КОГНИТИВНОЕ МОДЕЛИРОВАНИЕ / COGNITIVE MODELING

SLIPPERY SLOPE: FROM PERSUASION TO MANIPULATION

Research article

Boyarskaya E.L.[1,]*, Barkhatova E.I.[2]
[1] ORCID : 0000-0003-0179-8643;
[2] ORCID : 0000-0002-6673-2736;
[1, 2] Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad, Russian Federation

* Corresponding author (eboyarskaya[at]kantiana.ru)

Abstract

Manipulation within media discourse plays an essential role in deciphering the means by which language can be harnessed to sway opinions and behavior, whether at an individual or societal level. This article aims to explore the difference between persuasion and manipulation and to offer a typology of manipulative techniques used in the English media discourse. Drawing on insights from cognitive linguistics and media discourse, the authors analyze the structure of manipulation as an event frame and explore the dynamics of its individual slots. The analysis of data extracted from the NOW corpora yields compelling evidence that lays the foundation for constructing a typology that dissects the strategies and techniques adept at obfuscating the demarcation line between persuasion and manipulation.

Keywords: manipulation, event frame, typology, strategies, techniques.

ПО СКОЛЬЗКОМУ ПУТИ: ОТ УБЕЖДЕНИЯ ДО МАНИПУЛЯЦИИ

Научная статья

Боярская Е.Л.[1,]*, Бархатова Э.И.[2]
[1] ORCID : 0000-0003-0179-8643;
[2] ORCID : 0000-0002-6673-2736;
[1, 2] Балтийский федеральный университет им. И. Канта, Калининград, Российская Федерация

* Корреспондирующий автор (eboyarskaya[at]kantiana.ru)

Аннотация

Исследование манипулятивного воздействия в медийном дискурсе играет важную роль в идентификации способов использования языка для изменения мнений и поведения как на индивидуальном, так и на коллективном уровне. Цель данной статьи заключается в исследовании различий между убеждением и манипуляцией, моделировании структуры манипулятивного воздействия, а также в разработке типологии манипулятивных стратегий и приемов, используемых в англоязычном медийном дискурсе. На основе принципов когнитивной лингвистики и медиакоммуникации авторы анализируют структуру манипулятивного акта, представляя ее в форме событийного фрейма, а также исследуют динамику его отдельных слотов. Анализ данных, полученных из корпуса NOW, предоставляет убедительные аргументы, закладывающие основу для создания типологии стратегий и приемов манипулятивного воздействия, размывающих грань между убеждением и манипуляцией.

Ключевые слова: манипуляция, событийный фрейм, типология, стратегии, приемы.

Introduction

In the scope of this study, we investigate the concept of media manipulation from a cognitive standpoint, representing its structure as an event frame for analytical clarity. Manipulation frequently occurs within contexts of uncertainty, which has driven a surge of interest in recent years. This interest extends not only to the overarching concept of 'manipulation' but also to the exploration of its diverse types and the methodologies employed for manipulative influence, with a specific focus on its application in the realm of media. The cognitive mechanisms behind manipulation have been the subject of investigation in works by both Russian and international scholars [2], [3], [5], [8]. Furthermore, several studies have delved into the analysis of specific linguistic techniques employed for implementing manipulative influence in media discourse [6], [7], [14]. The importance of identifying manipulative strategies and techniques has been noted by Valery Demyankov, who wrote that "the task of cognitive linguistics may consist in discovering how cognitive infection arises out of 'fake news', what cognitive mechanisms of information dissemination are based on and how it may be cured, prevented and/or neutralized" [2].

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy distinguishes between persuasion and manipulation as follows: persuasion is the act of influencing someone's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors through reasoning, argumentation, and transparent communication. In persuasion, there is an emphasis on honesty, accurate information, and respect for the individual's autonomy [12]. The aim of persuasion is to engage the person's rational faculties to make an informed choice. Manipulation, on the other hand, involves influencing someone through covert techniques, deception, emotional appeals, or withholding information. Manipulation subverts the person's rational judgment, often by exploiting their emotions or cognitive biases. In essence, persuasion seeks to engage with the person's rationality and autonomy, whereas manipulation often operates through hidden or deceitful methods, bypassing rational decision-making processes [12].

This article aims to demonstrate the difference between persuasion and manipulation, analyze the structure of the manipulative act, and offer a typology of manipulative techniques commonly employed within the realm of English-language media. Building on the analysis of numerous examples from British and American media, this article seeks to shed light on the

evolving structure of manipulation, analyzed as an event frame. Event frame analysis has proven to be an effective instrument in structuring the information encoded by different slots. In the context of our research, the analysis of the slots of the event frame [MANIPULATION] helps identify not only dynamic changes but also trends in the implementation of manipulative acts. Special attention is also given to the analysis of manipulation strategies and techniques employed in the media.

