Chapter 5
Bernays, Horkheimer, and Adorno:
Theory in the Age of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media and 21st century mass communication have changed the technological landscape of marketing and advertising, enabling instant content creation, content curation, and audience feedback. The thought of Edward Bernays can be useful in examining and interrogating today’s media, especially through the lens of Frankfurt School social theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Further, the works Crystalizing Public Opinion and Propaganda are critiqued through ideas found in Dialectic of Enlightenment to give business and PR professionals ethical concepts that may be applied to modern trends in communications.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1734-5.ch005
INTRODUCTION

In the age of social media, propaganda techniques are ubiquitous—whether they appear as user-generated content displayed as the results of invisible (yet personally tailored) algorithms or by means of dialogue and discourse which actively demean out-groups or deify in-groups.

The results of propaganda are often observed post-hoc, that is, after website traffic data is collected or after violent protests take place. Naturally, qualitative data only functions to observe after-the-fact documentation. Other tools may be needed to attempt to understand the effects of propaganda before damage is done. Social theory—seen as distinct from fields such as “community management” or “data science,” which may be “trendy” within the digital age—is a useful interrogative lens which provides an explanatory framework through which the results, justifications, and developments of modern propaganda may be explored. Such exploration clarifies the “why” of certain results of propaganda but may also outline the particular styles of communication and group behaviors which may predict—philosophically, rather than empirically—future actions as a result of propaganda.

Such discussions may initially seem too erudite, or perhaps too tangential to the field work of copywriting, statistical analysis of social media engagement, or expertise in landing page design. However, as in any field, communications and media is bolstered by external information (which may not be in the form of applied domain-specific knowledge). For example, a psychotherapist’s work may be bolstered by an understanding of the classics, as it relates to the narrative arc of human and cultural development. A historian may be aided by a familiarity with chemistry, as the archeological work they may do may be affected by various interactions of ancient materials with their analysis and testing tools. In the same way, one’s expertise in the human-centric fields of social and digital media may be augmented by becoming conversant in the field’s meta-topics: philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. A topic such as social theory covers these grounds, and does so in a way which integrates these fields together so that they are accessible to non-philosophers, psychologists, or anthropologists by focusing on observable, real-world phenomena—the kinds which many marketers may already perceive and participate in, but may not necessarily have the lexicon to describe these experiences. Further, the work of social theorists has often taken a critical view of totalitarian language, overly-controlling organizations, and extremist communication which come through the means of new media. Therefore, social theorists—by the nature of their work and field—are inherently helpful interlocutors in marketing-related conversations concerning trends in increasingly aggressive digital communication.
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