The Origins of the "Brainwashing" Theory. From the Private Lectures of Professor Massimo Introvigne

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Abstract

This article delves deep into the origins of the term "brainwashing" and traces its evolution from a historical backdrop involving unscrupulous psychologists and the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War era. The author explores how people in the academic world perceived "brainwashing" and examines the methods used for it. With a keen emphasis on Professor Massimo Introvigne's lectures and the pivotal role of ideology, the article unveils how this term was employed for the manipulation of public opinion and how it found its footing within the realm of religious extremism. The article then embarks on a historical journey, taking us from the roots of "brainwashing" in Nazi Germany to its subsequent resonance during the Cold War in the United States.

Furthermore, it sheds light on the extended application of "brainwashing" within the realms of religion and anti-cult movements. In particular, it delves into the thought-provoking perspective of Margaret Singer, who categorized religions into two distinct types and raised the enduring question of how to discern if someone has undergone the process of 'brainwashing.' In summary, this article offers a comprehensive historical exploration of the term "brainwashing," underscoring its lack of a solid scientific foundation.

Keywords
brainwashing, religious extremists, counter-cult, anti-cult movements, ideology

Introduction

The term "brainwashing" conjures up images of espionage, cults, and mind control. It is commonly thought of as the process of forcibly manipulating an individual's beliefs, thoughts,

and behaviors to align them with a specific ideology, agenda, or group. This topic was and continues to be an area of research interest today. (Albarracín, 2022; Cai & Mason, 2022; Hassan & Shah, 2019; Pailhès & Kuhn, 2021). Particularly given the rapid development of information technology, it is interesting to consider what role social networks play (Bastick, 2021; Chang & Tsai, 2022; Chen et al., 2022; Ferrara, 2017). In everyday conversations, we often use the term "brainwashed" to describe someone who has been manipulated or influenced in a harmful way (Atran, 2020; Bauza & Bouchard, 2018; Laskin, 2021, Leistedt, 2017). However, it is not widely known that this phrase has its roots in a significant historical event involving unethical psychologists and the Cold War tensions.

The term "brainwashing" can denote a method or tactic involving misinformation or the manipulation of public sentiment. In this context, "brainwashing" involves an effort to shape the beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions of individuals or groups by disseminating disinformation, falsehoods, or prevailing stereotypes. This can encompass the propagation of inaccurate news, manipulation of social media, or the utilization of various approaches to sway public opinion and cultivate specific stereotypes or beliefs. To counteract brainwashing and the dissemination of disinformation, it is crucial to approach information critically, verify sources, and ensure accuracy before believing or sharing it.

Additionally, promoting media literacy is essential to foster a more informed and rational public discourse. The manipulation of public opinion and the spread of disinformation are particularly pertinent challenges in today's information society. To gain a deeper comprehension of these concepts and techniques, it is beneficial to examine key factors and tools employed in their execution. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, serve as convenient channels for disseminating disinformation and influencing public opinion due to their swift dissemination and extensive audience reach. The misuse of bots (automated programs posting messages online) facilitates the widespread dissemination of disinformation, contributing to alterations in the perception of information across a broad audience. Certain media platforms, particularly those with limited editorial oversight, may permit the circulation of false news and dubious content. The application of psychological tactics, such as leveraging emotional influence, fear, and outrage, can amplify the efficacy of manipulation and disinformation. Frequently, these manipulative practices and the spread of misinformation are employed to further specific political, economic, or personal objectives. The algorithms employed by social media and other platforms can establish "filtered bubbles," reinforcing users' inclination to seek only confirming information. To address these challenges, collaboration among society, technology firms, law enforcement agencies, and citizens is essential. Working together can involve identifying and curbing disinformation, enhancing media literacy, fostering critical thinking, and encouraging an unbiased comprehension of information.

In 2016, renowned sociologist of religions, Professor Massimo Introvigne from Italy, was invited by Ukrainian scholar Oleg Maltsev to visit Odessa (Newspaper "Public Surf," 2016). During his visit, Professor Introvigne delivered a series of lectures on the subjects of counter-cult and anti-cult movements. These lectures covered their historical context, the methods employed, and, of course, how religious extremists profit from their activities. Professor Introvigne emphasized that at the core of the activities of religious extremists lies the development of a suitable ideology because everything begins with ideology.

