive conduct results in loss or damages, affected consumers are entitled to seek compensation.[137] Other countries tend to have a similar system when it comes to fraud and consumer protection.

By contrast, persuasive and manipulative techniques such as semiotics, scarcity cues, fear appeals, or appeals to urgency (e.g., FOMO)[138] remain lawful in commercial transactions provided they do not cross the threshold of misleading or deceptive representation. In such cases, responsibility is typically attributed to the purchaser, with outcomes framed as poor decision-making or inadequate due diligence, regardless of subsequent regret or non-financial harm (social conflict in families, etc.).[139–143]

Importantly, these legal protections are confined to conduct occurring in trade or commerce. Comparable forms of manipulation (such as fear-based messaging, selective framing, omission of material context, or the strategic construction of misleading impressions), are generally lawful outside commercial transactions, including in political campaigning, media commentary, and social media discourse. As a result, techniques that would give rise to liability if used to induce a purchase may remain legally permissible when used to influence political preferences, social attitudes, or blame attribution (all of which are legal due to the freedoms of expression and information),[144] with responsibility similarly placed on individuals to independently assess the information presented. Terrorism, hate, and genocide are some of the types of propaganda/misinformation that are not seen as valid freedoms of expression and information.[144]

As long as a product is technically delivered and no specific factual promise is breached, platforms may lawfully host and profit from communications that induce fear, false hope, or medically unsupported beliefs, even where foreseeable harm results. In this context, legality functions not as a complete safeguard against harm but as a threshold for platform non-liability, allowing responsibility to be displaced onto victims whose consent was shaped within an asymmetrical and profit-driven communicative environment.

The people who are doing the manipulation are the ones responsible for people being manipulated. However, the effectiveness of manipulation is significantly muted unless someone helps them to communicate with their victims. If a company is passing messages from malicious people to victims, knowing that the messages they are passing on are often causing harm, they are part of causing the harm. In the context of scams, Australian law requires businesses to implement actions to stop scammers, since most scams occur using these forms of mass communication.[145] Similarly, if a company is spreading polarizing or body image content, etc. it is a part of the problem. Yes, targeting the content creators to stop the malicious content is crucial and repeat offenders caught doing so should face consequences (like suspended scam accounts[145] and criminal prosecution where possible).[146] But this is exceptionally difficult to do in social media with potentially billions of posts each day.[147] It must rest mostly on the distribution infrastructure to ensure people have the choice to avoid manipulative content and count on the "community watch" users to help keep an ethical feed clean. The collective users can work together, rather than each and every user work alone on a case by case basis, and the distribution platforms merely need to take action when the harm threshold becomes significant for action.

A Potential Content Management System for Present-Day Media Distribution

Platforms can provide an option for users to choose a news feed that requires content to meet the Journalist Code of Ethics.[148] In doing so, ethical content is made available without having to directly compete with content that's allowed to be highly manipulative. If the implementation of this moderation is too expensive, and the increase in reputation to brand association is not sufficient, then the moderation is not financially viable. This means the cost of moderation becomes more than the platform receives in higher ad revenue.[149] This becomes a negative financial affect to the company, which means that only the threat of fines[145] becomes an incentive to implement action. However, if the increase in revenue is significant (through better reputation for brand association), yet the cost of moderation is low, then implementation makes financial sense, even without the added incentive of avoiding fines.

1. The "Intern" Reality Check: Feasibility and Cost

Tech platforms often characterize systemic changes as prohibitively complex or costly. However, from a technical perspective, the implementation of a metadata filter is a standard procedure. A small development team could integrate an Ethical Journalism tag into a database and a toggle filter into a user interface within a short timeframe. A simple search box can be allocated to the Ethical Journalism news feed to encourage people to look up news in a place where ethical news will be the top of the results. The infrastructure for tagging and genre filtering already exists. YouTube has a more complex version where the content creators can select "made for kids"[150] and "No, don't restrict my video to viewers over 18 only".[151,152] People can report content that breaches their code of conduct.[153] And parents can make it so their children only see content safe for children (albeit in a much more complicated way than clicking a single button).[154]

The real question is not *"can* they do it," but *"will* they?"

