



From Don't Look Up to Reality: The Manipulating and Manipulated Media in the US

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How to cite this paper: Dahao Li. (2022) From Don't Look Up to Reality: The Manipulating and Manipulated Media in the US. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 6(3), 328-333.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2022.09.005

Received: July 7, 2022

Accepted: July 30, 2022

Published: August 17, 2022

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Abstract

The black comedy film *Don't Look Up*, which is a great success in 2021, sharply insinuates the absurdity of American media in the post-capital era, reflecting that the American media is manipulating the society as well as being manipulated, ironically but truthfully. Currently, media penetrates individual opinions and impacts the entire civil society in the modern US. The contents and concepts carried by popular entertainment and the mass media fill people's daily life and spiritual world. Inspired by the realistic satire in the film *Don't Look Up* and the reality in not only the US but most countries all around the world in the post-capital era, this paper endeavors to emphasize how American media manipulates the crowds invisibly through a comparative analysis of historicity and realism, particularly exposing the historical change in its function—from information dissemination and interaction to information blinding and ideas manipulating. Also, this paper manages to illustrate various substructural factors like Profit-seeking of Capital Markets, Political Game, Populist Social Sentiment and some other reasons, which manipulate the media from the dimensions of economics, politics, society, etc.

Keywords

American media, manipulating and manipulated, impacts, substructural factors

1. Introduction

The film *Don't Look Up* has been a bit hit, whose satiric presentation of the depressing reality and obscure critics bring people laughter as well as reflections. Exaggeratedly telling about how Americans responded to the upcoming catastrophe which could bring the extinction of human beings, *Don't Look up* candidly reveals the accumulative deception and harm from American media imposing on the ordinary in today's reality. In order to seize specific interests, the media manipulates Americans who don't seek facts themselves but mechanically follow the so-called mainstream. While at the same time media itself is deeply manipulated by diverse powers. This has become a more and more salient contradiction in the US nowadays, which brings people great concerns. Then the questions are as follows: how American media manipulates nearly the whole civil society? What reasons cause the media itself be-manipulated? Based on the film *Don't Look Up*, this paper is trying to put forwards the objective and convincing answers towards those relevant questions.

2. The Long-term Media Manipulating: from the past to the present

In film *Don't look up*, an impressive scene is when a quasar about to hit Earth appears in the sky that could be seen directly from the ground, people just keep their head down and fix their eyes on the screens. It seems that Americans no longer trust the facts surrounding, but instead thoroughly counted on every word of the media so as to doubt the warns from professional astronomers as well as the certified truths. Back to the reality, from the past to

the present, American media has kept manipulating the whole society, not only connecting each other but also re-shaping people's thinking and perceptions. Evidently, the long-term advancement of media deeply changed American ordinaries in nearly all aspects and maintained manipulating invisibly.

2.1. Information Transfer and Value Shaping in the past

Thanks to the invention and popularization of printing press, for the first time, humans had the ability to copy information in large quantities. After that, the publishing industry in America emerged in a grand scale and developed at a dramatic high-speed, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. The scope of information exchange was no longer limited to a specific area like villages or towns from then on. However, information transfer broke through the limitations of space, covering every corner in the US and beyond (Beyond Summits, 2020). Information was recorded relatively rigorously on newspapers, brochures etc., printed and sold cheaply to the public. Consequently, it brought individuals swift and extensive channels to spread information.

While with time going by, American printing media became a powerful information transferring tool as well as a discourse structure, which was a famous conception created by Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Neil Postman, 2005). Then what ought to be emphasized is that information was gathered, organized, illustrated and transferred in a serious and rational way at that period. Correspondingly, public communication was more objective and calmer in the same way. For this reason, when conventional American Media like publishing Industry and republic of letters led America into "The golden age of Reading", American spirits and values had deeply rooted in people's minds, and was embodied in rationality, freedom as well as the pursuit of justice.

