On Visual Propaganda in the Digital Age
An interview with Matteo Stocchetti[1]

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Associate Professor Matteo Stocchetti from Arcada University of Applied Science in Helsinki, Finland, has dedicated his personal scholarship to critical social theory, with expertise in political communication and political science. His research particularly deals with the role of communication in the construction and legitimization of relations of power.

Among many other publications, perhaps his most important ones are *Critical Media Analysis: An Introduction for Media Professionals* (2011)*, Images and Power in the Digital Age: The Political Role of Digital Visuality* (2014) and *Critical Thinking and Cultural Recycling: Research notes for the educational use of bad movies* (2013). Further research interests include visual communication and digital visuality. Within the media landscape, he also examines the role of digital technology in education.

Stocchetti's attention has so far also focused on visual propaganda in the digital age, which is primarily dependent on the blurring of reality or, more specifically, on permeating virtually every dimension of social communication. Furthermore, he addresses a current strong tendency to pursue the spectacle and emotional involvement rather than rational information and our reliance on the visual can easily inhibit critical reflection.

This interview is dedicated to all of these issues addressing specifically the increasing visualization of news material and the fact that the media landscape is now overwhelmed with an increasing amount of images. The interview was conducted during Matteo Stocchetti's stay in the Czech Republic in April 2016. He was hosted by the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague.

Propaganda is nowadays a very popular term, but the definition of it is a bit problematic. Could you briefly describe what this term precisely means?

Propaganda etymologically comes from Latin word *propagare*, which literally means to spread or to extend something, in a form that contains a normative element. So technically, this notion involves the idea of distributing something that is important and not primarily trying to convince somebody. Still, it is one form of so-called persuasive communication, which means communication aiming at persuading someone about a certain state of affairs. Other forms of persuasive communication, besides propaganda, are for example marketing, advertisement, etc. Education is also a form

of persuasive communication – when we tell students how to behave, how to do certain things and how to engage with certain issues in life, we try to persuade them about the convenience of this kind of behaviour. In the term "propaganda", there is an implicit negative moral connotation and there are reasons for this. But we should also be aware that affecting people's mind is also part of the legitimate tasks of teachers and parents. Therefore, I think that the problem does not lie in the effort of changing people's mind, but rather in the intentions inspiring this effort and the direction of this change. Am I trying to persuade someone for his or her own good or for my own interest? Because when we talk about propaganda as a negative phenomenon, like in an authoritarian regime, the idea is that somebody tries to persuade somebody else against his or her own interest.

Media frequently use the term propaganda in association with political regimes of various countries like Russia, the United States, China etc. and are detecting their specific manifestations. But what are the ideological and ontological similarities?

If we take into account the literal meaning, the circulation of important information is necessary everywhere. Every political regime needs some form of propaganda, because it is primarily about distribution of knowledge. The problem is not in spreading or distributing some information, but in the nature of this information, in its quality, relevance etc. Are you distributing falsity, lies? Or are you distributing some sort of empirical truth? There is obviously a big difference between spreading falsity, lies and the truth.

The nature and content of propaganda depends on the type of political regime. Authoritarian regimes use propaganda to convince people to let the leaders do the thinking for them. These regimes usually rely on violence, or the threat of violence, to achieve compliance. One of the tasks of propaganda in these regimes is thus to justify violence and injustice, usually against minorities or other weak elements in society. On the other hand, the main task of democratic propaganda is to convince people to think critically, with their own head. Democratic regimes need propaganda also to teach people to behave in a democratic way, which is not a natural behaviour. The capacity to have an opinion and respect other people's opinion or the exclusion of violence as part of the political competition are forms of behaviour which have to be supported by ideas, information, knowledge.

In the digital age, what are the main characteristics of spreading ideas to gain attention?

I am afraid that a rather dangerous message in the visual propaganda of the digital age is distraction or, more technically, de-politicization. The reliance on the visual can easily perform as a way of involving emotions in ways that inhibit, rather than foster, critical reflection. If the 60s and the 70s was the time of politicization and even private relationships were considered to be a political issue, nowadays I have the impression that the main trend is the opposite. Even when providing information about very political topics, such as labour conditions or the use of violence and military actions, there is a strong tendency to portray them not as political issues but rather as enter-

tainment. This kind of propaganda mobilizes people's feelings and emotions, but tries not to make them think. Watching the news is then not about giving facts and informed opinions but rather about raising emotions. In this way, information is transformed in the so-called infotainment and reporting about important social, political and economic problems is experienced as a spectacle.

