

Watching the News: Is A Way Out of the Manipulation of Information and the Construction of Reality Feasible?

Dr Niki Menelaou

Lecturer, Nicosia, Cyprus, Frederick University

7, Y. Frederickou Str., Pallouriotissa, 1036 Nicosia, Cyprus

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Link Tutor of the Institute for Work Based Learning at Middlesex University

Hendon Campus, College House, The Burroughs, London, NW4 4BT, UK

for Frederick University, Cyprus

Dr Theodora A. Maniou

Lecturer, Nicosia, Cyprus, Frederick University

7, Y. Frederickou Str., Pallouriotissa, 1036 Nicosia, Cyprus

Abstract

The construction of reality which results from the manipulation of information has been a core issue for media theorists. The main feature of today's information is the construction of reality aiming at the creation of pleasant and attractive information. One may argue that this manipulation of information its dissemination is the result of a shift of the central and vital focus of the media and especially the traditional ones, from the originality of the event, to its dynamic to produce income. This paper attempts to explore the above issue and additionally propose ways of escaping from the danger of the arbitrary construction of information by taking advantage of the model of digital information, examining, at the same time, its limitations. In this perspective, the essay takes into account, as a case study, the dissemination of information through the Cypriot television, examining in specific the public's opinion concerning the news.

Key words: public, digital information model, television, interactive blogs, the news, manipulation of information.

Introduction

The construction of reality which results from the manipulation of information has been a core issue for a number of media theorists. Pleios (2011) refers to the 'current age of information' that followed the age of 'news writing' when the news was transmitted without any alterations and the age of 'public speech', during which events were described through the lens of political ideology, that is to say the age when journalism was propagandistic. Pleios argues that "the main feature of today's information is 'the construction of reality aiming at the creation of pleasant and attractive information'. Reality is that which is produced within the media and not outside the media".

In other words, it is the elaboration of the news which constitutes the news today and not the actual fact that has taken place in a social, political, geographical or any other setting. One may argue that this manipulation of information before it is disseminated is the result of a shift of the central and vital focus of the media and especially the traditional ones, from the originality of the event, to its dynamic to produce income, from the objective dissemination of information to the commercial model of information.

1. A passive public

Today individuals know reality as that which the media dictate, i.e. transmit. In other words, individuals do not know reality as the objective existence or occurring in fact, but they perceive as 'reality' what is presented by the media. The public are usually passive viewers who do not exercise criticism on what is presented to them, but absorb it, unanimously.

Seldom do listeners or viewers participate in radio or television broadcasts since there are very few programs that are open to citizens for discussion; and since the concern on the part of key individuals at the media has shifted today from programs offering quality and opportunity for education, unlocking of creativity, promotion of cultural diversity and other beneficial practices to whatever offers ‘entertainment’, that is what the public absorbs. That is also what the masses like and instead of fighting this tendency for entertainment with low quality programs and leading people to the correct paths of information and entertainment, the media take advantage of what people like and seek in order to gain high tele-viewing and listenership scores. Subsequently, they sell broadcasting time and pages to advertisers willing to exhibit their products during programs with high viewing or listenership scores. The exploitation of the public can occur through the presentation of low-quality programs; through the money the media earn from advertisements; through the deprivation of the public of quality presentations and important information that would not only enrich their knowledge and expertise but also entertain them.

Referring to the television, a case study of which is shown below, a general description of the term ‘public’ could be ‘the majority of regular TV consumers’ or ‘the un-homogeneous majority of men and women that consume TV programs (Maniou, 2012: 22). In the case of newspapers or internet media, it may be easy to calculate consumer numbers. However, in the case of television we never really know either the size or the width of its public, since all methods used for this purpose are based on representative measurements. In any case, the TV public is the exact social group at which advertisers, opinion leaders and politicians aim, in order to approach it and send their message.

In Cyprus and in other countries where the traditional element is strong and has played a crucial role in structuring current societal trends, there are individuals who feel it imperative to seek their roots and origin in their rich folklore and cultural past, the pillar of their present, future and the evidence of their identity (Menelaou, 2011: 26) Accordingly, in such countries, identity (national, political and other) plays a key role for the individual’s television choices (Maniou, 2012: 55-57).