To illustrate the significance of ideology in his lectures, Professor Introvigne drew upon numerous instances of terrorist attacks. It became apparent that explaining the motives behind these attacks was a complex task, and leading scholars discarded notions that terrorists were driven solely by insanity or financial gain, as many of them were financially well-off individuals. Consequently, it was established that terrorist actions were underpinned by a particular idea, often rooted in religious ideology. In the context of religious extremists, the

ideology was closely associated with the concept of "brainwashing" (Newspaper "Unsolved Crimes," 2016c).

Research methodology

The research content involves logically justifying the selection of methodological approaches based on the formulated criteria by the author. This includes interpreting these approaches in relation to potential objects and subjects of research within the specified problem set and organizing the obtained results and conclusions systematically. The primary methods employed include logically justifying the choice of methodological approaches, specifying the selected and relevant provisions of these approaches for the subjects under study, and logically structuring the principles of researching information and disinformation issues. The article's presentation logic for both procedures and research outcomes aligns with the sequence of its implementation.

The methodology ensures a comprehensive acquisition of information about the studied process or phenomenon. The theoretical and methodological foundation of the research is delineated as a collection of approaches, wherein the synergetic and information approach serves as the overarching scientific basis, the axiological approach functions as the theoretical and methodological strategy, and the cybernetic and activity approaches serve as practical tactics for problem-solving in diverse areas related to information and disinformation.

Within the framework of this article, when addressing brainwashing methods, it's crucial to distinguish between the scientific validity of this concept and the strategies employed by individuals, organizations, and social institutions to deceive others for personal gain. When exploring methods of disinformation, let's refer to the research of Oleg Maltsev (2022) and his book "Enigma or Crime: Real Life and Economics," which outlines four distinct methods of disinformation:

- **Crude work**: an unsubstantiated theory where the subject is offered to a person without any research methodology, reliable facts and evidence, without photography as an instrument of scientific research and without validating scientific data. It is a simple statement, a theory or hypothesis, unsupported by anything.
- **Truth with "discount" conclusions.** In this case, the data is conscientiously collected, and the source material is presented. Although collecting data is one part of the scientific work, there are other stages as data processing and conclusions that are not considered. At this stage self-deception begins. Despite having "accurate" raw data, conclusions that are made based on them can be absurd.
- **Clean job**: the best historical example is the work of the Franciscan monks. These people were "experts" in rewriting history: they produced treatises, documents, and other material evidence at the highest level. It could be the case that even 100 years later, most people have no idea that they are dealing with a fake document.
- **Enigmatic Mass**: the subject of research is secret and unknown. For example, UFOs are enigmatic, and it is an exciting topic for many. Since it is impossible to verify the authenticity of their existence, any information "wrapped" under this topic can be fed to people.

All of the above-mentioned techniques, methods, and ways of research are used against people in all areas on a daily basis. Meanwhile, provided a person wants to find out what is actually true and what is not—he can find that answer in most of the cases. But usually, he does not even pose questions as such. Moreover, gaining an understanding of these four methods enables us to view the concept of brainwashing through this analytical lens.

Results

Remarkably, the theory of "brainwashing" has its origins in Nazi Germany and was put into practice by the Munich Institute for Social Research. Another influential institution working on this theory was founded in Frankfurt. German scholars aimed to synthesize Marxism and psychoanalysis, merging the ideas of Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1975) and Sigmund Freud (1999) to elucidate the mass indoctrination of citizens into the Nazi party. Prominent figures in this field included Rudolf Arnheim (1972) and Walter Reich (1976).

Initially, the explanation for these events rested on the belief that the bourgeoisie, alarmed by the Great October Socialist Revolution, sought to establish a political party to safeguard their interests. However, when these scholars observed Nazi parades, it became evident that the majority of participants were not from the bourgeoisie but ordinary individuals with modest means. This raised a new question: how had proletarians aligned themselves with the bourgeoisie, originally believed to have conflicting interests?

During the course of their rigorous research endeavors, German scholars arrived at a profound and consequential revelation: the working-class population gravitated towards and immersed themselves within the folds of the Nazi party due to a sophisticated and intricate process of psychological manipulation. This revelation compelled them to formulate an elaborate psychological theory, aimed at unraveling the intricate web of influence and control that led individuals down this path (Newspaper "Unsolved Crimes," 2016b).

As the sands of time unfurled, scholars hailing from the esteemed Frankfurt School found themselves inexorably compelled to seek refuge beyond the borders of Germany. This necessity arose from their dual identity as individuals of Jewish descent and fierce opponents of the despotic Nazi regime. In their newfound sanctuary within the United States, these erudite minds, imbued with academic zeal, continued to nurture the flames of intellectual inquiry. Some among them even found their expertise enlisted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

However, with the culmination of World War II and the annihilation of the Nazi regime, the demand for their scholarly acumen waned, as the specter of Nazism receded into the annals of history, no longer a subject of immediate concern for the United States. Simultaneously, a seismic shift unfolded on the global stage, marked by a burgeoning geopolitical, military, economic, and ideological standoff between the burgeoning socialist bloc, anchored by the USSR, and the dominant capitalist bastion, led by the United States.