The construction of American values evolved almost simultaneously with the transformation of the media. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American film and television industries were booming, which became an emergent form of American media with both popularity and influence. Besides, the 1930s and 1940s were the golden age for American broadcasting industry's development (Jerry L. Yeric, 2001). One key function for value shaping of broadcasting media was even more prominent. The government was aware of the profound impact of American film, television and broadcast media on ordinaries' values in the meantime. As a consequence, the ideological construction and value-shaping implemented through a mass-entertainment approach in the US gradually. Viewed in a larger dimension, American media such as Hollywood and Voice of America also played the role as powerful tools for the United States to promote and export American ideas, spirits and values to the world.

2.2. Information Blinding and Ideas Manipulating at present

In film *Don't Look Up*, astronomers find out the horrible truth that a comet is about to hit the earth directly soon, then they decide to use mass media as a seemingly ideal approach to inform and warn the American authority and the public at the same time. However, it backfires. The media renders the proved fact a lie or a joke, which blinds people's eyes to see the reality. Irresponsible comments fight down the truth when ordinaries are fascinated by celebrity gossips but dismissive of the real catastrophe to come. While unfortunately, those are not just satires in the movie, but true portrayals of current American society—Information Blinding and Ideas Manipulating of American media at present. Generally speaking, information blindness indicates "false information" and "Information Cocoons"^[1]. These two major aspects in today's American context, through which the intension of manipulating people's ideas to serve for different interest-groups could be achieved.

First of all, "false information" refers to the information that is not incorrect but is rather easily misunderstood, resulting from artificial manipulation of facts for specific purposes by imposing causality, over-association, garbling quote out of context and other idiomatic means. Take the US election campaign as an example, both sides of the competition try hard to dig out each other's small flaws and alter the narrative on purpose, making the information no longer accurate, objective, complete or impartial. Then piles of "false information" are released on the mass media, profoundly influencing and manipulating the voters' ideas. Despite that what is mentioned above could be viewed as some individual malignant phenomena, American media's entertainment instinct is a more general contributor to producing and spreading "false information".

Second, what should be paid highly caution is the worsening tendency of being trapped into the "Information Cocoons" for Americans at present. To be specific, each kind of media has its corresponding target audiences. And under this circumstance, people with specific positions and preferences may only receive information from a rela-

^[1]"Information Cocoons" is a conception raised by Harvard Law School professor Sunstein. It illustrates the phenomenon that nowadays people passively accept limited types of information and eventually limit themselves in this complex information society.

tively single channel. Through filtering specific information and targeting individuals, American media has constructed large amounts of “Information Cocoons” for the ordinaries, in which they get and learn what they prefer but have no opportunities to see a complete whole world. Hence generation of ideas for an independent individual is not of his/her own free will but American media’s invisible manipulation, meeting the appetites of capital, politics and many other realistic factors, which will be discussed specifically in the following content.

3. America’s Substructural Factors of Media’s being Manipulated

The film *Don’t Look Up* chooses to show the ridiculous realistic contradictions in a dramatically satire way, which reflects a helpless and powerless self-mockery in front of the highly stable and unshakable system in the US. And it goes the same for the whole American media in modern times. The media can no longer defend for the principles of objectivity and fairness. And it is being trapped into a great dilemma of fighting against the powers of capital, politics social sentiment and others. The conclusion can be safely drawn that manipulating the public is not the instinctual or initial will of American media itself but, essentially, the consequence of media’s being manipulated by several substructural factors of American reality.

3.1. Profit-seeking of Capital Markets

As it’s known to all, the main sources of income for American media are advertisers and capitalists. According to professional research data, the American media industry is very profitable, and its ultimate benefit outputs as well as prospects remain well above the market average despite in recession. Some relevant charts below will help to illustrate the phenomenon:

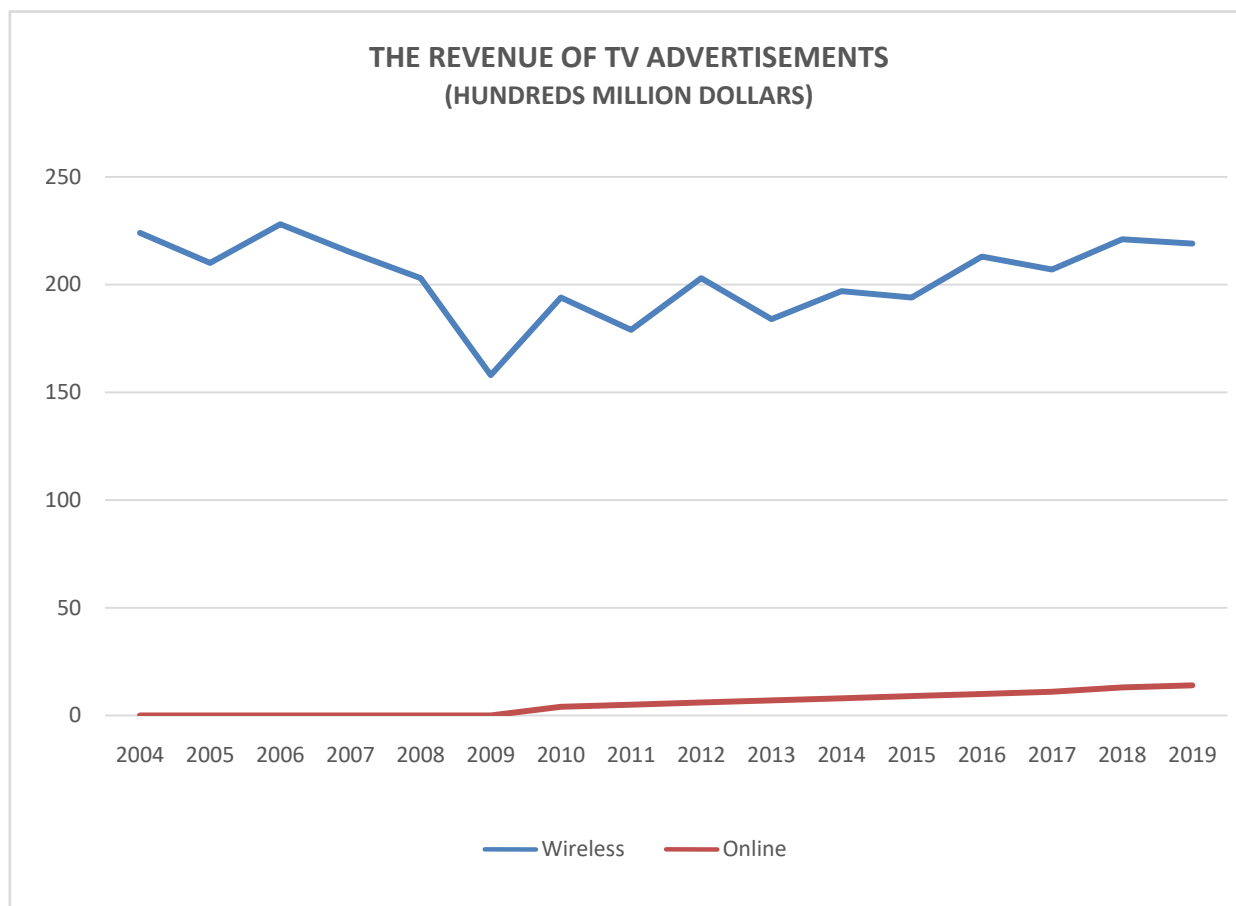


Figure 1.The chart^[2] above reveals the great business interests made by conventional media, TV.

^[2]The data used by the charts in this paper originated from BIA/Kelsey.