Can you demonstrate the actual functioning of this principle on some significant examples?

In the year 2003, the coverage of the US-led invasion of Iraq: on BBC World and CNN International, which we have been monitoring very closely, war was presented as entertainment. Media coverage contained action footage not dissimilar from Hollywood war movies; allied weapons systems were presented through computer generated graphics which advertised the qualities of those weapons for future potential buyers; even the allied military strategy was admittedly broadcasted as part of the 'psychological warfare campaign' as a former US general candidly revealed on CNN (Lundsten & Stocchetti, 2005, pp. 18-19). Through that kind of war coverage, we had all sorts of entertaining information about the war but very little or nothing about its causes.

Another example is now the refugees' crisis. The visual coverage is all about the tragedy and how sorry we should feel because people are sinking in the ocean and living in terrible conditions or, at the same time, about the potential threat – we are shown angry young men who want to get beyond a fence and the policemen are standing on the other side. This is, of course, totally distorting – the reality is much more complex. But the mainstream media are not engaging with the question why these people are running away and especially what are they running away from. It is important to bear in mind that it is a very difficult situation in which Western and European powers, among others, have a lot of responsibilities.

What are the consequences of perceiving information mainly through the emotions?

Important events narrated through attractive images and shocking stories become de-politicized, i.e. put outside the political discourse. News of this kind, and the problems they are part of, cease to be relevant the moment the next pieces of news appeal to another set of emotions. You see a poor child, you feel sorry, [but immediately] afterwards there is some sport news. Later on, there is no trace left, no deeper imprint. The problem with emotional response is that it is strongly involving, but ephemeral – of short duration. By contrast, it takes some time to create an opinion and when it comes to potentially changing it, you want to obtain a clear evidence of why you should actually change it. With emotions it does not work like that, especially with the ones provoked through images. One emotion is followed by another one in a very quick rhythm, which is exhausting; besides, the opinion is still missing, or maybe there is some, but it is shallow. You just feel, but not think that something is right or wrong. And of course, it is also a matter of time – it is much easier to see an image, because it takes just a few seconds, than to read an article. Therefore, it is also much easier to convey emotions rather than to produce a complex opinion.

How dangerous this can be?

This can be dangerous if the majority of recipients are completely susceptible to who-ever comes out with a stronger image or a better visual narrative. There is a lot of space for spreading disinformation and manipulation. And this is a big chance for demagogues. Manipulation is a form of propaganda, in which ideas that are spread are intentionally based not on reason, but on emotions. These are usually fear, anxiety, or hatred. In the digital age, people who are in charge of producing news coverage, raise strong emotions just partly intentionally and for quite a logical reason: media funding, unfortunately, depends on viewing figures, the number of "clicks", or how many times people visit a certain platform.

What are other effects of emotional appeal?

The tendency to pursue the spectacle and emotional involvement rather than rational information is also changing the nature of journalism. In Finland, for instance, senior journalists are losing their jobs; they either retire or they are even fired sometimes, because they are expensive and, partly because of the crisis triggered by digitalization, the newsrooms are no more willing to pay them. Instead, mostly freelance reporters are being hired. These are people who know a little about everything and thus can produce quick pieces. In doing that, because usually there is not enough time to work on deeper matters, they have to rely on information provided by communication ex-perts. Sometimes they just cut and paste from other sources or they publish material which is given to them by communication officers of the agencies involved in that particular story, for example a press release, without editing it. In these conditions, good analysis becomes quite rare, but that is exactly what is needed in the news media – the experts. Professional journalists with expert knowledge in legal affairs, financial business or international politics, for instance, who can interpret important facts in these domains and help the public in understanding what do they mean for our daily lives. This kind of information is required, because if you just tell me the basic fact, it has no extra value for me. I already know it and everybody can know it. But very few can understand the meaning of it. And this applies to everything – governmental poli-cy, international politics, social and cultural events, etc.

That is what Albert Einstein remarked – that any fool can know, but the point is to understand.

Yes, exactly. You need an expert and somebody who is committed to the truth.

