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COE 299

1 May 2019

Film and Media Manipulation

Film and media are manipulated daily. Some people are more aware of it than others. This paper discusses the different areas of media that are manipulated and how people perceive this manipulation. Through analyzing perspectives found in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, the topic can be better understood. This paper uses psychology, sociology, and film as different perspectives, all of which support the existence of manipulation in film and media. While they approach the issue differently, these three disciplines come to conclusions that confirm manipulation in different areas of media such as reality television and documentary film. Two studies are discussed in the natural sciences portion that analyze viewers' perceptions of manipulation when shown the same media within different contexts or with varying degrees of manipulation. This paper discusses how people are affected by film and media manipulation and what they think of the matter.

Natural Sciences

Psychology is the natural science that addresses this issue, which fits within the natural sciences' goal of better describing and understanding natural phenomenon because it has to do with the brain and mind. Something in the brain makes viewers feel differently about the same media when it is edited differently or simply shown in a different context. Media manipulation is powerful, and viewers' minds shift to suit the situation without second guessing it. Daniel

Barratt, Ph.D., et al. and Tara Emmers-Sommer, Ph.D., et al. published articles discussing two studies supporting this issue.

Both natural science studies discussed in this paper support the existence of this issue and share a unified perspective on the topic, but they approach it differently. The idea that people perceive things differently based on the context in which they are found is supported in each. In the first article by Daniel Barratt, Ph.D., et al., the goal of the study is to find out if the Kuleshov Effect, “the capacity for emotional contexts to influence the viewer’s interpretation of a neutral face” (Barratt 848), really exists. The experiment presents the participants with sets of three still frames. For each of the sets, the first and third frames are the same “neutral” face, while the second, or middle frame, presents the situation in a different context. The article describes this order as “a close-up of the target person’s neutral face (glance shot), followed by a view of the object or event that the target person was looking at (object shot), followed by another close-up of the target person’s neutral face (glance shot)” (Barratt 854). The object shot is the frame in the set that presents the context of the neutral faces. When presented with the different contexts, participants could choose one of six conditions. The possible conditions were happiness, sadness, hunger, fear, desire, and a null condition. The purpose of this experiment was to see if the participants would match the neutral faces with various emotions, or conditions, based on the context in which they viewed them. This would support the existence of the Kuleshov Effect as well as the idea that film and media are manipulated daily to make viewers perceive things in certain ways.

In the second article by Tara Emmers-Sommer, Ph.D., et al., this issue is addressed through the use and manipulation of film. The participants in this study were split into four groups consisting of three treatment groups and one control group. The three treatment groups

viewed the film *The Accused* with different degrees of manipulations, while the control group viewed the film, *Free Willy*. The sexual assault in *The Accused* was manipulated to show different extents of it and varying degrees of violence among the treatment groups. The film was either viewed uncut, mosaic-ed or edited. The first group viewed the film uncut, so they saw the highest degree of sexual violence. The second group viewed the film mosaic-ed with digitized editing, so they could not see exactly what was going on. The third group viewed the film professionally edited without any sex or violence. All three treatment groups viewed the same film with different degrees of manipulation and were expected to form different attitudes toward women and film editing as a result, thus supporting the idea that film and media are manipulated daily to make viewers perceive things in certain ways.

The research appears to be sufficient and supportive of the issue of film and media manipulation but could be improved with better sample groups. The experiments are valid and repeatable, but they have the potential to bring back stronger results. The first article showed positive results supporting the existence of the Kuleshov Effect, but the results could be more confident if the sample size were larger than 36 participants. The demographics were appropriate, but there could have been a larger group. The second article showed more positive results supporting this issue, but again the experiment has room for improvement given the sample group. Out of 174 participants, 120 of them were women. Emmers-Sommer emphasized, “the significant differences appear to be more a function of participant sex than of the group to which the participants were randomly assigned” (691). The study could have potentially brought back different results had the sample group been split equally between men and women.