In this pivotal historical epoch, the specialized knowledge and wisdom of these expatriate German scholars, who had already disseminated their teachings to eager American followers, found renewed relevance, as American society sought an explanation for the process of becoming a communist. Without hesitation, these distinguished scholars leveraged the same analytical framework they had hitherto employed to elucidate the Nazi party membership, now applied to unravel the process of becoming a Communist (Newspaper "Unsolved Crimes," 2016a).

The scientific community's focus turned towards the examination of communism in China, where it was referred to as "Maoism." There existed a belief that Mao Zedong possessed a capacity for profound mental influence over individuals, a notion that naturally piqued the interest of American intelligence agencies.

Consequently, two eminent professors, Robert Jay Lifton (1961) and Edgar H. Schein et al. (1961), both disciples of the foundational Frankfurt School, undertook the mantle of researching this particular facet. Driven by their scholarly dedication, Lifton embarked on a mission assigned by intelligence agencies, leading him to Hong Kong to investigate the nuances of mental manipulation on the ground. While Lifton and Shine did unearth elements of psychological influence, they found them to be relatively limited in scope. It is noteworthy to

mention that in China, the pursuit of psychological control often resorted to extreme measures, including violence and torture. In stark contrast to the way these findings were interpreted by the American Congress, the CIA took a different path. CIA operative Edward Hunter, working as a journalist for a Miami publication, began crafting sensational narratives that posited the idea that the Chinese possessed the capability to transform any American into a Communist through the insidious process of "brainwashing" (Hunter, 1951). This metaphor resonated powerfully within American society, leading many to believe in the feasibility of such "brainwashing."

The American CIA even went so far as to produce a fabricated manual on the art of "brainwashing," ostensibly authored by the head of the USSR's KGB. The Church of Scientology was tasked with disseminating this spurious textbook. What stood out was that the so-called "brainwashing theory" lacked a rigorous scientific basis. Nevertheless, the United States harbored genuine apprehensions about the potential for brainwashing. FBI Director John Edgar Hoover vividly illustrated the concept of brainwashing by using a metaphor, likening it to a vinyl record within one's mind. According to Hoover, the Communists would extract this vinyl record from the head, inscribe their desired content upon it, and then reinsert it, effectively altering an individual's beliefs and convictions (Newspaper "Unsolved Crimes," 2016a).

During the Cold War era, a notable cinematic work that emerged was "The Manchurian Candidate" (Frankenheimer, 1962). In its storyline, a young patriot falls victim to Soviet spies who subject him to a three-day ordeal of intensive "brainwashing." The success of this brainwashing is such that he later becomes an unwitting assassin, targeted to eliminate the President of the United States. At this historical juncture, as highlighted by Professor M. Introvigne, two distinct viewpoints were in a kind of ideological clash:

1. The perspective put forth by Professors Lifton (1961) and Shine posited that a person, when pushed to the brink and subjected to violence and extreme stress, could indeed undergo a transformation in their beliefs.
2. The second perspective, although lacking scientific rigor, was skillfully propagated and asserted the existence of a systematic process of "brainwashing." This viewpoint depicted a scenario in which an individual's brain "record" was erased and then overwritten. As a result of this well-crafted propaganda, the term "brainwashing" became synonymous with what the Communists purportedly did, thus influencing the perception of many Americans at that time.

However, in the 1960s and 70s, the term "brainwashing" expanded its scope and found application in two novel domains: religion and anti-cult movements. William Sargant (1957), a psychiatrist and the head of one of Canada's major psychiatric associations, notably employed the term "brainwashing" for religious purposes. Sargant harbored strong antipathy toward Christianity and harbored a vision of reviving Roman Greek faithю He thought that no one can believe such stupidity as Christianity. According to Sargant's contention, one could only embrace Christianity if subjected to a process of "brainwashing" (Sargant, 1957).