Are the journalists nowadays committed to truth?

First we have to ask: what is the truth? This is a very difficult question. The truth is based on many factors such as trust, tradition, scientific knowledge, freedom of speech, and even moral values and ethics. Of course, we do not need to have an ab-solute notion of truth. I mean, we are still just humans and we try to do our best, but it is impossible to be absolutely objective. But there is a difference between trying to do the best we can in the conditions of our job and deliberately giving up certain as-pects. An example is, yet again, the invasion in Iraq in 2003. There was the system of embedded journalism – press people who were integrated in the military units of the

US coalition (this system was not new, it had already been experimented in invasion in Panama and Grenada). With this system, the military control of the press marked an important progress: From traditional censorship based mostly on the idea that control comes from blocking dangerous content to the actual facilitation of the production of content in controlled environment. The justification for this is that war is a dangerous business and the US military wants to support the press without endangering neither journalists nor the success of their operations. The obvious problem with this system is that embedded journalists can report the war only from the point of view of one the parties involved. In a very literal sense, the embedded reporter sees the war from the point of view of those who provide him protection, food, clothing, transport and accommodation; those who take him there and out of there. The inevitable distortions of this system have been repeatedly pointed out[1]. In these terms, we can completely forget about the ideal of objectivity and neutrality. Even if the reporter wants to tell the truth, he can only express it as perceived from this very limited point of view.

However, I do not want to watch a war movie; when there is a war, I want to understand what has brought to that event. In some cases, empirical verification is important, but in the same war, there were the most casualties among journalists and there were a couple of episodes in which the journalists were deliberately targeted by the American military[2]. Then they claimed that they thought they were enemy combats. In the conditions of contemporary warfare, when one or both parties do not have the capacity or the will to perform accurate target identification, if the war assesses that you do not have time to ask, you just shoot, then to seek the truth becomes a very dangerous thing and I do not think that we can ask journalists to be ready to sacrifice their life, so there is a limit in that.

What are other limits of trying to reach the objectivity and telling the truth?
Apart from crises such as wars and their coverage, there are forms of propaganda which are mostly subtle and sophisticated, because they are inscribed in ideas continuously, albeit implicitly, promoted in most of the information we get from mainstream media. Ideological operations. Nowadays, the onslaught of Neoliberalism in education, healthcare, and virtually every domain of social life, is supported by the subordination of human life to the market and the logic of profit. This subordination and this logic, however, are very much given for granted, usually kept implicit, and very seldom problematized.

What is the main message of this propaganda – which idea is being widely spread?
It is especially the idea that everything should be regulated by the market. The main message of Neoliberal propaganda is not (only) broadcasted by mainstream media but by the myriads of texts which populate our mediated world and influence even our interpersonal relations – like when a boss refers to his or her subordinates as 'human resources'.

The overall commercialization, and omnipresent consumerism, reification and alienation, which are intoxicating our societies, impoverishing our culture, and ulti-

mately creating the conditions for inequalities, injustice and conflict on a global scale, are not depending on any specific 'campaign'. Rather, they permeate virtually every dimension of social communication. The digital age supports a promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) and when we talk about propaganda, we do not only talk about propaganda in the domain of news, but in the social domain, which goes from one aspect to another – it is very broad. The fundamental message seems to be that the only relevant values are those which have a market potential; something is important only if it brings profit to someone and is associated with the economic interests. And that is usually damaging for democracy. I do not think that anything like the truth is possible in these conditions.

A rather specific consequence of this state of affairs, among other problems, is that the idea of public service, which is supposed to be independent of economic interests and also the governmental pressure, is now endangered. There are claims from various sides that the public news service distorts the media market and that certain media have an undeserved advantage. Nevertheless, the public service has been established, apart from other reasons, to promote values others than economic ones to avoid the idea that what is valuable has to be referred to the market. The information services just cannot be associated too closely with economic interests. Otherwise we would have the media of the millionaires and we would all suffer from the Berlusconi syndrome.