Natural science would benefit significantly from further research on this topic. The second article brought to attention that although “the study of attitude change due to viewing

films shown in their original form has been done for some time, the research on attitude change that result from film edits is relatively new” (Emmers-Sommer 687). There are a lot of unexplored areas in film manipulation and so much left to research. Researchers may be able to determine why our brains are so prone to believing in the manipulation even when we know what we are seeing is not entirely accurate. It would be interesting to see the results of a study focused on reality television such as *The Bachelor*. The viewers are typically led to believe one individual is the “bad” person to watch out for because of how that person is portrayed throughout the show. If someone had access to the footage and could manipulate it in a different order or way to present certain people in different lights, viewers would most likely think whatever they thought they were supposed to think about the people on the show. If a “good” person were presented negatively by highlighting only their worst moments in the show through manipulation, the viewers would perceive them this way because the editor told them this person was bad. In reality, everyone on the show could be behaving similarly, but one individual can easily be singled out and “attacked” with proper editing. Reality television is an example of film manipulation at its finest.

Social Sciences

Sociology is the social science that addresses this issue. Sociology fits within the social sciences’ goal of better understanding human relationships and behavior within society because its primary focus is social relationships and problems. This paper addresses the effects that film and media manipulation have on viewers with supporting sources from Lisa K. Lundy, Ph.D. and colleagues, and Jelle Mast, Ph.D., which both approach this issue from a reality television perspective.

Both social science articles discussed in this paper support the existence of film and media manipulation and share a unified perspective on the topic. In the first article by Lisa K. Lundy, Ph.D. and colleagues, college students were asked about their reality television consumption, why they watch these shows, and what they think about the content. A recurring theme in the data was participants underestimating their consumption of reality television. Most participants said the reason they watch reality television shows is to escape their own reality for a moment or live vicariously through the characters in the shows. Participants said they watch reality television shows for entertainment, and many eventually reach a point of investment where, “they (the participants), or their friends...become addicted to following the characters and situations in RT (reality television)” (Lundy, et al. 215). These young adults do not realize how often they watch reality television, because at a certain point, they do not think about the fact they are watching it. They become so invested that they just want to see what happens next in the story. Looking at it from a social aspect, participants have admitted to watching some reality television “in order to feel familiar with what others were talking about and to be able to participate in the conversation” (Lundy, et al. 219). Some viewers only watch to stay in the loop. Many participants know what they are watching is not entirely real, but they continue to watch for entertainment purposes. One participant confessed, ““It’s pure entertainment and it may not be real but it is funny”” (Lundy, et al. 215). Going along with this idea, the results of the study showed, “most of the participants indicated that many of the shows do not reflect reality anymore” (Lundy, et al. 217). This research supports the idea of film manipulation in reality television shows. While many viewers know what is happening on the screen, they still watch regularly and engage in it despite this. In this article, reality television overall is viewed as a

“misrepresentation of reality” (Lundy, et al. 218). Some aspects of it are real, but there is blatant manipulation on screen.

In the second article by Jelle Mast, Ph.D., the realness of reality television is discussed. A creative director opened up about how the term “reality” has become a new genre in itself, where the situations portrayed on screen are the opposite of reality. This creative director describes the genre by saying, “‘It’s actually the other way round, it’s not reality...it hasn’t been called ‘reality’ until it became a commercial genre, and more specifically a game format’” (Mast 903). The reality television genre created an inaccurate perception of reality. Van Leeuwen argued that editing in reality television could bring about problems, as the editor has the power to create a “preferred reality” for viewers rather than portraying the actual reality (qtd in Mast 912). Ytreberg explained that scripting in reality television shows is different from fiction because instead of specific dialogue, the script “implies the skillful anticipation and careful managing of a ‘reasonably expectable’, and thus preferable, scenario of events” (qtd in Mast 905). This supports the idea that reality television is manipulated and only parts of it are real. In addition, participants on reality television shows are often given specific roles based on the way they are portrayed in the show. More goes into choosing candidates than what seems. Mast explains that there are specific character types program makers look for, and as a result “yield(ing) candidates that appear neither too ‘polished’, nor too ‘grey’” (908). This is another idea that supports the issue of film manipulation that diminishes the actual reality of reality television. According to Gatfield and Hargrave, many audiences today often anticipate that material on screen will “be edited in a way that makes a story” (qtd in Mast 912). People watch reality television expecting it to be manipulated in some way.

The research is sufficient and supports the issue of film and media manipulation in reality television shows. I believe there could always be more research done on entertainment and reality television as it is continually growing. There is supportive evidence of the existing issue, but social science would benefit from more research on the topic. People are beginning to realize what is happening in the shows they know and love, but the knowledge does not stop them from watching. It is important that viewers know the “reality” they are watching has been edited and is only partially reality. Reality television shows, new and old, have gained significant followings, for the most part. With that said, the existence of manipulation and unauthentic reality is not visibly hurting the industry.

