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Media studies, Le Bon's psychology of crowds, and qualitative-normative research on propaganda, 1880–2020

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ABSTRACT

The unexpected change in the way media researchers frame the Internet – from a utopia of free speech in the 1990s to a nightmare of spreading propaganda and disinformation in the 2010s – is reminiscent of the founding period of the field in 1880–1920. It was then that, because of the birth of the modern cultural-industrial media system that was put into large-scale propaganda use by governments and other social actors, the foundations of propaganda studies were laid. This is why the work of Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) acquired new actuality. In *Psychology of Crowds*, first published in 1895, Le Bon suggested an explanation for why some people resort to propaganda and why others believe in it. This paper tracks the development of this research tradition from Le Bon to Walter Lippmann, Theodor W. Adorno, and – following the interlude of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s – the present day. In conclusion, a methodology for explaining the evolution of media studies is advanced, using qualitative-normative propaganda analysis as an illustration.

KEYWORDS: Le Bon, mass psychology, propaganda, development of media studies, qualitative-normative research

Introduction

How is it that the Internet, heralded in the 1990s by media scholars as the saviour of free speech and democracy (Breton, 2000), came to be considered only two decades later as an insidious means of spreading propaganda and disinforma-

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tion (Badouard, 2017; for a detailed history of the debate, see Alexandre et al., 2022)? This turnaround is understandable if we consider what kind of things media scholars assume to obtain in society and media and what kind of intellectual resources they exploit while conducting their research. If media researchers take for granted – as was not uncommon in the 1980s and 1990s – that people are not passive receivers but active interpreters in their relations with the media and are not influenced primarily by what they are offered, it can be assumed that propaganda is not a priority on their research agenda. However, if media researchers think that people, in their relations with the media, are not fully rational or not consciously deciding how they behave, but – at least in part – non-rational and affective, then the overall picture changes. It is thus natural to assume that people can be led astray by manipulative mass persuasion and false information.

These contrasting opinions pose a problem for historians of media studies. Why does only one of these options dominate the field at any given time, and why does the general consensus switch back and forth? In this article, I address this explanatory question by taking up the branch of propaganda inquiry that starts from crowd-theoretical presuppositions, arguing that media behaviour is influenced to a far greater extent by non-rational factors than is assumed by cognitive or instrumentalist approaches. As a case in point, I will follow up on how Gustave Le Bon's conceptual framework can be used to shed light on the developmental logic of media research.

The framework: Le Bon and the psychology of crowds, 1880–1920

Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) is an underrated figure in media studies. Stefanie Averbeck (1999), for one, dismissed the wide influence of his bestseller *Psychology of Crowds* (1895/1921), which addressed German media studies at the turn of the 1930s, considering it an outmoded way of thinking about the process of mass communication. Some eminent scholars in other disciplines have disagreed. Sigmund Freud (1921/1923: 5) thought that Le Bon's book had deservedly earned its reputation ("mit Recht berühmt" [rightly famous]), and Robert K. Merton (1960) praised Le Bon for making apt observations and generating fruitful problems for social scientists to delve into. Following Freud and Merton's lead, I use the case of Le Bon as an instance of how different social, media, and intellectual trends towards the end of the nineteenth century produced a manner of thinking that is useful to bear in mind when trying to understand the media landscape in the Internet age of the 2020s.

First and foremost, Le Bon was concerned about the dissolution of the traditional hierarchical society based on commonly shared beliefs (for a short description of Le Bon's career and conceptions, see Lindenberg, 1996). In line with a long conservative tradition, he thought that popular governments were short-lived and followed by anarchy, making dictatorships necessary to restore order (Le Bon, 1910). With the advance of democracy toward the end of the

nineteenth century, Le Bon thought that France's Third Republic was leading that country into anarchy because of the increasing role of crowds in determining the course of history. Crowds have played their roles, both positive and negative, throughout history. Due to democratic movements and the lack of determination among elites to supress them, the crowds of Le Bon's lifetime posed a threat similar to what France witnessed during its 1789 revolution, owing to the fact that crowds lack a will of their own and are easily swayed by skilful political leaders and orators. Of these, Le Bon (1911) found the socialist agitators of the working masses the most abhorrent, because he felt that they represented the degenerate elements of society. These orators could prompt working people to go on strike and make economically unrealistic demands for compensation. To explain the success of political leaders in holding sway over their audiences, Le Bon introduced his concept of the psychology of crowds.