In the 1970s, psychologist Margaret Singer emerged prominently in the American landscape and later became a pivotal figure in the anti-cult movement within the United States. Singer had received training from Shine and had also collaborated with Sargant. While Singer presented herself as a university professor, this was not entirely accurate. Although she was a psychologist, she lacked credentials in psychiatry. During a time when anti-cult and anti-sectarian sentiments were gaining traction, Singer introduced a compelling notion. She posited that Sargant's assertion, which implied that anyone embracing any religion had essentially been "brainwashed," was an exaggeration. Singer (2003) proposed a dichotomy of religions into two categories:

1. Religions of the first type were those that individuals willingly embraced of their own accord.
2. The second type encompassed cults and sects, wherein individuals entered due to the influence of "brainwashing."

Singer's viewpoint presented a somewhat peculiar and mutually exclusive logic. On one hand, she contended that one voluntarily accepted religious concepts, while on the other, she maintained that individuals joining sects did so because they had been "brainwashed." This perspective raised questions regarding the blurred boundaries between what constituted a religion versus a sect.

Interestingly, both in subsequent legal proceedings and ongoing debates, people consistently confronted Singer with a fundamental question: how could one ascertain whether a person had been 'brainwashed'? However, despite her persistent inquiry, Singer never provided a definitive, well-structured, or scientifically robust answer to this pivotal question.

In his lectures, Professor Introvigne highlighted that Margaret Singer derived a significant portion of her income from involvement in various legal disputes (M. Introvigne, lecture, October 13, 2016). In one particular trial held in Switzerland, Professor Introvigne and Margaret Singer found themselves on opposing sides of the legal battle. When the judge inquired whether Mr. Introvigne was familiar with Singer's research on sects, Prof. Introvigne humorously responded, "Of course I am. And for more than one year." Subsequently, when asked about his perspective on sects, Introvigne wittily quipped, that any organization for which Singer was paid becomes a sect.

The concept of "brainwashing" has never attained scientific status, and it has failed to be recognized as a legitimate scientific theory. Instead, it has been utilized in different historical periods to address ideological challenges, as observed in its use by organizations like the CIA. Additionally, experts like Margaret Singer have employed the idea not only for intellectual pursuits but also as a means to generate income.

Discussion

In general, the research methodology of brainwashing theory is an informal term employed to describe or criticize approaches that simplify or manipulate information to influence the opinions, beliefs, or attitudes of others. The term is often used to characterize practices such as mass media manipulation, political propaganda, or other efforts aimed at shaping public opinion. The concept of brainwashing originated from methods designed to psychologically influence individuals who have been held captive or subjected to intense pressure, compelling them to alter their beliefs and behavior.

The issue of indoctrination and manipulation of people's beliefs, which may be construed as "brainwashing," is frequently discussed in the modern scientific narrative. There are specific techniques that might fall under the umbrella of the term "brainwashing":

- Disinformation: Disseminating false information or distorting facts to sway people's beliefs and opinions. This encompasses fake news, manipulative photos or videos, and other deceptive means.
- Emotional Influence: Aiming to evoke emotional reactions like fear, anger, sadness, or joy to shape a specific mood or perspective on an issue. Information laden with emotional charge can significantly impact decision-making.
- Conspiracy: Promoting belief in conspiracy theories, often rooted in illogical or unsupported evidence. This can distort perceptions of events and foster paranoid beliefs.
- Group Pressure and Social Conformity: Leveraging social pressure to prompt individuals to deviate from their beliefs and opinions, aligning instead with the accepted views of the group.

- Restriction of Access to Information: Controlling media or the internet to limit access to alternative information and establish a monopoly on the flow of information.
- Repetition of Isolated Messages: Perpetually repeating the same message or ideology, even without evidence or justification, to influence beliefs through sheer repetition.
- Psychological Pressure and Control: Employing psychological pressure, including assurances, intimidation, and threats, to subdue will and mold new beliefs.
- Indoctrination: Systematically teaching a specific ideology or belief system to persuade individuals to adopt it as their own.
- Psychological Manipulation: Using psychological techniques, such as neuro-linguistic programming, to govern the thoughts and actions of individuals and others.

It may also involve elements such as manipulation of information, the use of psychological techniques, control of access to information, political or social pressure, and the continual repetition and reinforcement of specific messages or ideologies to implant them in people's thinking. Moreover, it is believed that contemporary methods in this context also encompass social media and algorithmic filtering. Social media algorithms have the capability to present content to users that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes and opinions. This can lead to the creation of "filter bubbles," wherein individuals are exposed to minimal or no alternative viewpoints.