2. Primary issues:

Monitoring Costs:

The primary ongoing cost of regulatory compliance in content moderation is often human intervention, involving the employment of moderators and Trust & Safety staff to review flagged, escalated, and appeal-level content.[155] To solve this, the system can use Threshold-Escalating[156] Reporting.

- The Influence Threshold: Moderators do not need to check every report. A post with ~500 views has low social impact. A post with ~10,000 views begins to be influential. Human intervention should only trigger when a piece of content, that is tagged as "Ethical", reaches a specific threshold and automation can't accurately deal with it. The more ethical the company wants to appear, the lower the limit and the more posts they will need to review, meaning more humans to check to see if the content meets the code of conduct requirement. However, many of these moderators won't need to be monitoring the default content (which isn't tagged), as much, which means less oversight (in the default feed, only direct harm, inciting terrorism, genocide, and other explicit harm-generating content needs to be dealt with, whereas climate change deniers, etc., are given complete freedom).

- The Anti-Spam Multiplier: To prevent political parties or "troll farms" from mass-reporting ethical content to shut it down, there can be a Dynamic Threshold.

  - If a story is reported ~500 times, a human checks it against the Ethical Journalism Code of Conduct. If it breaches the code, the tag is removed, and a warning is given to the account that posted the content. Constant breaches result in being banned from tagging content as ethically safe.

  - If a human reviewer determines the report lacks merit because the content adheres to the code of conduct, the report threshold for that specific item increases threefold, or whatever amount is most efficient (e.g., 500 becomes 1,500).

  - If it happens again, it triples again (1,500 to 4,500). The way this escalates can be relative to the amount of influence, for instance, a percentage of subscribers. This would be up to the platforms to work out for the best reputation/cost effectiveness.

- Transparency as News: The report threshold and status should be visible. A high number of failed reports on a single item can serve as an indicator that organized groups may be attempting to suppress specific information. Massive reporting can become a newsworthy event, similar to how downvote ratios on some content can become newsworthy.[157]

Malicious bots:

- Bot accounts can potentially create thousands of small content posts that never get over 500 views, flooding the platform, saying a single type of misinformation message.[158,159] When monitoring these trends to see if the platform is getting flooded, the specific misinformation content can be treated like a Cyber attack. During the attack, it may be possible to put an Ethical Journalism tag freeze on that content for any new accounts under the threshold until the attack is dealt with. Transparency of the attack can help the platform to be seen as a victim of the attack, with a message about the platform doing their best to mitigate the damage, apologizing to the users for any inconvenience.

3. Comparison: The Social Media Ban Model Versus The Filter Model

The Australian government implemented a social media ban for children,[160] which requires advanced age verification technology. It is expensive,[161] technologically "leaky," and easily bypassed.[162,163]

The Ethical Filter Model is the opposite. It doesn't try to ban users. It filters the content, leaving only the Ethical Journalism genre just like how clicking a button on the TV remote selects the Cartoon Network. It is easier to implement, costs less, increases reputation more, and doesn't require "Digital ID" surveillance. It is the difference between trying to ban every child from a marketplace where people can slip alcohol into almost anything (the Social Media Ban Model), and simply having a section of the market that's safe for the kids (the Filter Model). To this day, parents have no real way to easily ensure their kids have a safe social media experience because they can't easily click a button to ensure the experience will be safe (not just from adult content but also from dark pattern tactics[164] and social manipulation tactics).[165] With a lack of understanding of what the dangers are, many people wouldn't even know how to ensure every platform is safe for their kids.