The basic axiom of Le Bon's psychology of crowds is the proposition that, when under the spell of a crowd, individuals behave emotionally rather than rationally – they act in ways they wouldn't when alone. As members of a crowd, for instance, individuals believe in opinions that defy logic; they reject any counterarguments that might force them to think twice. This effect is produced by the psychological trick of suggestion, which unleashes an affective chain reaction called mental contagion among the members of a crowd. Political leaders and demagogues try to instigate such chain reactions by using rhetorical devices such as slogans and words with strong emotional connotations. Le Bon (1911: 209) compared such behaviour to that of microbes. By the end of the nineteenth century, the modern world had entered the "age of the crowds": a regression to a lesser level of civilisation was imminent, and ultimately, a descent into anarchy or a more primitive, if not barbaric, form of collective life (Le Bon, 1895/1921: 11–82).

What established further credibility to Le Bon's prognosis, in his own estimate, was the new role newspapers had assumed. The media system entered a new phase in the 1880s, just as Le Bon was putting his observations on paper (for more on the 1880s as a turning point in media history generally, see Timoteo Álvarez, 1987: 23–49; for more on the phenomenon in France, see Charle, 2004: 143–167). In Europe and the US, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw the rise of mass-circulated dailies trying to appeal to as many readers as possible. To achieve this, newspapers could no longer be organs of opinion with their own political mission; they had to be servile and merely reflect their readers' opinions (Le Bon, 1895/1921: 128). In this way, the opinions of the crowds, which newspapers attempted to please, became public opinion. Le Bon diagnosed the fatal consequence of this shift as politics becoming a sentimental matter because of the affective logic that guided reasoning in crowds: The public sphere, as represented by newspapers, was imbued with non-rational elements – to the detriment of rational ones. And as the power of the crowds in the new democratic age was increasing, so too were the irrational forces guiding the fate of nations – including the mass media. In *Psychology of Crowds*, Le Bon (1895/1921) devoted only a few pages to mass communication media (Le

Bon, 1895/1921: 127–129; see also Le Bon, 1911: 218–220), but his message is unmistakable. In the hands of a propagandist or a socialist demagogue, for instance, such media could be used to arouse irrational impulses that could bring down the normal course of social and political life.

To understand what the crowd was really about, Le Bon suggested that the discipline of psychology be reformed. He felt that traditional psychology focused too much on cognitive processes, assuming that individuals act on the basis of rational logic. When confronted with the affective – and unconscious – psychic mechanisms indicative of crowd behaviour, psychologists had to discard the quantitative methods they had borrowed from the natural sciences. Le Bon was not alone in his assessment: The nineteenth century had witnessed the professionalisation of the human sciences, and by the turn of the century, there were heated debates over two relevant subjects. On the one hand, the respective merits of the quantitative-systematic and qualitative-historical methods were brought into focus (on the famous German *Methodenstreit* [method dispute], see, e.g., Habermas, 1967: 3–19). On the other hand, the problem of whether science can justify values and norms and whether it is inherently value-free was posed (on the *Werturteilsstreit* [value judgment dispute], see Ferber, 1959). With his psychology of crowds, Le Bon sided with those who defended not only a qualitative-historical conception of scholarship but also the normative idea that research must be guided by social ethics or a vision of the Good Society.

I would argue that, by implication, Le Bon anticipated a line of media inquiry into affective communication as its main object based on the qualitative analysis of contemporary and historical sources interpreted in the light of a social philosophy. This approach is perfectly suited to research on propaganda because, first of all, it was itself born as a reaction to modern popular movements, which, for Le Bon, were the ideal empirical material for observing the kind of collective behaviour that propaganda presupposes in order to function. However, it was also the way Le Bon analysed crowd reactions: a non-standard qualitative method from the point of view of social stability, or the conditions under which peaceful social coexistence is possible, which was followed by later representatives of this field of inquiry.

The universalisation of the propaganda concept from Lippmann to Adorno and beyond, 1920–1980

At the turn of the century, Le Bon's theoretical ideas were put into practice in the US by at least one of the founders of yellow journalism, William R. Hearst (Timoteo Álvarez, 1987: 65). However, it was not until World War I that journalists and scholars became fully aware of the extent to which the behaviour of large populations could be manipulated, with the help of newspapers and other means of public information. For this reason, and to arouse hate toward the enemy, fake photos and other similar material were distributed (Avenarius, 1915; on the use of photographs in the conflict more generally, see Gervereau, 2000: 85–128). One of the people who had inside knowledge of this propaganda

programme and who, based on his personal experience, formulated one of the best-known early views on propaganda in media studies, was Walter Lippmann (1889–1973; for his biography, see Riccio, 1994). Starting with Lippmann's work, I show how the scholars of the Frankfurt School – Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) in particular – harboured similar views on the subject from the 1930s to early 1950s, followed by Marxists and others in the 1960s and 1970s.