The responsibility of the media in the preservation and dissemination of tradition is huge but what they have managed to do or at least most of them have managed to do is to shift and disorientate the public’s interest from its past. Such trends, however, exist internationally. The inflow of low quality but money raising cultural products drives the masses and rules their tastes. The average media consumer is satisfied with the low quality performances that the world of disenchantment has provoked. Steward Hoover and Knut Lundby (1977), argue that today’s world appears ‘icy, impersonal, abstract, technical and devoid of warmth and magic’. Progress and the steady improvement of the physical and material conditions of everyday life as well as new opportunities for mobility and choice led to the stripping away of values and of the need to enjoy quality in information.

2. A case study in the Cypriot television public

To take the example of the television as the medium with the advantage of the powerful image, today the majority of programs transmitted are entertainment productions such as reality shows, soap operas and sports with the exception of news broadcasting which itself has added in its flow new elements that relate to the commercial model such as news regarding product launching and the lives of stars.

A research conducted in the Cypriot television public in the last months of 2010 offers a wide range of remarks to this direction. The research presents elements that occurred from 400 personal interviews addressed, through a structured questionnaire, to the citizens of the republic of Cyprus¹ (excluding the areas of the island that are under Turkish occupation). The sample of the research was representative, according to the factors of gender, age and area of living and the sampling methodology followed was stratified random sampling. The average duration for the interviews was 18 minutes, while the answering percentage was 95, 2%, which depicts confidence interval of 5%. Descriptive data are presented below, as well as data occurring through the chi square test, comparing the public’s choice of TV programs and different kinds of news within the news bulletins to the factors of gender and age.

¹ The figures presented in this paper are published for the first time and they are part of a broader research, originally published in 2012, concerning the general viewing habits of the Cypriot television public and especially the public’s opinion concerning the quality of political news presented through television. (see Maniou, Th. (2012). *Television, Society and Political News*, Thessaloniki: Epikentro Publications)

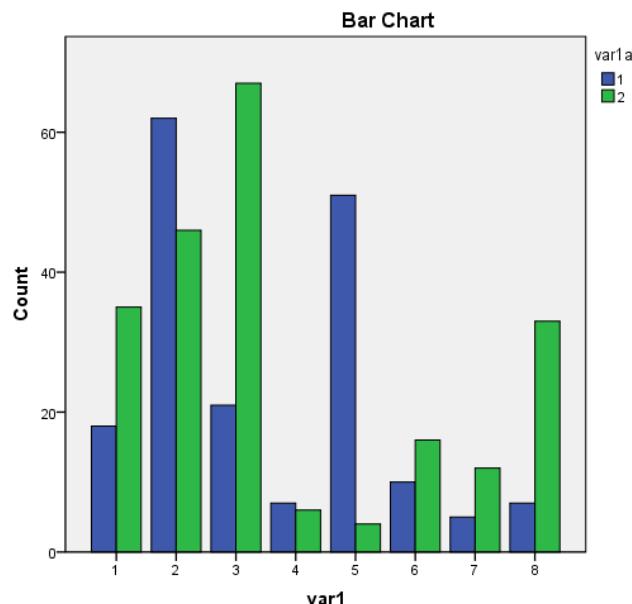
The results show that a remarkable percentage of the public in the Republic of Cyprus (27%) prefer to watch the news, in comparison to other TV programs (see Table 1). Really close to that stand the TV series (22%) with sports programs following (14%). Programs on scientific issues only attract 3% of the public. Trying to compare the informative to the entertainment programs, we can see that the second ones largely overcome the first ones. Talk shows attract only 7% of the public, whereas reality shows attract even less viewers (4%). It is interesting to note that a decade ago, when they first appeared in the Cypriot television, such shows were enjoyed by the majority of the viewers.

Table 1: Which of the following programs do you prefer to watch on the Cypriot TV?