4. The Uncensored Default: Preserving Free Speech

This system does not censor high-arousal or manipulative content. To preserve free speech, the default setting remains an unrestricted engagement-based algorithm, allowing for the continued distribution of speculative or sensationalist information.[166] Conspiracy theories, that may currently be censored, would no longer need to be censored in the default feed. This maintains the platform as a space for diverse and unverified content while offering a managed alternative.

Why?

1. Free Speech: Everyone has the right to be a conspiracy theorist or a tabloid sensationalist as long as there is no direct connection to significant harm.[167]

2. Entertainment Value: Many people want to see the insane theories and the "High-Engagement" chaos. It is valuable for creativity, story ideas, and entertainment.[168–170]

However, the user is given an Ethical Journalism button. This is an Opt-In choice that could even be selected every time a user logs in, to ensure that the default is not limited in any way by default. This is comparable to TV stations, where they may default to adult content, and parents have to opt into the Cartoon Network, rather then the Cartoon Network being the default station. When the Ethical Journalism button is clicked, the algorithm immediately hides everything that has not been verified or tagged as meeting the Journalist Code of Ethics.[148] This programming code already exists on many platforms for filtering content by genre.

5. The Outcome: A Managed Marketplace

By clicking this button, the user enters a clean news feed. The user is presented with much more factual data and balanced reporting that avoids the use of dark patterns, manipulative semiotics, clickbait, emotionally loaded language, and logical fallacies. In an unrestricted default news feed, these less-than-ethical processes are significantly more effective at increasing the click-through rate, meaning ethical journalism that refuses to use these techniques in an unrestricted news feed would be at a significant disadvantage.[171,172]

This new news feed creates a market where Ethical Journalism can effectively compete.[173] Right now, ethics is a handicap. Under this new system, ethics becomes a marketable asset. If a journalist wants to reach the people who want factual information, they must adhere to the code. If they want to reach everyone as much as possible, they are free to do so, but they can't use the tag.

This stops the blaming of manipulated people as gullible and starts providing them with a way to choose safer content at any time. It takes the majority of the decision of "what is ethical content" away from the distributors[174] and puts it onto the collective users to decide. This makes it clear (in a non-explicit way) that the default content may contain manipulation, propaganda, brainwashing, and demonstrably false information, just as cautionary labels are applied to films containing violent or sexually explicit content. This allows the users to freely ignore the warnings if they want to. It is similar to how parents can conclude that if a film is unrated,[175] then it probably doesn't adhere to the children's programming code of conduct.

Rather than seeing manipulation as a problem,[176] it is turned into a genre choice. Just as Horror films are praised for how violent or gory they may be,[177] or how people praise poker players for their amazing ability to bluff,[178] society can start praising propaganda for how manipulative it is.

Potential Consequences: A Balanced Analysis

The implementation of a system as transformative as the Ethical Journalism Standard is likely to have profound and far-reaching consequences. A credible proposal requires an honest and clear-eyed assessment of both the significant benefits and the potential challenges.

Positive Consequences (Pros):

- Empowerment of the Public: The most significant benefit is the potential empowerment of the average citizen. The EJS provides a simple, at-a-glance tool to make informed choices, significantly reducing the cognitive load required to navigate a complex or adversarial information environment just as the MPAA ratings do.[179] It shifts the burden of verification from individuals back to content creators, and the monitoring to the community as a whole instead of being the responsibility of every single user for every single headline they see.[180]

- Increased Accountability: The public reporting mechanism creates a substantive incentive for journalists and organizations to adhere to their own stated ethical principles. The risk of being publicly stripped of an EJS label for irresponsible reporting should damage credibility and foster a culture of greater accuracy and accountability.[181]

- A Lifeline for Ethical Journalism: The EJS creates a viable market and a discoverable space for media organizations that want to prioritize ethics over sensationalism.[182] It allows quality journalism to differentiate itself from propaganda and clickbait, potentially creating a "flight to quality" among consumers exhausted by the current landscape.[183] Even if there isn't a significant share of users moving to the more ethical content, the Asymmetric Dominance is likely to increase the attention for the dominant product.[184]

