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Unpacking War Propaganda to Arrive at Neohumanist Clarity

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Touching Testimony of Atrocities - Selling a War

On October 10, 1990, Nayirah, a young 15-year-old girl from Kuwait, stood before the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus, with tear-filled eyes and voice breaking with emotion, to relate her eyewitness account of having seen Iraqi soldiers enter the hospital where she was volunteering to loot equipment including incubators. She told how they took premature infants out of the incubators and left them on the floor to die. The news of such a horrific atrocity reached at least 35 million Americans within hours, galvanizing support for military action in Kuwait.

However, two years later, in the CBC program called "To Sell a War" revealed that the entire story had been fabricated by the Hills and Knowlton public relations firm that had been hired by a pseudo-grassroots organization financed by the Kuwait royal family. Nayirah was the daughter of the Kuwait ambassador to the U.S., no evidence could be found that she had actually been in Kuwait during that time, and the details of her story did not match actual investigations.

Media Literacy and Civic Education Project for Romanian Highschools

Currently, in Romania I am leading a project named "SCOP", jointly with "Center for Equal Partnership". The project provides a civic education and media literacy program to high school teachers in ten underprivileged rural communities. As I was developing the media literacy component of the program, I was working daily on the Romanian border with Ukraine refugees, and directly witnessing the traumatic impact of the war on ordinary people's lives when participating in the interventions of AMURTEL's emergency psychologist.

Both Ukrainian and Russian Children Need Strategic Support

Meanwhile, during an informal conversation with Liane Ghent, the executive director of the European early years network, ISSA, she pointed out how in partner countries there are already worrying reports of bullying towards Russian children. We discussed the need to think strategically not only about how to support Ukrainian children through the traumas of war and dislocation, but also, equally importantly, how to support and protect Russian children from harmful, unfair discrimination.

Seeds of Hatred Multiplying

I was similarly struck by Yuval Noah Harari's commentary in a TED interview "The War in Ukraine Could Change Everything." He pointed out that "the seeds of hatred and fear and misery that are being planted right now in the minds and the bodies of tens of

millions, hundreds of millions of people... Because it is not just the people in Ukraine, it's also in the countries around, all over the world. And these seeds will give a terrible harvest, terrible fruits in years, in decades to come. ...Every day this continues, plants more and more of these seeds".

Deciphering War Propaganda

Now, with a brutal war right on our doorstep that has reawakened deep fears, dormant since Communism fell in Romania, I knew that it would be more important than ever to equip teachers and students with media literacy tools as the barrage of horrifying news from the warzone began watering seeds of hatred. I decided to dedicate a part of the media literacy sessions to the deciphering of war propaganda. The aim was not only to develop their ability to detect distortions and question narratives, but also to use an ethical framework, based on Neohumanism, to move beyond limiting sentiments towards a perspective that prioritizes the welfare of all.

Truth is the first casualty

There is a saying, *"In war, the first casualty is the truth."* In this moment, one of the important battlefields is the one taking place on popular social media platforms and mainstream media. More than 20,000 volunteers came forward to join the "IT Army of Ukraine" and dedicate themselves to fight in the information and cyber war. Many, many more professionals and volunteers are engaged in this war on all sides, using sophisticated, psychological tools to inflame powerful sentiments to override distaste for war, conflict, and aggression. Indeed, Harold Lasswell, an American specialist in communications theory and political science wrote, "So great are the psychological resistances to war in modern nations, that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about who the public is to hate."

Understanding what feeds the seeds

In order to be able to protect ourselves and others from the seeds of hate that these tactics employ, and that threaten to poison decades of progress in creating greater interconnection, understanding, dialogue and cooperation across cultural barriers, it is important to understand psychological dynamics they feed off.

Understanding Nationalism: Social Construct vs Geo-Sentiment - My home and my people

In 1983, Benedict Anderson published the book "Imagined Communities", a term he coined to describe the phenomenon of nationalism as a social construct, rather than having any innate basis. He attributes the

construction of nationalistic identities to the various cultural forms that create shared narratives, values, myths, and sense of collective identity. However, Shrii P.R. Sarkar goes deeper than considering nationalism as only a socially constructed concept. Rather, he invented a new term, "geo-sentiment," to encompass not only nationalism, but also other powerful forms of identification that arise naturally according to the sense of "home" that we have in connection to our dwelling, our city, our region, our nation etc. Similarly, socio-sentiments arise from our fundamental need for safety, connection and belonging. These ingrained sentiments are deeply intertwined in our sense of identity, and thus hold a much more powerful influence on us than mere ideas. Social constructs, on the other hand, such as the color pink being associated with girls and blue with boys have no inherent basis. They are simply conventions whose only meaning is that given to them by people.