A small social science project was crafted in the form of a survey focused on reality television shows. The results compliment the research on this topic. The survey consisted of 14 questions. Of the 14 questions, three were based on demographics, three on user activity in terms of watching television, six on ABC’s *The Bachelor*/*The Bachelorette*, and one on reasons behind watching reality television shows.

Of the 41 participants, 39 were female, which may have potentially impacted the results. 31 of the participants were between the ages of 18 to 24. Seven participants were under 18, one was between the ages of 24 to 34, and two were between the ages of 55 to 64. Only nine of the 41 participants answered true to not currently being enrolled as a student. 33 participants answered that they watch one to fifteen hours of television per week. The answers of 16 to 25 hours, 26 to 35, and 36 hours or more were split among the rest of the participants. Looking at television consumption, 16 participants answered that in a typical week, they do not regularly watch reality television shows. 11 participants answered that they watch once a week, 13 watch two to four days a week, and one watches five to seven days a week. The most watched reality

television shows among the participants were Competition Shows (26), The Bachelor/The Bachelorette (17), and Keeping Up with the Kardashians (12). The most significant question asked was, “In general, how authentic do you believe reality television shows are?” because it introduces the existing issue of film and media manipulation. The possible answers were not at all authentic (7), a little authentic (18), somewhat authentic (14), mostly authentic (2), and very much authentic (0), with the majority of participants selecting a little authentic. These results alone support the research on this topic that addresses viewers’ knowledge of manipulation in reality television shows.

For the questions based on ABC’s The Bachelor/The Bachelorette, N/A was included as a possible answer for users who may not be familiar with the show. The questions made participants think about the authenticity of ABC’s The Bachelor/The Bachelorette. Participants answered on a continuum of strongly disagree to strongly agree when given statements about the show. The following six statements were used.

1. The contestants are accurately portrayed on screen.
2. The contestants’ genuine personalities are shown on screen.
3. The contestants’ actions shown on screen are entirely up to them.
4. The situations on screen are shown how they initially happened.
5. The contestants’ emotions and feelings portrayed on screen are authentic.
6. ABC’s The Bachelor/The Bachelorette is loosely scripted.

Answers to these questions varied but overall supported the idea that reality television is manipulated and not so much reality anymore. While most viewers are aware of this, they continue to follow the shows regardless.

The final question was open-ended unless the user selected “I don't regularly watch reality television shows.” When asked why they watch reality television shows, participants’ most common answers were along the lines of because they are entertaining, funny or ridiculous, and drama-filled. Most users enjoy watching reality television shows even while being aware of the manipulation involved. The survey showed supportive evidence of this. However, a more specific focus group could potentially impact the results.

Humanities

Looking at the issue from a humanities point of view, art and film are the disciplines addressing film and media manipulation. The goal of humanities disciplines is better understanding humanity through the analysis of texts such as literature, film, religious documents, and philosophy. Film and media come straight out of humanities; thus the issue fits into the humanities’ goal. This section addresses the effects that film and media manipulation have on viewers by investigating Kip Andersen’s documentary film, *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*, with supporting sources from Elizabeth Cowie and Bill Nichols, which both approach this issue from a documentary perspective as well.

The documentary film, *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014), is one relevant text that supports this issue. The documentary was written, directed, produced, and edited by Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn. It is important to acknowledge that the same individuals took on all four roles. This indicates that Andersen had all the control over how the documentary was filmed and the order in which the footage was edited together. Besides *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014), Andersen produced *What the Health* (2017), which focuses on similar issues. Andersen calls himself an OCE, which he says is an “obsessive compulsive environmentalist” (Andersen). Everything changed for him when he saw Al Gore’s film on climate change. Right

then and there he wanted to change the way he lived. During his research, Andersen grew concerned and confused when he could not find anything about animal agriculture on the organizations' websites in which he supported most. The film follows him trying to uncover the hidden truths that some of the largest environmental groups fail to address. Andersen says he could not just sit silently when the planet was being eaten alive before his eyes.