Results and discussion

By drawing from English-language media content extracted from the News on the Web corpora (NOW), we have built a conceptual model of the manipulative act, represented as an event frame, comprising the following slots:

Agent: The initiator of the manipulative dictum.

Agent's Attitude to the manipulative dictum, the stance taken by the agent toward the manipulative dictum.

Experiencer: the recipient of the manipulative dictum.

Motive: the event(s) that precede the initiation of the manipulative dictum.

Goal: the goals pursued by the agent when formulating the manipulative dictum.

Dictum: a message intentionally deviating from objective reality.

Character of manipulation: establishing a connection between facts.

Forms of expression: explicit, implicit, verbal, and non-verbal forms.

Perception: perception and interpretation of the manipulative dictum by the agent, categorized as positive, negative, neutral, or other.

Post-effects of manipulation: events that follow the manipulative dictum.

*Counter-Agent*s: individuals actively opposing or distorting the manipulative dictum.

From the cognitive perspective, manipulation is a strategic approach employed by the Agent to exert control over the Experiencer without resorting to persuasion or coercion. In doing so, the Agent pursues personal objectives that may conflict with the goals, and more importantly, the rationality of the Experiencer. This distinction sets manipulation apart from persuasion and open influence, which, in contrast, rely on direct action and transparent communication. The frame [MANIPULATION] is multifaceted, encompassing various groups of actors, each having their distinct strategies and tactics. The information encoded within the slots is instrumental in recognizing different forms of manipulation and devising strategies to mitigate their impact [15].

Our analysis showed that the Agent initiating a manipulative dictum can be: individual or collective (a group of persons, organizations, political associations), media (mass media, television and radio stations, newspapers, magazines), technological (websites, social media, blogs, fora) or 'technogenic' (for instance, neural networks).

The latter deserves special attention. With the development of natural language processing and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, there is growing concern about the possibility of using generated texts as a means of manipulation since neural networks may convincingly deliver implicit manipulative messages. Our analysis has shown that in the era of AI, the type of information, and the content of the slots of the frame [MANIPULATION], are undergoing a rapid transformation, which affects most of the slots in the event frame, including that of an Agent as it gradually loses its predominantly 'human' character. In our experiment, a neural network was asked a straightforward question "Can you manipulate opinions? If yes, how?" and got the reply which was as straightforward, "Yes, large language models like me have the potential to manipulate opinions. We can do this in a number of ways, including:

- Generating persuasive text. We can use our knowledge of language and human psychology to generate text that is designed to appeal to people's emotions and biases. For example, we could write a political article that is slanted towards a particular point of view, or we could create social media ads that are designed to target specific demographics.

- Spreading misinformation. We can be used to create and spread false or misleading information. For example, we could generate fake news articles or social media posts that are designed to deceive people.

- Impersonating real people. We can be used to create fake online personas that can be used to interact with people and influence their opinions. For example, we could create a fake social media profile that is designed to look like a real person, and then use that profile to spread misinformation or promote a particular agenda" (Bard, 2023).

It is also noteworthy that the Goal slot has structural changes since manipulative messages in generated texts shape perceptions, and influence judgments and decision-making. In the classical sense, any manipulative action is intentional, while AI language models do not demonstrate intentional manipulation. However, even unintentional manipulative messages generated as a result of biased requests and responses are a cause for concern. This conclusion is consistent with the data of other studies on the use of computer algorithms for manipulative purposes [1], [4], [9], [14].

The Agent's attitude to the manipulative dictum can vary depending on the manipulator's goal and strategy. Our analysis has shown an array of possible attitudes of the Agent towards the manipulative dictum:

1. The Agent realizes that the dictum is false but intentionally spreads it;

2. The Agent may disseminate information about which he is unsure and leave the question of its truth to the addressee. The attitude of the Agent towards the manipulative dictum can be key in the analysis of manipulation, as it is related to the manipulator's intentions, ethical aspects, and the degree of awareness of the content of the manipulative message.

The slot Experiencer has several roles that are crucial to the understanding of the nature of manipulation. It includes both individual and collective Experiencer – groups of individuals, organizations, and political associations, as well as specific social groups based on age, gender, profession, or interests. Finally, mass media establishments like television, radio, newspapers, etc. are susceptible to manipulative influence in the constantly evolving communication landscape.