- Tangible Protection for Children: The EJS system provides an effective tool for parents, guardians, and educators. It gives them a practical method to curate a safer information diet for children, helping to shield them from polarizing propaganda, hate speech, and fear-mongering content that is detrimental to their psychological development, just as the MPAA ratings have helped curate content for children (even though ratings creep results in the public accepting more violent content in the PG13 rating).[48]

- Strengthening of Democratic Foundations: By making fact-based, good-faith journalism easily accessible, the EJS helps restore the necessary conditions for public trust[185] and informed consent. It provides a shared set of vetted information around which productive public debate can occur, strengthening the foundations of democratic participation.[186]

- The Resurrection of the Fourth Estate: It's not just a call for the reduction in harm directly from content. Building trust in the media, and allowing the media to reveal the truth about governmental affairs, allows the public to be informed about government actions and so keeps the incentives for governments to slip into corruption as a more risky venture. It's a more trustworthy watchdog on government corruption.[187]

Negative Consequences & Challenges (Cons):

- The Risk of a "Sanitized Bubble": A potential downside is that audiences might over-rely on the EJS filter, creating a new kind of "sanitized" echo chamber where they are never exposed to challenging, controversial, or alternative (though unrated) viewpoints.[180] This could inadvertently lead to a form of soft censorship because of exclusion by choice. Just like how horror films, censored by parents, means children never get to experience the beneficial ideas that horror films may offer.

- Subjectivity of "Ethics": While based on established codes, the application of "ethics" can be subjective. There is a risk that the review process could be influenced by political or cultural biases, particularly on highly contentious issues where one side's fact is another's "harmful" speech. This is similar to ratings creep, where what was deemed unethical in *Bonnie and Clyde* is more ethically acceptable by today's standards. Ultimately, a majority of public opinion, which may be significantly influenced by systemic narratives, will be responsible for enforcing the Journalist Code of Ethics.[148] This enforcement may not align with the perspectives of minority groups.[188]

- The Potential for Coordinated Abuse: The public reporting system could be weaponized. Adversarial actors, including state-sponsored influence operations and corporate interests, could launch coordinated reporting campaigns to delegitimize factual reporting. This could result in a centralized entity exerting majority control over the information stream.[189] In cases where the public remains unaware of this influence, subtle manipulation could occur on a broad scale, with no available sources to counter what is conceived as the truth. The public may be more open to believing this due to trusting the rating in a form of risk homeostasis.[190] Robust safeguards and transparency would be necessary to counter this.

- Self-censorship on Investigative Work: Some journalists may fear that tackling highly controversial or nuanced topics could expose them to unfair reporting campaigns. If a journalist's story attempts to provide a balanced perspective on a topic where the evidence is overwhelmingly one-sided, the effort to find a positive angle may be futile, and the article may be perceived as biased. This could create a self-censorship issue, discouraging them from pursuing important investigative work that is critical for holding power to account.[191] However, ignoring the self-censorship and publishing the unfortunately one-sided article could result in mass reporting when it is perceived as a biased article.

- Potential Burden on Platforms: The technical and financial burden of implementing and moderating this system would fall primarily on tech platforms. This may require tangible investment in review teams and AI, and would open them up to new avenues of political pressure and potential legal liability, depending on how the law is set up.[161]

Implementing a Content Management System in Today's Political Environment

The technical solution is ready. The code is relatively simple (already established principles that are common in the industry),[152–154] the cost is negligible to implement the code (about two buttons and a tagging system for the news feed means minimal components), and the precedent has been set for over half a century.[48] Historical precedents, such as the establishment of the MPAA and other public pressure changes,[42,58,110,112] indicate that technical feasibility often requires a clear demonstration of public interest to transition into formal policy.