In-Group and Out-Group Biases

The dark side of sentiments is that once we are part of an "in-group" it also creates "out-group" sentiments. Whereas we tend to give more recognition of diversity and attribute positive qualities to our in-group, we tend to create simplified stereotypes and more easily portray qualities of the out-group as negative. In our in-group, we may characterize our own nation positively as creative, independent, and freedom loving, whereas someone looking at us as an "out-group" may see those same characteristics as undisciplined, disloyal, and arrogant. We will also more easily tend to feel empathy for those that look like us, share values or customs, and that are closer to our in-group. We see this reflected in the much warmer reception in Europe towards the white, Christian Ukrainian refugees, versus the xenophobia that arose when brown-skinned Islamic refugees from Syria fled from similar situations.

How to Regulate the Power of Sentiment

The ubiquitousness and strength of these sentiments should not be underestimated. Rather, we all need to learn to identify their expression and master them. In his seminal work *"The Liberation of Intellect"*, Shrii P.R. Sarkar outlines not only a detailed analysis of sentiments, but also offers a pathway to regulate them and develop what he calls "rationalistic mentality," through three steps: study, analysis, and application of the ethical filter of "**Blissful or Non-Blissful Auxiliary**". At the same time, he recognizes the need to use even more powerful sentimental strategies than the ones used to create divisions: the first is to awaken anti-exploitation sentiment and the second is to awaken universalism, a deep sentiment for the whole planet as home and all peoples as brothers and sisters.

How does this apply to the teaching of media literacy for war propaganda? In a media landscape riddled with deceitful disinformation designed to purposely mislead, the step of "study" requires careful training in the ability to discern reliable sources from unreliable sources of information, "analysis" requires abilities in critical thinking and identifying exploitation, and finally ethical filtering requires anchoring in universalism and

cultivating the ability to resist and deconstruct the inflammation of sentiments that obscure it.

Vertical vs Lateral Reading

Lateral reading refers to the strategy of not just evaluating an article on the apparent coherency of its internal logic, which is "vertical reading". If the entire article is heavily biased or outrightly false and manipulative, it can be very difficult to detect the lies directly. Lateral reading means:

1. Verify the source: if you google the name of the source or author, what do you find? What other types of information is present on the source? Are there any claims that the sources may be manipulative? If you also add in words like "reliability" or "credibility" you may unearth more. Do any political biases or other types of bias surface? Who is backing or funding it? What types of ideas does the same author or source promote?

2. Is the source authentic? Sometimes disinformation will be posted on websites that mimic the logo and branding of legitimate sites. Carefully look at the branding and URL and do further checking to make sure they are legitimate.

3. Corroborate: Look for corroborating proof to back up claims made in the piece. Search and see if other reporters have found similar evidence. If the piece is referring to any original, primary source documents, look them up directly. In writing this article for example, I came across a claim in the Guardian that there were 300,000 volunteers on the telegram channel "IT War for Ukraine". However, when I directly looked up the channel, there were far fewer, so the claim appears to be either purposefully exaggerated or misinformed, despite coming from a reasonably credible source.

4. Distinguish good journalism from faulty journalism and facts from opinions: Good journalism will point to documents and other sources of information that can be objectively verified, will refer to facts, and will include a diversity of viewpoints on an issue. Poor journalism will use sentimentalizing language that mixes opinions with facts, does not provide a diversity of viewpoints, and cherry-picks only data that corresponds to its assumptions. Looking into the reputation of a journalist or a media source can also help. A reputable source that has high standards of journalistic integrity will be more reliable than a source that produces tabloid style sensationalistic material regularly or is a known source of propaganda.

5. Be aware of your filter bubbles & echo chambers. Remember that the internet currently uses complex algorithms to micro-target content to you that will feed you more and more of what you like to hear. To develop more complex, wider, better informed views on an issue, it is important to consciously endeavor to go outside of these filter bubbles and look for sources of information with viewpoints other than those that mostly resonate with your own, and risk to confirm biases. Keep dialogue open with people who have opposing views.