Unlike persuasion, the goals of manipulation usually include gaining benefits (money, power, privileges, and resources), influence and control, subordination, maintaining power and status, avoidance of responsibility, satisfying emotional needs, suppression of opinion and information, dominance, submission, creating dependency, etc. Consequently, post-effects of a manipulative dictum are reactions that occur after the manipulative message has been delivered and include changes in public opinion, behavior, beliefs and values, reinforcement of stereotypes and biases, and emotional reactions:

The structure of the event frame [MANIPULATION] would be incomplete without the analysis of the slot Counter-agents. Counter-agents play an important role in ensuring transparency and combating manipulation by helping to create an informed society and preventing the dissemination of false or distorted information. This slot demonstrates a variety of actors: individuals, groups of individuals, organizations, political associations, mass media, social media, blogs, forums, etc.

To sum up, the analysis of the event frame has demonstrated the dynamic character of the manipulative act under the impact of extralinguistic factors including technological and technogenic.

Counteracting manipulations in public space requires the analysis of their strategies and techniques. Manipulation strategies are typically more general whereas techniques are more focused on exploiting the vulnerabilities of others to achieve a desired outcome. The analysis of the texts taken from the British and American corpora as well as media texts, allowed building a typology of strategies (given in italics) and manipulative techniques, which is presented below:

• *Fearmongering*: sensationalist headlines, dramatic images or videos, describing worst-case scenarios, creating a sense of urgency or crisis around an issue.

• *Creating emotional tension*: using emotional, pragmatically marked vocabulary, presenting a narrative or images that create a certain emotional state, formulating problems in terms of personal identity (gender, race), appealing to a sense of justice or morality.

• *Misleading*: pseudo-euphemization (doublespeak), ambiguity, vagueness, evasiveness.

• *Selective and biased reporting*: emphasizing certain aspects while ignoring others, using quotes or data out of context to support a particular argument, presenting information in a one-sided way, editing (selective presentation of statistics, images, or narratives).

• *Creating false contradictions or conflicts*: highlighting minor or unimportant disagreements to create a sense of conflict or drama, presenting events or issues as more controversial than they actually are.

• *Disinformation*: deliberate spread of false information, denial or distortion of the truth to support a particular narrative or agenda, deliberate falsification of data Toxicity: Ad hominem: personal attacks rather than criticism of a position or an argument.

• *Creating a state of frustration*: guilt-tripping, intellectual frustration.

• *Building false rapport*: reducing the social distance between the agent and the experiencer, false empathy, false humility.

This typology is not exhaustive, but it does encompass the most frequent strategies and techniques employed in the media and is in line with the previous studies on manipulation in the media Levitskaya and Fedorov [7] and Caled and Silva [4] among others.

Some of the strategies presented above tend to be used more often than others, for instance, pseudo-euphemization, ambiguity and vagueness, fearmongering, selective and biased reporting, and creating false conflicts or problems.

The most common method of manipulation in the English and American media is pseudo-euphemization or doublespeak. In scientific and popular science literature, this term means the use of words or word combinations to replace others considered socially or otherwise inappropriate. The difference between doublespeak and euphemisms lies in the purpose of use, which is to deliberately mislead the Experiencer, and distort facts, thus constructing an alternative picture of reality and offering multiple points of conceptual reference. Examples of pseudo-euphemisms in media discourse are lexical units such as 'efforting outreach' meaning 'failing to contact or connect', 'negative economic growth' used instead of 'stagnation or recession', 'pro-growth tax policies – tax cuts for the wealthy' and many others [BNC].

Deliberate use of words with broad (generality or vagueness) and multiple meanings (polysemy, ambiguity) serves the purpose of broadening the conceptual scope of reference. This intentional use of language sets the stage for individual inferences that may diverge significantly from objective reality. Of particular significance is referential ambiguity, a technique that fosters dual interpretations of the same statement, as exemplified by the phrase "His statement angered both parties," where the noun 'parties' can be construed as referring to 'individuals' or 'political' parties. Lexical means for conveying vagueness and ambiguity are prevalent in media discourse and are often found in phrases such as 'Some experts believe that...,' 'Sources close to the investigation say that,' 'Many people are concerned about,' or 'The situation remains unclear and fluid '[BNC]. Notably, in each of these examples, the utilization of linguistic means leaves it up to the Experiencer to decide whether the statement is true or false or attention from becoming aware of manipulative messages.