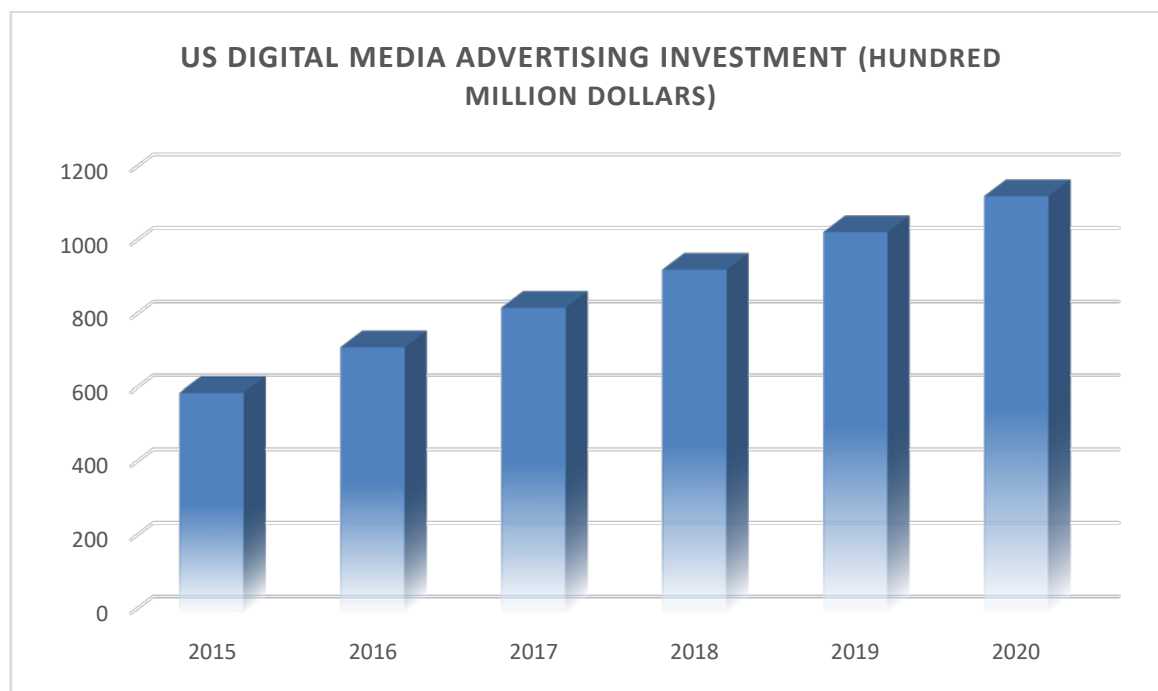


Figure 2. This chart³ reveals the great business interests made by emergent digital media.

Consequently, the capital market and American media have built up a firm cooperation relationship. Started early, the capital operation of media has become highly mature, and the manipulation of capital forces towards American media has become irresistible. For instance, *Amazon* founder and CEO Jeff Bezos purchased *The Washington Post* for \$250 million in 2013 and after that *Amazon* signed a \$600 million deal with the CIA for “cloud computing” services. According to Bezos himself that *Amazon* could win more contracts in the future. This shows perfectly how capital groups manipulate the media in cooperation with federal authority to grasp the highest profit. Meanwhile, to a certain degree, the pursuit of profits and fierce market competition will challenge and even seriously damage the professional ethics of American media. On one hand, the media will increasingly succumb to the pressure of capital and cannot fully adhere to the principles of fairness and comprehensiveness; on the other hand, the media’s value orientation will also be affected by capital competition and the weak in society groups will be also marginalized day by day.

3.2. Political Game

As we could see in film *Don’t Look Up*, when the president of the United States hears the astronomers’ suggestion of public disclosure and immediate response, the first thing flashes through her was the concern about her upcoming campaign and precious votes. Under the political pressure from the White House, the government or mainstream media refused to offer any positive help but chose to describe the astronomers’ finding as conspiracy theory. Back to the reality, American media has strong political attributes. Though the United States has endeavored to conceal the ideological constrains it posts on the media, in the meantime to publicize the media-independence and freedom of speech, American media cannot get rid of the manipulation of political powers as a matter of fact.

From the perspective of American politicians, political influence is largely based on the control and use of information. They will always use various means to manipulate the media for specific political interests. As a consequence, in most cases, American media just functions as a flexible tool in fierce political game, to avoid open power struggle. What’s more, media can be used to manipulate public opinions. Example could be the US election in 2014. Facing people’s reasonable criticisms against the Iraq war, Bush Jr.’s government issued warning signals of terrorist attacks one after another and the authority manipulated the media to create tense atmosphere in order to divert people’s attention and imply the rationality of the war. Similar political manipulations take place in Wash-

^[3]The data used by the charts in this paper originated from EMarketer.

ington almost every day and the American media seems willingly to cooperate.

To put it in a nutshell, when American media, relying on private capital, tries to gain popularity and maintain survival, it must accept political “regulations”. Or in another accurate word, political manipulation for defending so-called national security^[4] and actually pursuing political interests.