Because of World War I and its aftermath, both academic and non-academic writing on propaganda became popular during the interwar years, a fact demonstrated by contemporary bibliographies (Lasswell et al., 1935/1969; Scherke & Vitzthum, 1938). In American media studies, this was the period when the tradition of statistical-experimental communication research emerged and, by the turn of the 1950s, established itself as the paradigm of how propaganda should be examined (for an informative account, see Sproule, 1987). A good illustration of how this came about is Harold D. Lasswell's evolution from a historical and qualitative analyst of propaganda (Lasswell, 1927) into a specialist in quantitative content analysis in the same field (Lasswell, 1949). The latter approach, in which Lasswell tried to imitate natural scientific procedures and excluded normative issues from research, falls outside of my focus. Although Lippmann's *Public Opinion* has been called "the founding book of American media studies" (Carey, 1982: 23), his work is closer to Le Bon's qualitative-normative manner of inquiry than the American tradition of communication research; furthermore, his vision of the affective basis of human conduct is fully consistent with Le Bon's (see Lippmann, 1913: 203–245).

The affinity between Lippmann and propaganda analysis can be gathered from two key notions he developed. On the basis of his work both as a journalist and as a propagandist in the service of his country during World War I, Lippmann concluded that, first, there exists a radical difference between truth and "reportable" truth, the latter being that part of the truth which is within the reach of journalism (Lippmann, 1922: 361). This was also the lesson Lincoln Steffens, the renowned muckraking reporter with whom Lippmann worked during his early journalistic career and whose intellectual inheritor he was (Muhlmann, 2004: 244), had learnt from his efforts to expose social evils, such as corruption in the US during the Gilded Age (see also Lippmann, 1913). As Géraldine Muhlmann (2004: 221–244) recounts, Steffens soon found out that after a certain point, there was little a reporter could do. This point was reached when the social phenomena to be exposed were too complicated and multilayered to fit the format of a news story that would interest the ordinary reader.

Lippmann's (1920: 5) second key notion is the "manufacture of consent". His stint as a war propagandist made Lippmann see how modern democracies were compelled to resort to questionable means of social information in order to survive. The situation was aggravated by the way newspapers, the most important channels of public information available to citizens, were operated. Analysing the manner in which *The New York Times* misinformed the American public about the Russian Revolution and the ensuing civil war convinced Lippmann that something other than "a professional standard" guides journalistic report-

ing (Lippmann & Merz, 1920: 41), at least in cases with social and political significance. Consequently, "out of the troubled areas of the world the public receives practically nothing that is not propaganda" (Lippmann, 1920: 30). For Lippmann, the effect of these two factors – newspapers' inability to report on the facts as they really stand and of their function as a means of social manipulation – was that citizens in a modern democracy are ill-equipped to understand what is going on in the outside world (on Lippmann's conception of how this affects the nature of democracy, see Malmberg, 2009).

Combining the ideas of reportable truth and the manufacture of consent clarifies how the idea of manipulation by propaganda was expanded from something that primarily concerned military and political goals to cover the whole of social, economic, and cultural life – an idea that began to enjoy wide currency during the 1920s (for the American case, see Bernays, 1928). This line of argument was continued, so to speak, by the proponents of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno. It also exemplifies how Marxist media studies brought together the three forms of critique –social, media, and science criticism – that Le Bon initiated. I illustrate this using Adorno's well-known concept of the culture industry (for an aesthetic interpretation on the concept, see Malmberg, 1996).