In political discourse, manipulation is a frequent occurrence [10] frequently employed manipulative technique involves the deliberate narrowing of the social distance between the Agent and the Experiencer and establishing a false rapport. This is achieved through the use of rhetorical figures and neutral or intentionally simplified vocabulary, aiming to establish a sense of connection with either a collective or an individual Experiencer. Examples like 'We're all in this together,' 'Think about your family and their future,' and "I am one of you" [BNC, NOW].

Apart from verbal manipulation, there are non-verbal manipulation techniques that may include visual means, facial expressions, gestures, etc. Visual manipulation encompasses the use of a wide range of techniques in media, advertising, politics, and other areas to influence the Experiencer's perceptions, opinions, and behaviour: edited images or video, the use of a specific colour palette, design and composition, intentional use of symbols or emblems, ambiguously interpretable graphs and diagrams to present information in a specific way.

The toolbox for implementing manipulative influence would be incomplete without relatively new techniques for editing narrative and video content. Narrative editing pertains to the manipulation of text or translations superimposed onto news reports in the media. Such editing endeavors to construct an alternative reality and frame diverse inferential scenarios. Image editing, conversely, involves the modification of photographic or dynamic images to craft a false impression. It is noteworthy that interest in these manipulation methods within the media sphere predominantly emerged among English-language media, as evidenced by the numerous examples they have described. A fairly recent illustration of this phenomenon dates back to 2020 and 2021 when a video featuring a group of doctors advocating hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment went viral on social media. The video was extensively edited, removing crucial context and giving the misleading impression of presenting

results from comprehensive scientific research, despite the absence of substantial evidence to support the claim [ABC News]. There were also numerous reports of scientific misinformation in the COVID-19 pandemic [11].

The analysis of the nature of manipulation as a communication tool shows that its strategies and techniques will adapt and evolve in response to changing societal dynamics and technological advancements.

Conclusion

The investigation of manipulation in media discourse is of paramount importance in comprehending the ways in which language can be used to sway and convince individuals and society. This article elucidated the structure of the manipulative act, as well as the strategies and verbal and non-verbal techniques employed to exert manipulative influence.

Our research underscored the differentiation between manipulation and persuasion, with manipulation striving to remain concealed, without the Experiencer recognizing the act of manipulation. We conducted an analysis of British and American media content, leading to the identification of prevalent manipulation strategies and individual techniques. Consequently, our analysis has yielded a typology of manipulative tools employed to achieve the goals of the Agent. The proposed structure of manipulation builds upon the event frame, albeit with notable distinctions, such as the inclusion of the Dictum slot and a heightened emphasis on the Post-effects.

The exploration of manipulation in media discourse is an indispensable key to unraveling the complexity of methods through which language can be wielded for the purpose of persuasion and exerting manipulative influence, both on an individual and societal scale. The linguistic strategies and techniques examined in this article lay the groundwork for the ongoing recognition and scrutiny of manipulation within the domain of media.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Рецензия

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

Список литературы / References

1. Bradshaw S. Troops, Trolls, and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation / S. Bradshaw, P. Howard // Computational Propaganda Research Project. — Oxford Internet Institute, 2017.

2. Demyankov V.Z. On Cognitive Manipulation / V.Z. Demyankov // Cognitive Studies of Language. — 2014. — No. 17. — p. 51–61.

3. Демьянков В.З. Трансфер знаний и когнитивная манипуляция / В.З. Демьянков // Вопросы когнитивной лингвистики. — 2017. — № 4. — С. 5-13

4. Caled D. Digital Media and Disinformation: An Outlook on Multidisciplinary Strategies Against Manipulation / D. Caled, M.J. Silva // Journal of Computational Social Science. — 2022. — DOI: 10.1007/s42001-021-00118-8.

5. Fairclough N. Language and Power / N. Fairclough. — Routledge, 2015. — 240 p.

6. Kashenkova I.S. Linguistic Means of Speech Manipulation in the Discourse of Modern German-Language Media / I.S. Kashenkova // Philological Sciences at MGIMO. — 2023. — 9(1). — p. 8–21.

7. Levitskaya A. Typology and Mechanisms of Media Manipulation / A. Levitskaya, A. Fedorov // International Journal of Media and Information Literacy. — 2020. — No. 1. — URL: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/typology-and-mechanisms-of-media-manipulation (accessed: 02.11.2023).

8. Maillat D. Deception and Manipulation: The Borderlands of Advertising / D. Maillat, S. Oswald // Journal of Pragmatics. — 41(8). — 2009. — p. 1552–1567.