6. Look for expert sources: Are there any independent investigative bodies that have looked into the issue in question? Bodies like Human Rights Watch, reports

from human rights commissions, and organisations like Amnesty International work to provide independent investigations that must meet rigorous standards. While bias can creep in, overall the processes that they must adhere to weed out the most obvious forms. Using this sort of process will already help to eliminate a lot of disinformation and give you a broader understanding of issues.

Beware of Sentimentalizing Strategies

It is crucial to be able to identify sentimentalizing strategies and their effects on audiences. If we understand the blinding effect that geo-sentiment can have on rational analysis, then when we detect attempts to trigger it, we remain detached and make a better objective evaluation.

In particular, for identifying war propaganda, it can be very useful to become familiar with Anne Morelli's work, published in French in 2001, entitled "The basic principles of war propaganda." It was designed for use as an educational framework for media analysis. Indeed, one of the exercises I designed for the sessions with the Romanian high school teachers was to identify how the use of those principles are visible in the transcripts of speeches by some of the major world leaders involved in the current conflict: Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, and Joe Biden.

The 10 Principles of War Propaganda are:

1. We don't want war, we are only defending ourselves!
2. Our adversary is solely responsible for this war!
3. Our adversary's leader is inherently evil and resembles the devil
4. We are defending a noble cause, not our particular interests!
5. The enemy is purposefully committing atrocities; if we are making mistakes this happens without intention
6. The enemy makes use of illegal weapons
7. We suffer few losses, the enemy's losses are considerable
8. Recognized intellectuals and artists support our cause
9. Our cause is sacred
10. Whoever casts doubt on our propaganda helps the enemy and is a traitor

The results in the training were that, once exposed to this list of principles, the teachers were easily able to identify almost all of the principles reflected in the speeches from each of the sides.

Anti-Exploitation Sentiment

In the confusing landscape of distorted information and manipulation it can be tempting to simply think that the truth must be somewhere in the middle and to give up any serious attempt at moral analysis. One compass we can use to gain clarity is to become adept at identifying exploitation. The anti-exploitation sentiment is "I will not exploit anyone, nor will I allow anyone to be exploited, nor will I allow myself to be exploited."

Exploitation can be obvious, such as a stronger power attempting to dominate a smaller one, or systemic, such as capitalism, or subtler such as exploitation through undermining cultural values. In all these cases, Neohumanism does not encourage passivity but rather taking an active stance towards injustice.

Using Blissful or Non-Blissful Auxiliary to Navigate the Information War

The final step of a rationalistic process, described by Shrii P.R.Sarkar as "blissful or non-blissful auxiliary," will provide more clarity on how to come to conclusions even when in the midst of a morass of propaganda and disinformation. However, this term needs some unpacking. "Auxiliary" means a helping force, so this step means determining whether a conclusion will lead towards "blissfulness" or not, for all. Blissfulness means a state in which a being can express its core, innate nature freely and without restriction. Even the water can be "blissful" if it is pure and free of pollution and thus able to express its cleansing nature. So this ethical filter is firmly rooted in the principle of social equality, that all beings want and deserve that blissfulness.

The Subjective Side of Analysis

So, returning to war propaganda, in deciding the justness or injustice of different positions, we must take into consideration this auxiliary. Information is first analyzed objectively, but then ultimately must also pass through a subjective filter to arrive at a Neohumanist perspective. When evaluating a piece of information, if we can determine that it contains an intention to incite dehumanization of opponents and would increase tendencies toward polarization, division, and even outright hatred, then on the Neohumanist level, the information should not be accepted as is. Further research would be needed to broaden our perspective.

Uniting Humanity to Fight against the Right Threat

Considering the pressing need for all of humanity to work cooperatively in tackling the existential threats facing our species and planet, indulging divisive hate-filled tendencies is clearly counterproductive. Shrii P.R. continuously hammered home the message that Neohumanists must fight against all kinds of divisive tendencies and injustices. He encouraged all to work tirelessly to unite humanity on the basis of our common bonds. When deciding which information to accept or not accept, the most important critical reflection to consider is whether a conclusion will lead towards uniting us all on the basis of justice and equality (samamaja tattva) or would increase division and intolerance. Most of what we read is not designed to foster unity. We must be prepared to work hard to do our own intensive study, analysis, and ethical thinking in order to be able to arrive at well-informed positions that have the power to lead us towards a truly united human society.

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