Instead of journalism (which was Lippmann's province), Adorno analysed predominantly aesthetic forms of public communication. Musical theory and musical criticism furnished Adorno – a composer who had studied under Alban Berg (Müller-Doohm, 2003: 126–152) – with a model perspective from which to approach the new forms of aesthetic culture that the twentieth-century industrial system of cultural production and consumption had introduced. To characterise the change music had undergone as a result of the impact of twentieth-century conditions, Adorno (1932: 103) not coincidentally used the term propaganda machine [*Propagandaapparat*] (see also Adorno, 1936: 240–241; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947: 147). It was the universalisation of the use of propaganda to manipulate people by inconspicuous means in ever more areas of social life which became a leitmotif of Adorno's theory of culture industry, deduced from his application of negative dialectics to history – a theme that resonated in various forms of critical media research until the postmodern turn of the 1980s. As an example of this type of propaganda analysis, I briefly explain how Adorno's theory continues the line of inquiry inaugurated by Le Bon.

The Frankfurt School and Adorno both sought to examine both political and cultural propaganda from a coherent angle. For this, a critical theory of contemporary society was proposed. Its main tenet was that the bourgeois-liberal nineteenth century had been followed by a post-bourgeois and post-liberal twentieth century, typified by the loss of individual freedom and a subsequent increase in social conformity. To produce conformity, as Lippmann stressed, various propaganda techniques employed by mass media had to be applied. The point previously made by Le Bon was that the mass media relied on the same techniques, whatever arena of social life they sought to influence. Cultural, economic, and political propagandists all employ rhetorical devices to bypass individuals' rational side and appeal to their emotions and subconscious. For Adorno, this

was indicative of a psychological and collective regression which had to be explained. In his effort to find this explanation, he coupled a Hegelian version of Marxism with Freudian psychoanalysis, both qualitative approaches based on strong normative assumptions in conflict with the positivism that became the dominant philosophy of American media inquiry from the late 1930s on.

Traditionally, the two disciplines of rhetoric and aesthetics (or poetics) have usually been kept separate, the former dealing with public speech and the latter with public theatrical performance. To be more specific, it is one thing to argue for a cause in public gatherings and another to stage public shows with the aid of the narrative techniques used in composing theatrical plays. Adorno's colleague Walter Benjamin (1936) suggested that, by aestheticising politics, fascists had blurred the distinction between the two and called for the politicising of aesthetics to counteract the trend. This dual perspective is helpful in illustrating the point underlying Adorno's comprehensive propaganda concept and its reliance on crowd-theoretical foundations as reformulated by Freud.

The two recurrent issues of propaganda analysis are those of the veracity and the effect of propaganda. The connection between the rhetoric and aesthetics of propaganda, as conceived by Adorno, can be established by these two questions. Aesthetic mass communication, such as popular music, short stories in weekly magazines, and Hollywood films, does not argue discursively about facts, but it can still function as propaganda. Adorno argued that this occurs when, in their respective fields of artistic expression, they fail to adhere to the aesthetic standards demanded of them. To make this proposition plausible, Adorno introduced his (basically Aristotelian) idea of the truth content that necessarily inheres in genuine aesthetic communication (for the concept of *Wahrheitsgehalt* [veracity] in music, see, e.g., Adorno, 1962/1980: 230–257). Failing this, because of the universal commodification of life under late capitalism, products of the culture industry become a means of diffusing aesthetic disinformation. As a result, resorting to rhetorical tricks became a substitute for aesthetical innovation, which, from the point of view of information content, made political propaganda and the culture industry begin to closely resemble one another.

This analogy can be enlarged to include the similarity between the mechanisms, or "psychotechnics" (Adorno, 1946: 130; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947: 194), of political and cultural propaganda which produce their effects. In his analysis of fascist public speeches, both live and in radio broadcasts, Adorno pointed out a factor that plays a decisive role in aesthetic experience: pleasure, or gratification. People who participate in fascist rallies and listen to their leaders speaking on the air find these experiences pleasurable. As Adorno (1946: 132) indicated, this effect is based on the ritualistic character of the events: Both the leaders and their followers assume a ceremonial role. This leads to collective regression, which, as Le Bon presupposed, causes the participants to lose self-control and act in ways they wouldn't when in private. According to Adorno, this is also the way the culture industry functions. It applies the same psychotechnical procedures, such as repeating the same formulaic conventions and devices, which are the basis of the enjoyment they provide. For this to happen, serious art must be turned

into light entertainment that can be consumed effortlessly (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947: 163).