Institutional structures rarely implement self-regulatory constraints without significant external pressure from the public or legislative requirements.[192] The distribution platforms profit from the very manipulation that potentially harms the social fabric in significant ways. Therefore, they are likely to be reluctant to implement an Ethical Journalism button (that has the potential to reduce their engagement metrics, or that may reveal how manipulative their standard feed can be), unless the alternative is regulation. The regulation would not be significantly problematic or invasive on the way platforms work since it doesn't alter the main news feed (except for allowing more manipulative techniques and allowing those techniques to be more morally acceptable for the main feed, because there is a safe alternative).[193] YouTube already have a version of this, but it's targeted at kids.[154] The world is at a historical crossroads nearly identical to the 1960s. Either regulate the environment in a minimal but effective way, or watch the manipulation get progressively more specialized and effective, where the public psychological tendencies get even more exploited.

1. The Influence Coalition: The Need for Brave Voices

Implementation of such standards often begins with a concentrated group of influential actors. A historical parallel is found in the 1980s with the Parents Music Resource Center, which successfully lobbied for content labeling in the music industry.[194] Today's influencers, those who have achieved success within the current system but are not comfortable with competing with the clickbait and manipulative tactics, would need to stand up and encourage action. As seen in the reasons why protests fail,[107] public pressure is needed,[42,110,194] and to get public pressure, the public needs to be informed of the solution other than telling them, "learn digital literacy." This united message would need to reach the people who can organize the public pressure. These people can then effectively organize the public around a common objective, which results in minimal opposition from ethical organizations.[107]

These influencers would need to tell their followers the truth, that the manipulation can be harmful no matter how much digital literacy the public has,[3] and that ethical journalism deserves a chance.[173] That the followers deserve the right to access factual information,[195] and that they deserve to make informed decisions and give informed consent about their future.[196] They deserve simple human rights.[197] Without people with agency and reach willing to prioritize information integrity over short-term engagement metrics,[36,121,171] the proposal may lack the visibility required to reach policymakers and the public discourse as a whole.

2. Potential Protest Strategies

There are many forms of protest, and often, without severe manipulation driving them with hatred or fear,[85] the public tends to not have the motivation to protest.[107] Often it involves a massive effort which results in a single event that is soon forgotten as the media machine moves on.[85] Digital petitions are not effective when they are the entirety of a campaign strategy.[198] True change requires a visible, physical, consistent presence that cannot be "refreshed" away.[199] One option is to have a recurring date for the message to be spread, like Earth Day.[112,113] This recurring rate could be increased to once a month, to keep the message more active in the community discourse over time. Perhaps the last day of every month. Below is a potential example of what this sort of action may look like:

- The Act: On the last day of every month, citizens who demand information sovereignty sit on their own front lawns, in their own neighborhoods, with a simple sign, or just put up a sign or a flag. Even writing on a cardboard box and dumping it outside. Writing on white T-shirts. Simply expressing support for the cause, similar to how the peace sign ended up everywhere, without needing massive congregations of people.[200] If tens of millions do this every month, it doesn't fade away into obscurity. The key here isn't to disrupt society and cause negative responses, but to disseminate the topic for discussion. The act here is one of the most effortless courses of action, yet it still creates a significant exposure of the message to the public.

- The Message: "Free Ethical Journalism!" The point of this message is to generate discourse and to make sure that the topic is not something that causes division and tension. Something memorable for people to be able to research independently. They can then find more information regarding the topic and the pros and cons of such an approach.

- The Goal: This approach differs from traditional centralized demonstrations, which are often characterized as "fringe movements" by opposing narratives that may discredit and demonize the participants. The act of refraining from disruptive gatherings means the message is a localized, national presence that signals to neighbors and politicians alike that the desire for ethical media is a mainstream, universal concern. It echoes the drive of those in the 1960s who refused to allow their children's well-being to be sold for a profit. But this time the stakes are far greater.