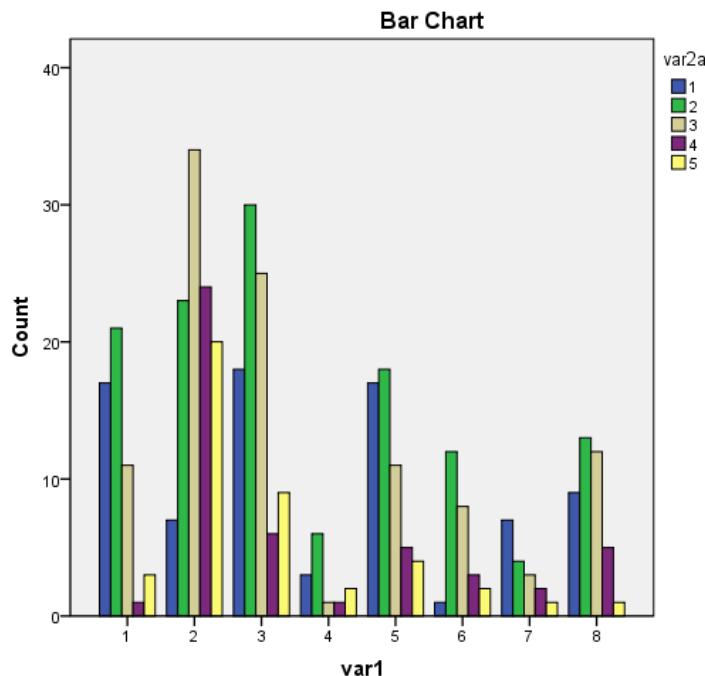
TV series	22%
Entertainment shows	10%
Reality shows	4%
Sports programs	14%
News bulletins	27%
Talk shows	7%
Scientific programs	3%
Movies	13%
Total	100%

Taking into account the chi square test concerning gender, we can see that it plays a dominant role in the selection of television programs ($\chi^2=90.483$, df=7, p= 0.000), whereas women tend to show more interest in entertainment programs compared to men, as depicted in the following figure:

Figure 1



Taking into account the chi square test concerning age and public's choices in the television program, we see that age is also a dominant factor ($\chi^2=66.295$, df=28, p=0.000), since younger people show a tendency towards entertainment programs, as depicted in the figure below:

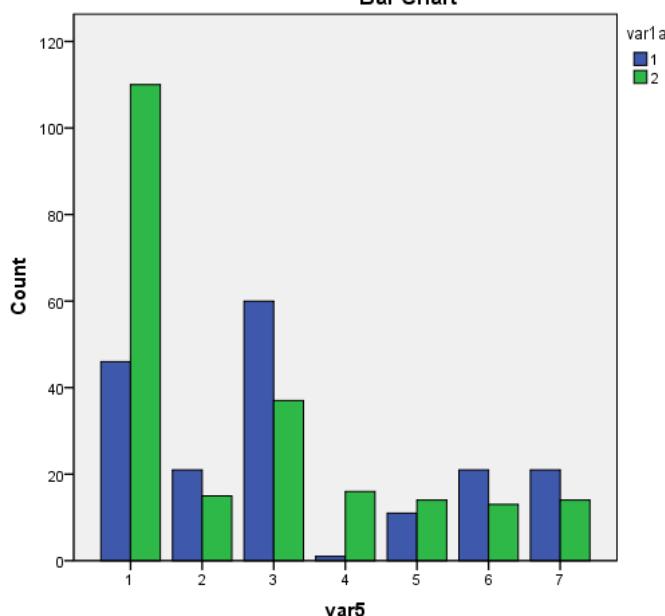
Figure 2

Concerning the different species of news presented within the news bulletins, we can see that the public's interest is focused primarily on social news (39%) and secondarily on political news (24%), due to country's political problem with the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus since 1974. Economic issues only attract 6% (since the economic crisis was not yet visible within Cyprus in 2010), whereas cultural issues only attract the 4% of the public, as it is depicted in Table 2:

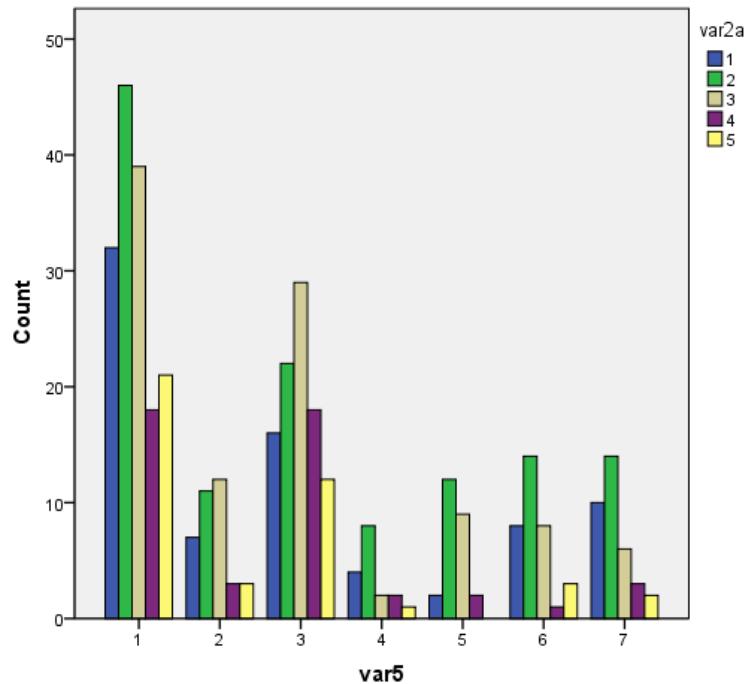
Table 2: The news, within the news bulletins, that mainly concern you and you try to get information are...

Cultural Issues	4%
International News	9%
Crimes, robberies, etc.	9%
Social news	39%
Economic Issues	6%
Political news	24%
Other Issues	9%
Total	100%

Taking into account the chi square test concerning the relation between sex the public's preference of different species of news within the news bulletin, we can see that there is a strong dependency between the two factors and sex plays a dominant role in the public's preferences ($\chi^2=46.396$, $df=6$, $p=0.000$), as we can in the following figure:

Figure 3**Bar Chart**

Taking into account the chi square test concerning age and the public's preferences concerning the different species of news within the news bulletins, we can see that it plays absolutely no role and it is not considered to be an influencing factor ($\chi^2=29.225$, $df=6$, $p> 0.05$), as it is depicted in figure 4:

Figure 4**Bar Chart**

Consequently, in the case study concerning the Cypriot television public, we can see that entertaining issues tend to attract the public's attendance more often than informative ones, whereas women's and younger's people more often than others. Concerning the different kinds of news within the news bulletins, social news come first in the public's preferences, whereas cultural news only attract 4% of the people living in the Republic of Cyprus.

3. An optimistic note from the digital world

To add an optimistic note to the above, there is an argument that one of the positive features of today's society of information is interaction and the end of the monologue. Individuals are no longer passive receivers or absorbers of information but they, too are disseminators of information. Where does this argument stem from?

New challenges have arisen in the field of journalism with the emergence of the phenomenon of the dissemination of information digitally. With the digital model of information, the media appear everywhere and at any time, eliminating the dimensions of space and time. Fluidness in speech is activated by immediate interaction among readers who are constantly engaged in dialogues that are enhanced with the element of people of different standards being brought together as they take part in the same dialogue (Jenkins, 2008: 256-257).

At the same time, new forms of television programming emerged through the digital model of information. As Kompare argues, television's perpetual cultural and industrial instability has extended in recent years into more radical reconfigurations, as the medium has migrated from domestic set to networked node (Kompare:2011, 161-166). Furthermore, it seems to have gained even more power in recent years, since it integrated forms of social media evolving into social TV. Undoubtedly, the Internet has changed the way television is viewed by individuals, marking the so called "third era of television" (Moyer: 2009, 74-79). Moving from the rise of TV networks to cable and satellite TV and moreover – today – to connected TV, the medium deployed mechanisms to preserve its consumers against all odds in the previous years.