It is debatable whether the total concept of propaganda assumed by Adorno bears close scrutiny, given its *Zeitdiagnose* [time diagnosis] reflecting the catastrophic age of the Thirty Years' War from 1914 to 1945 (Mayer, 1981: 3). However, every strand of propaganda analysis – or, for that matter, media research in general – is the product of its own time. Up to the 1980s, as the monopolistic or Fordist phase of capitalism that Adorno had in mind disintegrated, the idea of an all-inclusive manipulation by mass media was shared by different critical and Marxist traditions, including those investigating news production (Robes, 1990: 140–190) and feature films. Particularly cinema, with its pictorial language arousing archaic modes of reasoning crossing the border between rational and non-rational, was thought to be an effective tool for psychic manipulation, providing an ideal case for media research inspired by anthropology (Morin, 1956) and psychoanalysis (Metz, 1977).

The return of propaganda and of crowds in media research, 1980–2020

Things changed in the 1980s. Celebrating media for their emancipatory power was substituted for considering them as a means of mass deception. The fear that people would lose their individuality and become part of a faceless crowd because of the machinations effected by media monopolies no longer held the attention of media scholars, who instead turned to conceptions that stressed the autonomy and activity of subjects in appropriating media messages (on this change of parameters, see especially Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986, and Curran, 1990; for a wider picture, see the perceptive *Zeitdiagnose* in Huyghe & Barbès, 1987). The researchers advocating this line of reasoning were scholars of cultural studies, which originated in the UK but crossed frontiers and exerted particularly strong influence in the Anglophone world and those countries with close intellectual relations with the UK and the US. Although cultural studies grew out of critical and Marxist research traditions, its adherents assumed that people are more or less immune to the power of propaganda attributed to the mass media by Lippmann, Adorno, and their likes. John Fiske (1939–2021), an influential figure in the movement in the 1980s and early 1990s, illustrated the explanatory logic underlying this assumption. Lumping together Marxist and semiotic influences, Fiske's criticism of the kind of media analysis represented by the Frankfurt School boils down to the issue of textual polysemy, cultural-political (class) struggle, and active receivership (on Fiske's relation to Habermas, see Malmberg, 2006: 16–18).

What structuralist semiotics, or the science of signs, taught Fiske was, first of all, that all modes of signification are arbitrary. There is no necessary link between the material basis of signs, or signifiers, and signifieds, or their mental or conceptual counterparts (Fiske & Hartley, 1978: 37–58). This nominalist conception makes epistemological realism – Lippmann's and Adorno's philosophical

commitment – impossible, leading to the denial of the possibility that media texts may make true rather than false propositions. Fiske instead argued that there was a conflict between two major modes of discourse – literal and oral – the former purporting to be logical and the second rhetorical, even though both are actually different codes leaning on different discursive principles. This semantic interpretation of signification, coupled with a pragmatic one, leads to a populist idea of mass communication, according to which there is a cultural-political struggle being waged in society between the huge majority of the population and those at the top. In this struggle, the popular tabloid press, with its kind of journalism which disregards normal standards of reporting, is on the side of the people. Fiske made the provocative proposition that "information need not always be associated with an objective truth"; as a matter of fact, "popular information is [...] partisan, not objective: it is this information that serves the people's interests" (Fiske, 1992: 46–47). However, because of the third issue, which is close to cultural studies, this counterintuitive conclusion is logical. As media texts are inherently polysemic, based on different modes of discourse between which no hierarchy as to their truth content can be established, it is ultimately the receivers of information who determine the practical significance of television and other mass media. In other words, the activity of the receivers guarantees that the result of the struggle, seen from the social whole, is positive. Because popular culture is by definition democratic, through mass media it necessarily upholds the common good.

When the postmodernist interlude of the 1980s and 1990s ended and propaganda once more became a major issue, the three basic tenets of cultural studies – the irrelevance of the distinction between truth and untruth, the division of society into the people and the elite, and individuals at the receiving end of communication processes being the most decisive link – could no longer be embraced without further qualification. As a result, crowd-theoretical ideas returned from the margins to the centre of the field in the 2010s. Actually, what occurred was a rerun of the atmosphere of the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, in the three respects introduced earlier.

First, the society around media scholars has changed. Le Bon had been anxious about the rise of the working people, fearing anarchy and the ensuing loss of control by the legislative and executive branches of government. Some hundred years later, Le Bon's conservative worries were shared by liberals who, after the rise of so-called populist groups in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007–2009, which had ushered in a period of economic austerity, began to doubt whether the neoliberalist course pursued since the late 1970s was the correct one (Luce, 2017). Social analysts agreed with the proposition that Western societies had entered an era of regression into less civilised times (Geiselberger, 2017). Second, this impression was strengthened by the unexpected communication practices to which the introduction of Web 2.0 technology gave rise. The utopian ethos of the 1990s (Breton, 2000) was curbed, and what was initially considered an undisputed boon became, among other things, an unprecedented means of spreading propaganda and disinformation, both overtly and covertly (Badouard, 2017).