3.3. Populist Social Sentiment

The historical moment when former president Donald Trump won the election in 2017 marked the general decline of American democracy, foretelling the continuing rising of populism^[5] in American society. Of course, the film *Don't Look Up* reveals its critic towards the fact that electoral democracy is being kidnapped by populism in the US (Chen Haibo, 2016).

As it's widely acknowledged that, although the collective passion of the masses is irrational, lack of thinking as well as impartial, it has become something from which politicians and capitalists reap their practical benefits. Then with the acquiescence of the public, the populism starts to get its greater edge with time moving on. To be concrete, when the collective passion with few critical thinking influences every individual, it'll eventually transfer into a specific kind of civil awareness called populist social sentiment, which is taking place in the US currently. While that is something seems irreversible in a short period of time. What's more disappointing is that facing these salient threats of populist social sentiment, American media has no other choices but to obey the spiritual or emotional needs of their target groups, providing ordinaries selected information accordingly. For that reason, tidbits of celebrities, confrontational gender issues and racial issues have seized the media's attention more and more frequently. It seems to become a must for American media to choose the appropriate topics, contents and standpoints which are coherent with the populist social sentiment.

Developed from the 1960s until today, the populism has gone through a tortuous development process. Candidly speaking, the populist social sentiment is a negative factor separating the America society, which strongly manipulates the mass media in the US for its great influence on the ordinaries.

3.4. Other Reasons

Apart from the substructural factors already discussed above, it lies some other reasons to be talked about. To begin with, the special characteristics of modern American media should be taken into consideration in comparison to the conventional media. For one thing, as it is mentioned by Neil Postman in book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the modern media is disguised as a more secretive despotism. This means that at the time when media entertains people, it causes the alienation of people's spiritual distance, and American life have become more and more symbolic and even turn into accessories of modernization in some ways. For another, the combination with fast-advancing technology makes American media overload with unorganized information. Furthermore, the current transfer of information is so rapid and fragmented that people's dependent on media is deepening constantly because they are seldom available to construct complete and systematic structures of knowledge by themselves.

In addition, the asymmetry between fast shift of the contours of American media and relatively lagging regulatory system is a significant reason as well. A recent Pew Research poll^[6] found that 71 per cent of 18-to-29-year-olds in the US treat the internet as their primary source of news,^[7] which makes the FCC's^[8] job a lot harder (Huang Yuanji & Kuang Libo, 2018). While the FCC is still embarking on its second try in overhauling the highly contested media ownership rules in the US while no substantial progress has been made. The shift of current American media is too rapid to be well handled by official regulations, and the result is that many loopholes of it

^[4]Here the writer mention national security is to emphasize that almost every administrative manipulation is implemented by the name of defending national security, which guarantees its political function and meanwhile gives it full legitimacy.

^[5]Populism first developed in the 19th century. The term refers to a range of political stances that emphasize the idea of the people and often juxtapose this group against the elite. This is the Reference from Wikipedia.

^[6]The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan American think tank (referring to itself as a "fact tank") based in Washington, D.C.. It provides information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends shaping the United States and the world.

^[7]America's media rules the FCC should be in no hurry to change regulations: [LONDON 1ST EDITION]. (2006, Jun 26). Financial Times Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/americas-media-rules-fcc-should-be-no-hurry/docview/249905351/se-2?accountid=13151>.

^[8]FCC: Federal Communications Commission. The Federal Communications Commission regulates interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories. An independent U.S. government agency overseen by Congress, the Commission is the federal agency responsible for implementing and enforcing America's communications law and regulations.

may be exploited by a variety of safeguards and incomplete administration indirectly contributed to the media being manipulated.

4. Conclusion

In current era of informatization and modernization, the chaotic and absurd situation of American media shown in film *Don't Look Up* is not something exaggerating. When some of Americans get to realize the danger of being manipulated by the media, and the rest of them still keep numb to it.

Individuals should not be carried over by the collective wave. As everyone is born with the rights to know the truths as well as think and speak freely following his/her independent will. However, the fact that American media is manipulating ordinary people and meanwhile being manipulated by various powers in society is taking away such rights from Americans. This problem needs to be confronted and addressed in the near future through understanding the fundamental logic of media's manipulation and balancing the game of politics, capital, society and media in today's America.

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