Real action on many successful blogs appears in the comment section, where a post can have layers of depth added to it, as readers share their thoughts, ideas and experiences on a topic. Interactive blogs have undoubtedly benefited their participants in the sense that a) they receive large quantities of knowledge and rich information; people who are different as regards gender, religion, work environments, culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or age, meet together in the social setting of the dialogue and their versatile knowledge is unfolded enriching the topic that was set for discussion in the beginning, b) they experience the sense of community which is created by large numbers of readers; interaction amongst readers is somehow triggered by the enthusiasm and the spontaneity of comments and c) they can enjoy continuity in the discussion, as participants can comment on new issues raised by other persons after reading the original news. This continuity creates a sense of commitment to lead the dialogue to an end by deciding on a conclusion.

What is most important, however, is the fact that with the emergence of the digital media the world has managed to get in a continuous mode of information. Information is no longer a one way road as the opportunity for dialogue generated by the digital media ensures that everyone and at any point of time can critically appraise and add food for thought over the significance of information and its dynamic to bring change to existing situations. The meeting point is the blog, where distance is nullified and people from different parts of the world can enter dialogues at points of time that suit them, without them having to rearrange work schedules or family commitments and responsibilities. The freedom of thought and expression is enjoyed equally by every human being.

Additionally, the digital media offers this freedom to individuals with movement disorders, as they just have to be able to write on a computer apparatus in order to meet with others. Even those who may experience different forms of violence or live in hostile environments can find a way to express themselves freely with the use of the digital media.

A crucial aspect of being engaged in such dialogues is the fact that one is not only communicating with others but he/she is also disseminating information on the culture of his or her country or even the culture of the place he/she is living at or the culture of a certain social or professional group he/she belongs to. Thus such dialogues are often successful vehicles of culture, expressing ideas and values that range from individual opinions to much more profound attitudes; such dialogues can be identified as negotiations with other civilizations, with other ways of life, negotiations with secret meanings and codes known only to those who share the same culture. Such is the depth of communication among people that can be achieved through interacting in blogs; and such is the solidarity that can be succeeded among people of so different backgrounds.²

Are blogs a substitute to traditional media methods? How do they affect the individual in particular?

Characteristics like the fact that: a) blogs are decentralized, as they are open to everybody and everywhere, b) they are driven by community and not by profit, since as argued above, participation by large numbers of readers creates a sense of community, c) they are at times revolutionary to classical structures of power and d) they are not subject to editing or in other words they are not subject to management, measure the impact of blogs on the individual.

With blogs, individuals are no longer offered information by the few (the term ‘few’ here is used to represent the traditional Media) for consumption; individuals are no longer passive receivers or absorbers of information but they, too are disseminators of information. To repeat what was said above, information is no longer a one way road. Access to information is enhanced with access to conversation, media consumption is not the main characteristic of the internet and the social networking production but what makes the difference is media production and the freedom it carries along with it. Blogs enable individuals to compete and participate in the creation of the content that is disseminated and this participation has a profound effect. People can privately and publicly engage in debates for thousands of issues and news.

On the contrary, the traditional media that are engaged in a continuous struggle to ‘make an impression’ at any cost very often manipulate information, dramatize the truth, create the illusion that what is presented is absolutely real and requires no further reflection or analysis on the part of its recipient. Getting informed today by traditional media methods does not mean understanding the facts and citizens are now closed up at home accepting passively what is presented to them without circulating among others, without discussing and critically appraising facts. This circulating among others, discussing and critically appraising is substituted by the engagement in digital dialogues.

Digital journalism as it appears on the Internet has however been criticized for its unfiltered quality. It is left to the world to decide what is newsworthy and what is trivial whereas in print media the writers of articles and editors are the ones who decide what to disseminate to readers. As said previously, people can comment on articles and engage in discussions with other readers whom they have never met. And this is the core element of digital journalism.