Calls for harnessing big Internet companies such as Facebook and Google in the 2010s echoed the calls for the nationalisation of the press issued by scholars in 1880–1920 (see Groth, 1948: 255–296). The reason for this was also similar, namely, the immense power that media enterprises allegedly wielded, which Le Bon had also bemoaned. Finally, there was also a scholarly analogue to one of the intellectual characteristics of the turn of the twentieth century. Le Bon was dissatisfied with the psychology of his time for its focus on cognitive-rational mechanisms in explaining human behaviour. What was needed was a qualitative psychology of affect, one variant of which was Freudian psychoanalysis. It was the tenor of the cultural studies of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly its defence of qualitative procedures, which helped media studies to take the affective turn which paved the way for the return of propaganda studies à la Le Bon.

To make the foregoing argument consequent, we must consider the following three aspects of digital communication media scholars faced in the new millennium and relate them to Le Bon's main axioms: the possibility of manipulation by media, the generation of communicative chain reactions, and the use of conscious discursive strategies to break down receivers' rational defence mechanisms.

By the mid-2010s at the latest, it became clear for the mainstream media studies community that, as maintained by Lippmann, Adorno, and others, media of communication can manipulate people's opinions and behavioural patterns. Predictably, pre–cultural studies' conceptions about the power of media to mould human conduct were revived (e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Furthermore, the many-to-many type of digital mass communication made possible the launching of hate-blogging and other forms of bullying online (Jost, 2018), leading to the rapid – or viral, as it is now known – spread of informational chain reactions, what Cass Sunstein (2017) called cybercascades. In an atmosphere of social turmoil, this implied that what was at stake was the future of democracy (Badouard, 2017: 178). Finally, the specific form of employing "storytelling" as propaganda (Salmon, 2007), or blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, could no longer be ignored by media scholars. There is nothing new in the manipulative use of lies and disinformation, which was in widespread use during World War I (Bremm, 2013); indeed, the term disinformation [*дезинформация*] was coined in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s (Durandin, 1993: 17). Against the background of cultural studies, what was new was that media scholars took the question of veracity seriously, no longer using scare quotes (e.g., "truth") when dealing with the subject. The positive side of this change in the zeitgeist was that the arguments cultural studies practitioners advanced in defence of the emancipatory power of popular media such as television were turned upside down in order to explain the manipulative power of propaganda on the Internet.

First, the thesis that there is no way to distinguish between true and false news, only between the different types of discursive news practices applied by quality and tabloid press platforms, was questioned. Spreading false news was found to be much easier on the Internet than spreading true news (Vosoughl et al., 2018), indicating that the possibility of mass deception had made a comeback. Second, the idea that popularity equals democracy, representing the voice

of the people against elites, rests on the premise that popularity is genuine and not manipulated. However, as research on algorithms has demonstrated (Citton, 2014: 99–122), it is easy to rig search results and manufacture (the appearance of) popularity in other ways – that is, public acclaim can be turned from an index of mass support to one of mass fraud, which, in the case of elections, constitutes a menace to political legitimacy. Third, if the crux of communication processes is how receivers interpret media messages, there is no way of distinguishing between what is correct and what is not. Given the ubiquity of false information on the Internet and the astonishing conspiracy theories people believe to be true (Bronner, 2013), it is hard, if not impossible, to stick to the idea that what the receivers get out of media texts is the ultimate standard.

In explaining unexpected communication forms such as those described above, what this all amounts to is a return to conceptions of communication based on the idea of transmission or a "conveyor belt", of which Le Bon's concept of mental contagion – typical of interaction in crowds – is an early paradigm. For a while, these conceptions of communication were discarded by many media scholars; yet, as the course of media research shows, they reappear now and then. In fact, as Stina Bengtsson and her colleagues (2017: 77–79) rightly argued in their textbook presentation of communication models, the Internet has given new actuality to this sort of stimulus-response theorising. It is maybe too early to say if we are witnessing an explicit rehashing of the kind of qualitative-normative approach with crowd-theoretical undertones that Lippmann, Adorno, and their followers adopted, but we can say with some assurance that the kind of critical intellectualism Le Bon shared with those voicing similar scholarly and social concerns is still worth devoting our attention to.