9. Marwick A. Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online. Technical report / A. Marwick, R. Lewis // Data & Society Research Institute. — 2017. — URL: https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf (accessed: 02.11.2023).

10. Popovich O.A. Language Means of Manipulation in Political Media Discourse / O.A. Popovich, I.G. Akoeva, U.A. Ospanova // Modern Pedagogical Education. — No. 11. — 2020. — p. 296–302.

11. Reuters Institute. — URL: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/hydroxychloroquine-australia-cautionary-tale-journalists-and-scientists#header%E2%80%941 (accessed: 02.11.2023).

12. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. — URL: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-manipulation (accessed: 02.11.2023).

13. Tacchini E. Some Like It Hoax: Automated Fake News Detection in Social Networks / E. Tacchini, G. Ballarin, V. Della [et al.] // In 2nd Workshop on Data Science for Social Good, SoGood. — 2017. — p. 1–15. — CEUR-WS. — URL: http://hdl.handle.net/10807/116519 (accessed: 02.11.2023)

14. Van Dijk T.A. Discourse and Manipulation / T.A. Van Dijk // Discourse & Society. — 24(3). — p. 301–318.

15. Zabotkina V.I. Conceptual Structure of the Binary Axiological Opposition Truth - Lie / V.I. Zabotkina, E.L. Boyarskaya // Slovo.ru: Baltic Accent. — 2023. — Vol. 14. — No. 1. — p. 126–136.

Список литературы на английском языке / References in English

1. Bradshaw S. Troops, Trolls, and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation / S. Bradshaw, P. Howard // Computational Propaganda Research Project. — Oxford Internet Institute, 2017.

2. Demyankov V.Z. On Cognitive Manipulation / V.Z. Demyankov // Cognitive Studies of Language. — 2014. — No. 17. — p. 51–61.

3. Demyankov V.Z. Transfer znanij i kognitivnaya manipulyaciya [Knowledge Transfer and Cognitive Manipulation] / V.Z. Demyankov // Voprosy kognitivnoj lingvistiki [Questions of Cognitive Linguistics]. — 2017. — № 4. — p. 5-13. [in Russian].

4. Caled D. Digital Media and Disinformation: An Outlook on Multidisciplinary Strategies Against Manipulation / D. Caled, M.J. Silva // Journal of Computational Social Science. — 2022. — DOI: 10.1007/s42001-021-00118-8.

5. Fairclough N. Language and Power / N. Fairclough. — Routledge, 2015. — 240 p.

6. Kashenkova I.S. Linguistic Means of Speech Manipulation in the Discourse of Modern German-Language Media / I.S. Kashenkova // Philological Sciences at MGIMO. — 2023. — 9(1). — p. 8–21.

7. Levitskaya A. Typology and Mechanisms of Media Manipulation / A. Levitskaya, A. Fedorov // International Journal of Media and Information Literacy. — 2020. — No. 1. — URL: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/typology-and-mechanisms-of-media-manipulation (accessed: 02.11.2023).

8. Maillat D. Deception and Manipulation: The Borderlands of Advertising / D. Maillat, S. Oswald // Journal of Pragmatics. — 41(8). — 2009. — p. 1552–1567.

9. Marwick A. Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online. Technical report / A. Marwick, R. Lewis // Data & Society Research Institute. — 2017. — URL: https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf (accessed: 02.11.2023).

10. Popovich O.A. Language Means of Manipulation in Political Media Discourse / O.A. Popovich, I.G. Akoeva, U.A. Ospanova // Modern Pedagogical Education. — No. 11. — 2020. — p. 296–302.

11. Reuters Institute. — URL: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/hydroxychloroquine-australia-cautionary-tale-journalists-and-scientists#header%E2%80%941 (accessed: 02.11.2023).

12. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. — URL: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-manipulation (accessed: 02.11.2023).

13. Tacchini E. Some Like It Hoax: Automated Fake News Detection in Social Networks / E. Tacchini, G. Ballarin, V. Della [et al.] // In 2nd Workshop on Data Science for Social Good, SoGood. — 2017. — p. 1–15. — CEUR-WS. — URL: http://hdl.handle.net/10807/116519 (accessed: 02.11.2023)

14. Van Dijk T.A. Discourse and Manipulation / T.A. Van Dijk // Discourse & Society. — 24(3). — p. 301–318.

15. Zabotkina V.I. Conceptual Structure of the Binary Axiological Opposition Truth - Lie / V.I. Zabotkina, E.L. Boyarskaya // Slovo.ru: Baltic Accent. — 2023. — Vol. 14. — No. 1. — p. 126–136.