3. The Legislative Demand: The Filter as a Human Right

The message to regulators must be singular and uncompromising.[107] The objective of the proposal is not the suppression of speech but the provision of informed choice.[196] The legislative goal is the requirement that major media distribution platforms provide a separate Ethical Journalism filter allowing the public to easily access ethical information, which is free of unethical practices such as dark patterns.[164]

This is not a ban on speech.[55] It is the enforcement of the Freedom of Information laws,[201] and the right to informed consent.[196] Just as a patient has the right to know the side effects of a drug before they take it, a citizen has the right to know who they are voting for before they vote them in. The right to informed consent is usually applied to a patient when the risks of surgery are of concern. With the current media system, some of the things at risk for the general public is their job security, medical options, housing status, and their mental well being.

4. The Message to the World

To succeed, this movement must rally behind a unified declaration.[107] This possible example below could be the message that is spread until it becomes the new social baseline:

"We demand our right to freedom of information, to make informed decisions, to informed consent, and to exercise free speech. We demand our right to be protected from dangerous mental health issues brought on by manipulative media. We demand regulations for every major media distribution platform to supply an Ethical Journalism Filter, so that we can select Ethical Journalism content in our feeds, free from psychological manipulation and addictive practices. Give us the choice to click a button to select Ethical Journalism, as easily as selecting a TV station free from drugs, sex, and violence."

5. The Echo of the 60s

The proponents of film ratings in the 1960s argued that maintaining the psychological health of the population was a prerequisite for long-term social stability.[42] They had the drive to do whatever was legally necessary to force the industry's hand. Today, society faces a far more potent and invisible threat.[53,54] If the public does not find that same level of seriousness in the willingness to protest, to message political representatives, and to demand an Ethical Journalism button, then the public is consenting to their own manipulation and to the exploitation of those who don't even know they are being exploited.

Granted, people could just delete their social media accounts after 10 years of building up a following.[202] They could refuse to consume any news from any source.[203] They could try to find an ethical journalism platform that doesn't charge too much money and doesn't force a "dog versus cat" story into left-wing and right-wing categories.[67] There is a market of consumers seeking to access relevant information without the high cognitive and logistical costs currently required to verify the ethics of a source, which often results in Cognitive Miserliness.[204] And for those who know they have a choice, when the choice is "Don't be informed, pay a lot of money to have limited information, or navigate the minefield of misinformation," most choose the navigation, with television and social media being the main source of news.[205]

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the mechanics of psychological governance and proposed a technical framework for information sovereignty. The EJS provides a mechanism for individuals to interact with digital media without being subjected to involuntary behavioral modification. By restoring the conditions for informed consent, the system assists in stabilizing the psychological baseline of the population and supports democratic processes.

People are not "data points" to be harvested. People are not "biological units" to be polarized for profit. People are individuals with the right to think, the right to choose, and the right to live without being psychologically colonized by a machine. But people should be allowed to choose unrestricted content and appreciate the exceptional manipulation skills without having to see those skills in a negative light.

An Ethical Journalism button can restore the public's sovereignty. Ethical people can have a chance to lead. The truthful people can have a chance to speak. And the public can have a chance to feel much safer. Every side of the divide could come together to discuss topics on common ground, even if they still disagree on the way forward. The Fourth Estate protection on governance can be reinstated. The extreme misinformation views, considered to be fact, will diminish. And people wanting to celebrate misinformation are free to do so without associated negative perceptions.

It doesn't have to be perfect. Modeling suggests that even a partial adoption of these standards could significantly reduce the prevalence of unverified or manipulative content in a user's feed. The success of the MPAA in categorizing film content provides a historical precedent for the efficacy of such labeling systems. People with agency have a choice to ensure that the future of the world is decided by informed people, rather than manipulated ones. Democracy requires informed consent. The Ethical Journalism filter makes that consent possible while simultaneously increasing the freedom of speech. It gives the public the opportunity to choose.

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