The so called citizen journalism is rapidly developing with the emergence of digital journalism which lacks editors. Anything important that happens in a community can be discussed by anyone, regardless of education standards. Some companies even use citizen journalists' information when they themselves cannot access certain situations, for example in countries where freedom of the press is limited. Ordinary people can record events happening and send it anywhere they wish, or put it on their websites for the world to see. Other media outlets can then pick up their story and run with it as they please, thus allowing them to reach audiences with information that they might not have otherwise received. Many newspapers have created online sites in order to remain competitive and have taken advantage of audio, video and text linking to remain at the top of news consumers' lists.

² The question “Do digital tools enhance democracy?” has often been raised and an answer given by Clay Shirky in the essay ‘The Political Power of the Social Media, Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change’ in the *Journal of Foreign Affairs*, published by the Council on Foreign Relations, January/February 2011 Issue, supports that “...these tools probably do not hurt in the short run and might help in the long run but they have the most dramatic effects in states where a public sphere already constrains the actions of the government”. Solidarity that can rise by participation in blogs may enhance controversy to state action and press for reform.

In fact, very recently, several noteworthy newspapers and magazines have given emphasis on their online tools, abolishing their printed version, e.g. Newsweek, indicating what is likely to happen in the media industry in the near future.

Additionally, digital journalism creates an opportunity for niche audiences, allowing people to have more options as to what to view and read. With digital journalism, there will always be a new, better, faster, easier way to access information. As a result, even more competition is created while at the same time and as already stated, there are no editors in the field. In the past, it was considered that the Radio's advantage over printed journalism was the breaking of news stories; this advantage is now also offered by the internet though one can argue that the internet cannot offer the breaking of news in the immediate sense that it can still be offered by the radio. A fact that does not change, however is that people are now able to find the news they want, when they want, without having to leave their homes, and in most cases, pay.

News websites are able to update their stories within minutes of the news breaking, providing efficient and accurate reports. Of course, the in-depth analysis of events is still left to the newspapers.

3.1 Limitations

A danger that emerges with millions of people having access to producing and posting information, is that it is often left to the readers to differentiate what is news and what is merely entertainment or just opinion writing and some of them are not in the position to do that. Readers also have to pay attention to the writers of these articles: who the writers are, their credibility, what their credentials are. One cannot ignore the fact that often there is a lot of nonsense posted as news despite the view that 'unfiltered' news is good in the sense that people can actively participate in the information flow (Goode, 2009) and the additional view that unfiltered news may also be good in the sense that no one can determine what are the fresh events that people should be informed about.

In the Digital Journalism Wikipedia we read: "For citizen journalism to be effective and successful there needs to be citizen editors, their role being to solicit other people to provide accurate information and to mediate interactivity among users".

The speed in which information can be posted with digital journalism very often does not allow for errors to be corrected and in some cases does not hinder misinformation by unqualified journalists. The latter are major limitations, whereas they are not the case with print journalism.

Some critics also believe that newspapers should not switch to a solely internet based format, but also continue their printed version. There are many examples of this type of format in many different countries as there is still a considerable percentage of their population, mainly the elder ones, who do not use the internet facility.

Another criticism that has to do with the limits of digital media is that they have made journalism to evolve from very long to very short stories contrary to its principles. In this way viewers are learning that there is no need to tell a long story passing on the message that quick and easy information is common today and accepted. And, of course, transmitting very little information to more and more people results in a vast number of the population being inadequately informed, or at times being informed about trivial facts.

4. A way out of the manipulation of information

The digital media can indeed offer a way out of the manipulation of information as they provide the opportunity to large numbers of readers to participate in discussions and thus either accept or reject what is forwarded to them via the traditional forms of information. However the trend of easy and quick access to information has worked the other way round as well. It has inspired disseminators of information, i.e. the public, to act exactly in the same way and as a result, they themselves provide easy and quick information imitating the way they themselves acquire information. Quality and in depth information is a privilege enjoyed by the very few today; the very few who disseminate it and the very few who seek it and know where to find it.

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