While I believe in what the documentary is saying, I cannot help but feel as the viewer that the film is full of manipulation. Having a background in film editing, I assume the creator kept in the parts of the interviews that support his argument while leaving out anything that may sway the viewer even slightly. While documentaries are viewed as "true," editors can arrange clips in a certain way or cut part of an interview out to make it only include the supportive parts. I am not the editor so that is not something I can prove to be true, but based on general film manipulation seen elsewhere, it is evident that it happens in documentary film as well. I feel it is important to keep in mind Andersen not only directed the film but produced and edited it as well. Knowing this opens up more possibility for manipulation in the film. I believe Andersen is extremely knowledgeable on the topic and clearly passionate about it. That being said, I am led to believe the film may have been edited in a way to show only evidence supporting his argument, while leaving out anything that may say otherwise. My interpretation reflects rather than contradicts the other research described later on in this paper.

The humanities articles discussed in this paper support the existence of film and media manipulation and share a unified perspective on the topic. In the first article by Elizabeth Cowie, she talks about the challenge that documentaries face by having to blend facts with the imaginary. There is evident manipulation just given the fact it is being reenacted, which she further explains in saying "temporal disjuncture introduced between the real time of the event

and its presence again in the document” (Cowie 87). Cowie questions the truth of documentary film in her article. She explains, “Documentary is the re-representation of found reality in the recorded document, its truth apparently guaranteed by mechanical reproduction of that reality in what has come to be known as its indexical relationship to the original” (Cowie 89). Filmmakers may fall into trying to please the audience and showing them what they most desire to see. Adding these details may, in turn, take away from the actual reality of the story. This is further explained by Cowie when she states, “In its desire to show the real, however, the documentary becomes prey to a loss of the real in its narratives of reality” (Cowie 89). It seems as though the reality in documentary film is starting to come into question because producers try to create the most successful film, not focusing as much on the accuracy of it.

In the second article by Bill Nichols, he focuses solely on reenactments in documentary film and how they are not entirely authentic. He introduces the idea of fantasy being present in documentaries even though they are showing true events, which may lead to the viewer possibly being deceived. Nichols explains this idea by saying that a reenactment “introduces a fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same event lacks” (Nichols 73). This becomes a problem when the difference between the two is not clear. Nichols goes on to say, “When the distinction between reenactment and enactment goes unnoticed or unrecognized, the question of deceit arises” (Nichols 73).

Another interesting point that Nichols makes is how reenactments in a documentary are from whatever view the creator sees, and it is important to acknowledge this. The creator may choose to manipulate the film in the most believable way to keep it true yet still support their argument as much as possible. Nichols states, “Reenactments are clearly a view rather the view from which the past yields up its truth” (Nichols 80). Often, people watch certain documentaries

because the topic is of interest to them. While a viewer may agree with the point of view, it is still important to acknowledge “the adoption of a distinct perspective, point of view, or voice” so they can distinguish between what is real and reenacted (Nichols 80). The documentary film genre is unique in terms of what it can accomplish. Nichols explains how powerful documentaries are in the way they “take past time and make it present” (Nichols 88). Documentaries are informative, but it is important that viewers take into account the manipulation in place and consider they may be deceived in some way.

The research is sufficient and supports the issue of film and media manipulation in documentaries. The body of research would benefit from expansion, because the articles focused on reenactments in documentary film. Manipulation likely occurs in all forms of documentaries. This body of research could use more research on different kinds of documentaries such as those that are more interview-based like *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* by Kip Andersen as previously discussed.

Integration

Looking at the topic of film and media manipulation from three different disciplines has been valuable in understanding the topic better. The natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities have contributed to our understanding of this issue by looking at it from a perspective in those disciplines, which was something different for each. For example, when looking at the natural sciences, I looked at the topic from a psychology perspective. This was fascinating because I looked at specific studies done on topics related to film manipulation. When I looked at the social sciences, I looked at the topic from a sociology perspective. The sociology sources that I found focused on manipulation in reality television, asking how real the “reality” is. When looking at the humanities, I focused on film, as the topic directly relates. The sources I found

were centered around the manipulation in documentary film. Although the three different disciplines have unique approaches to the issue, they all reach similar conclusions or results.