Conclusion: Propaganda analysis, the psychology of crowds, and explaining the course of media studies

In an age of the dissolution of social cohesion, Gustave Le Bon considered crowd mentality and crowd behaviour to be ineradicable. Walter Lippmann demonstrated how the media of mass information were turned into means of manufacturing consent – that is, manipulating public opinion – to counteract this dissolution. Such manipulation could guarantee the necessary social cohesion or conformity, but only at the risk of turning society into a large-scale propaganda machine. The Frankfurt School, especially Theodor W. Adorno with his theory of the culture industry, argued that this was an inevitable consequence of the post-bourgeois or post-individual society based on homogeneity and mass manipulation, a view shared by many Marxist media scholars up to the 1970s. During the 1980s and 1990s, in the work of John Fiske and like-minded scholars, the problem of propaganda vanished. As individuals were considered to be fully able to make sense of media content, they could not be influenced against their own will. However, a couple of decades later, media scholars are once again beginning to take the problem of propaganda seriously. The question arises as to why: How is it that representatives of the field have come to collectively

change their minds and make an about-turn on this subject? I conclude by offering an answer for this dialectical or cyclical evolution, during which some basic conceptions occasionally negate each other.

Explaining the logic underlying the evolution of media studies constitutes a branch of inquiry which encompasses philosophical, sociological, and other specialties (for one elaborate suggestion, see Averbeck-Lietz, 2010: 95–123). Here, I focus on the intersection of philosophical and sociological determinants, making use of crowd psychological premises. The question I address deals with what has been called, in explaining the non-rational behaviour of people believing in conspiracy theories distributed on the Internet, the "bias of confirmation" (Bronner, 2013: 32–36). Simply put, the principle states that people tend to believe in information which confirms their beliefs (even when the information is false) and dismiss information which conflicts with these beliefs (even if it is true). Logicians discuss confirmation bias in the context of inductive logic, which is about the grounds upon which we infer general propositions from single cases. The effect of the way philosophical, sociological, and crowd psychological factors impinge on the general propositions media scholars make can be illustrated both theoretically and in terms of a practical case.

Briefly stated, the theoretical problem concerns the possibility of distinguishing between "plausible untruths" and "implausible truths" (Ahmavaara, 1969a: 157). When media scholars draw conclusions based on a collection of observations, they rely on their everyday experiences, which are coloured by their ideological presuppositions or *Weltanschauung* [worldview]. As Yrjö Ahmavaara (1969b: 173) wrote, "what we consider as social problems [are] first of all determined by our ideology". Hence, what media scholars deem plausible or implausible, which is a philosophical or methodological issue, is linked to what provides them with their standards of plausibility. This, in turn, is based on the way their everyday experience or worldview has been determined, a sociological topic of which crowd psychology can be seen as a special case (see Borch, 2012, which has been one of my sources of inspiration).

The theoretical principle which combines philosophy and the sociology of media studies can be exemplified by practical cases in which media scholars have taken issue with highly significant social problems associated with propaganda, such as the crisis of mass democracy Le Bon responded to or the rise of fascism and the spread of antisemitism Adorno tried to account for. A similar contemporary case is the so-called Russiagate: the allegations that Russian agents diffused propaganda and meddled in the affairs of foreign countries, especially during and after the "*annus terribilis*" of 2016 (Cohen, 2018: 215–218). Given the high political stakes involved, it is no wonder that scholars and other analysts have clashed with each other in dealing with the plausibility of these allegations. This can be gathered from the conclusion that Oliver Boyd-Barrett, a seasoned expert researcher in international news, drew in *RussiaGate and Propaganda* (2020), in which he reexamined the evidence for and against. In his estimate, the majority of the charges were "based on over-assertive allegations that have yet to be proven" (Boyd-Barrett, 2020: 18; see also Diesen, 2022). One decisive

factor contributing to such conflicts of interpretation has to do with different criteria of what counts as admissible evidence, a philosophical problem whose solution depends on sociological or crowd psychological factors. This opens up the possibility that media scholars, because of their concerted action as a group, may be susceptible to admitting as trustworthy evidence that is actually just a collectively shared preconception or, using Francis Bacon's (1620/1902: 19–42) vocabulary, an "idol". However, this outcome is precisely what, given Le Bon's affective logic of collective behaviour, one cannot a priori exclude.

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