If the purpose is to promote commercial interest, what strategies do media producers use?
The influence of every ideology, including democratic ideology, depends on the control of the reality: the possibility of controlling the meanings and the practices through which we make collectively sense of what is happening around us. This is crucial. But in the age of digital media, as many have noted, the notion of the real itself becomes problematic. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard used the notion of 'perfect crime' to describe the substitution of the real by its mediated representations (Baudrillard, 2007). Maybe to that I could add that these mediated representations are not ideologically neutral but reflect the main tenets of the hegemonic ideology, which are now the bits and pieces of the Neoliberal project. This propaganda is largely based on blurring of the reality to suggest the idea that certain things are fine as they are, that certain ideas are actually legitimate.

In this strategy, there are at least two elements, one positive and one negative. The negative element consists in the blurring of reality and in the effacement of the political: in the explicit invitation to clear our lives with any concerns about power and citizenship and enjoy 'buying power' and consumers' identity in their place. This aspect is negative in the sense that the goal of manipulation here is to negate: to create a vacuum which prepare the grounds for positive content. The main positive element is the logic of the market as the only reasonable point of view through which one should make sense of reality. Through this kind of propaganda, for example, some people come to believe that social justice is either utopian or even damaging for individual freedom; that the measure of individual entitlements should be in direct proportion with the size of one's fortune or that the 'free market' is necessary for demo-

cracy. That the notion of justice, for example, is equivalent with the market. So in the end, what is justice is decided by the balance of economic forces, which is not valid.

In this context, what is the role of the means of communication and how does the principle of distributing information work to support specific ideas and enforce certain images?

The means of communication are even more intrusive. Everything is stuck in your own private mobile, and you get personalized messages which are personalized based on the data provided by legal spyware that track our digital behaviour. The big data business is an influential force in support of digitalization and this business is for the most part about control, not democracy or emancipation. It is about the business of giving to a relatively few the informational infrastructure to control the many. The paradox is that even though we think that because we have more media, there is more pluralism, if we look at the ownership structure, we notice that today there are even fewer service providers than ever before, controlling almost the totality of means of communication. What this means, in practice, is that, for example, the same images circulate on every possible device one may have access to. So I think the overall impact is homogeneity. The idea of pluralism is further discredited by the so-called 'Internet bubble' and the fact that when seeking information, the majority of people look for information and opinions confirming their original ideas and preferences rather than critical perspectives.

Is it intentional? If so, what is the motivation?

On that level, I think this is not unintentional. There are elites who benefit from the idea that education should be privatized, that public service should be eliminated, that we do not have the same entitlements etc. These people push you that undemocratic ideology because they occupy a position of power and have more power, more resources, more wealth and they are afraid of losing their privileges. The motivation is not only the greediness. It is especially about fear: the fear fed by the awareness of the fundamental injustice of the order they promote. The more this order shows sign of crisis, the more criticism is voiced from many quarters, the more aggressive their stance becomes. As we know, fear and aggressiveness are close companions and increasing inequalities fatally lead to greater fear and greater aggressiveness. But it is also the fear of the elites; they have some kind of a guilty complex, I would say, unconscious remorse, and thus they are afraid of being punished. So there is huge fear, but it is fear which is interpreted in defence. So instead of saying: let's give some of our privilege away to make society a little bit less unjust, the idea is to protect the fortress and do not let anybody else to get in. And propaganda is functional to preserve this state of affairs and to preserve the relations of power.

Can this situation be changed? How can we protect ourselves from being manipulated by visual media?

Education is the answer. Humans are intelligent; we learn even when we are not aware of learning. You can cheat us once, not twice, or not in the same way, at least. But what is true is that in order to use information properly, to 'see through' the confusing ef-

fects of manipulation to develop critical ideas, people have to be trained. Critical social theory is a very powerful tool which contains some very powerful concepts, debates which are useful. Some ideas should be for everybody. You do not have to be an academician to be able to practice critical thinking. So as long as we have schools and especially public education, we should take advantage of that. What we should be teaching is basically the capacity to think in critical terms, which means to understand the nature of the relations of power that lay underneath relations of meaning. To be able to understand what is said, written, communicated, think with our own head; to have moral values, to compare information, to put the pieces together. I would say that there is more and more awareness that there is something deeply wrong with the Neoliberal project. There is more awareness that capitalism and democracy are incompatible ideologies but influential forces in our societies are inclined to sacrifice the latter to preserve the former. However, we should not give up democratic ideals; we cannot come out with better ideas than the democratic ones but now we seem to ignore them. And this is the challenge for educators. The battle is not yet lost.

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