These disciplinary areas answered some of the questions on this topic, but I believe there are still many questions yet to be answered. There are questions on this topic that some people may not even know need answered because they have no prior awareness or understanding of film and media manipulation. The natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities had unique insights on the topic, but there are still more approaches that film and media manipulation could be taken from. While the information I found was supportive of this issue, the research on this topic has extensive room for growth. The three disciplines could still dive deeper into the matter. Manipulation occurs in more media than what was discussed in the research. For example, the sources took a look at the manipulation that occurs in reality television and documentary film. The natural sciences research took a more general approach, not focused on one specific kind of media. The studies that were done explored the general existence of the issue.

The three areas of discourse produced parallel ways of understanding film and media manipulation. They did approach the topic from different perspectives, as they are three different disciplinary areas, but the conclusions they arrived at were very similar. Looking at the issue from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, and film was valuable to me, as I was able to understand more about how others perceive film and media manipulation. The natural sciences introduced the issue and confirmed that people perceive media differently when shown different degrees of manipulation. The social sciences focused on how people perceive manipulation, in reality, television shows and answered the question that asks why they watch it even while being aware of the editing. The humanities explored the reality of documentary film in terms of reenactments. The three areas of discourse came to similar conclusions in saying that film and

media are manipulated, while also looking at the way people are affected by this and how people perceive the manipulated media.

Combining or synthesizing these modes of knowledge contribute to our understanding of film and media manipulation. Looking at just one of the disciplinary areas is helpful, but that is only one perspective of the topic. The approach was different based on the area of discipline. For example, the social sciences research I found focused mainly on the reality television aspect of it, being as it is centered around the way people behave. Given a topic, the fields of psychology, sociology, and film will approach it in whichever way makes the most sense in relation to their perspectives and work. Having multiple approaches and views on a single topic makes for a more thorough understanding of it. It is also valuable to have more than one perspective on something, as there is typically not one correct view. Hearing from multiple disciplines can open one's mind to different ideas, thus giving them a better opportunity to confidently form an opinion of their own.

Reflection

Why do I care about this topic? The topic of film and media manipulation is important to me because I hope to someday work in a related field. My goal is to have the title "Video Editor" which is directly related to film manipulation. I know first-hand that film and media are manipulated because I have always been interested in that field of study. I feel as though not everyone understands what goes into a film or television show behind-the-scenes, especially in post-production. As someone interested in the industry, I think it is important that I not only know about the manipulation that takes place but understand the different perceptions of it and how people are affected by it. People perceive film and media manipulation differently based on how much they know about the topic and how much it matters to them. For example, when I

conducted a survey of my own, I found that most people who watch the Bachelor know it is manipulated in some way, but they watch it for entertainment purposes. Depending on the seriousness of the topic in a film or television show, the way people perceive the manipulation may vary.

I am satisfied with the perspectives offered by the three disciplines. I believe all of the research I found approaches the topic in unique ways. The research is supportive of my argument that film and media are manipulated daily. I was fascinated by the different types of perspectives I found from each of the disciplines. For example, when looking at the topic from a sociology perspective in the social sciences, I came across several reality television studies. On the other hand, while looking at the topic from a film perspective in the humanities, documentary film seemed to be the focus of most articles and research. I believe having the perspective from all three disciplines is valuable because I am not sure if just one would think to approach the topic from different areas of media such as going from reality television to documentary film. Looking at it from a psychology perspective was particularly of value to me because of having the chance to hear about specific studies done on the topic. Reading about studies where there are participants and results surrounded by a particular goal is valuable but should not serve as the only perspective or stand alone. Having perspectives from the social sciences and humanities as well makes it easier for an ordinary person to understand the topic. I believe all three disciplines work together to enhance the research done in each of them.

There is a lot that people do not know or understand about film and media manipulation. I feel it is important that people know the things they see in film and television are more often than not being shown to them in a different order or way than it was captured. In most cases, media is edited together or reordered to ensure the right message gets across and that people are

entertained. I believe it is okay for film and video editors to do this, but I also think it is important that the people watching realize this could be happening in the films and television shows they like most. People need to understand what they are watching is only one perspective—that of the person who edited it, or the person who instructed them on how to edit it. People need to be analyzing for themselves and forming their own perspectives rather than saying something is absolutely 100% true or vice versa. Instead, they should combine what they see with their own beliefs. The different disciplines go deeper into this topic by looking at it from different kinds of media. They introduce the idea that much of what we watch is manipulated in some way. As mentioned before, there is value in looking at the same topic from the perspectives of all three disciplines because they approach it differently.

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