Newspapers and yellow journalism utilize sensationalized headlines, exaggerations, and distorted events to captivate audiences and create a psychological impact. Media and political propaganda leverage television, radio, and newspapers to disseminate one-sided views and political agendas. Comparison manipulation involves contrasting a chosen ideology or candidate with others portrayed as less attractive, creating an illusion that the preferred alternative is superior. Another tactic involves creating the impression of a threat, fostering the belief that a specific group, idea, or phenomenon poses a societal danger and that only particular measures, often aligning with a specific political or ideological direction, can safeguard against this perceived threat.

The utilization of authority figures, whether influencers, experts, celebrities, or other credible sources, reinforces specific beliefs or attitudes. Microtargeting and personalization leverage user data to tailor messages and advertisements, targeting individuals with customized content designed to shape their thoughts and beliefs. Additionally, psychological pressure tactics, including isolation, intimidation, and other methods, are employed to coerce individuals into changing their beliefs and subjecting them to influence.

Disinformation, indoctrination, and manipulation exert various detrimental consequences on society:

1. Loss of Trust: The proliferation of misinformation and brainwashing erodes trust in the media, authorities, and other information sources, fostering general skepticism and hindering the formation of an objective public opinion.
2. Political and Social Discord: Disinformation fuels discord in society, exacerbates political debates, and contributes to conflict, posing threats to stability and security.
3. Health and Safety: Inaccurate health information can lead to perilous decisions regarding treatment, vaccination, or disease prevention, with severe public health implications.
4. Influencing Elections: Misinformation can be wielded to sway the outcomes of elections, disrupting the democratic process and challenging the legitimacy of the elected government.
5. Loss of Time and Resources: Combating disinformation demands significant effort, time, and resources from the media, law enforcement, and society at large, diverting attention from addressing genuine problems.
6. Violation of Privacy: Certain brainwashing techniques may involve the violation of personal privacy, including the use of personal data to manipulate individuals.

7. Promoting Extremism: Disinformation can fuel extremism, radicalization, and violence within society.

To counter these shortcomings, concerted efforts are necessary from society, government, technology companies, and the media. Identifying, halting, and rectifying misinformation, along with enhancing media literacy and critical thinking among citizens, are crucial components of an effective response.

The concept of brainwashing lacks a specific scientific theory or identifiable authors and sources. Instead, it serves as a term to describe strategies and techniques involving the dissemination of misinformation, manipulation of information, and the use of psychological methods to alter the beliefs and behavior of individuals or groups. The notion of influencing opinions through media and various channels has a long history, and the methods employed can vary depending on the context. These manipulation and disinformation techniques may be employed by political entities, commercial agents, media members, activists, or other actors with an interest in shaping public opinion. Specific strategies such as disinformation, fake news, social media manipulation, psychological influences, and other tactics to influence public opinion are utilized by diverse actors across different spheres to achieve their respective objectives.

In the current era of advanced technology and global information dissemination, various methods play a significant role in misinforming and manipulating public opinion. These include Fake News and psychological manipulation, which involves using techniques to control individuals' emotions, beliefs, and behavior. Another method is trolling, an active engagement in online communities aimed at spreading speculation, aggression, and misinformation, contributing to conflict and division. Additionally, network echo chambers and filtering algorithms on social media platforms can create filtered bubbles, reinforcing users' existing views and limiting exposure to diverse information. Another noteworthy method involves the use of automated programs (bots) for the automatic distribution of posts and comments, creating artificial demand for specific topics and positions. These methods collectively shape the landscape of information influence in our interconnected world.

These methods also encompass mixed truth and lies, where true facts are combined with incorrect or distorted elements to create a favorable sentiment or discredit opponents. Political advertising and influencing elections involve content-sponsored campaigns and influential groups shaping political processes. Anonymity and pseudonyms are utilized to spread misinformation, making it challenging to identify information sources. Information and disinformation campaigns are organized efforts featuring a multitude of exciting news, events, or information items to divert attention from real problems or foster a favorable mood. Financial influence employs resources to support media agencies, political groups, or activists, shaping news agencies. Additionally, the misuse of statistics and data involves presenting information in a biased manner, potentially deceptive or highlighting selective aspects of an issue. These methods collectively contribute to shaping the information landscape and influencing public perception in our interconnected world. Various other methods contribute to misinformation and manipulation.

Combating these tactics necessitates a multifaceted approach involving effective regulation, enhanced cybersecurity, education, media literacy, and open information sharing. Collaborative efforts are essential, with the public, media, technology companies, and authorities working together to mitigate the impact of misinformation on society. The development of media literacy, critical thinking, and effective algorithms for filtering and detecting misinformation is crucial. It requires a united front involving the public, government, media companies, and technology platforms to effectively combat these challenges.

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