

# Influencing Public Opinion

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## What is Consciousness?

Consciousness is a concept that was developed in the seventeenth century by the philosophers John Locke and René Descartes. It was Descartes who said that the human is a conscious being, meaning that “he knows that he can think.” This statement seems simple, but it is not. Over the course of thousands of years of history humans preferred “the thinking of the gods,” even if they were small wooden statues or invisible demons. Descartes also said that “I think, therefore I am.” These two statements indicate one main premise, according to which human consciousness is equivalent to the very existence of the human being on the one hand, and it includes a subjective – that is, personal – element on the other hand. In other words, the human being is capable of changing his opinions by himself; that is, consciousness is not determined by a divine power, and it changes over the years.

We can refer to the concept of human consciousness as all of a person’s knowledge and beliefs, the way and type of thinking, and additional personality components, such as the level of alertness and suspicion toward the environment, comprehension and analytic ability, openness, friendliness, perfectionism, and inclinations, such as racism or humanity (for example), as well as one’s sense of class or economic discomfort in small circles (the family circle) or large circles (the political circle).

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## **Essential Layer versus Opinion Layer**

When discussing the issue of influencing consciousness, it is customary to refer to two layers of consciousness: a basic essential one that includes “belief in religion” or “affinity for the nation,” and a second layer, which is made up of “positions and opinions.” Two people who have an identical basic layer of consciousness can have differing opinions on many topics. Thus, for example, a population composed of members of the same religion (Sunni Muslims, for example) can have different political and behavioral opinions.

Changing positions and opinions among individuals or a population with the same essential layer of consciousness is easier than changing the essential layer itself. Change at this level is usually a complex process that we humans do not have control over. It shifts according to long, deep, and complex processes that occur as a result of the large information revolutions, which enable cultural, social, and political upheavals. The concept of “influence” addresses cognitive change, meaning changing attitudes. An example is changing the perspectives of members of the same religious faith who believe in the use of violence to accept other views, such as shifting to political or business activities (with their range of possibilities) as an alternative to violence.

## **Influencing the Public versus Influencing Individuals**

Another distinction lies in the difference between a public’s cognitive state and a specific person’s consciousness. This article focuses on influencing the broader public, as opposed to influencing an individual. The attempt to influence a specific person depends usually on the ability to understand or estimate formative components of a person’s “personality” and the nature of his behavior, as well as “structured” details, such as his place of residence, information about his family members, hobbies, inclinations, and so forth. The opinion of hundreds of thousands or millions of people is harder to estimate and constitutes a technological challenge. The main challenge lies in processing information and turning a large population that contains a mix of people into an “object,” that is, a uniform entity whose opinions on a certain issue we seek to influence. In recent years, “big data” solutions have been created that address this challenge.

Influencing consciousness means attaining cognitive change of defined opinions of a “public,” as opposed to changing a basic level of cognition,

which requires significantly larger processes than any intentional attempt at influencing and usually take place over the course of centuries (for example, changing a religious faith or turning a Palestinian nationalist into a Zionist). It should be emphasized that the attempt to convince a person who has a certain religious faith to change elements of his basic faith is usually doomed to failure. However, there are counter-examples, such as the shift in Egyptian public opinion that enabled the peace process with Israel; the transformation in the public consciousness in the Soviet Union that led to its dissolution; or the adoption of Christianity by the Western world in the fourth century of the Common Era.

The process of changing public opinion is not like creating the momentum for an action by a population that already has the desire to act, and all we are trying to do is to cause the public to take action (demonstration, march, signing a petition, and so forth). For example, motivating a public that is angry at a certain regime to take action means influencing it so that it goes to the town square to protest. This is a different kind of process of influence than that discussed in this article.

This article focuses on changing public opinion. For example, if a given public is convinced that only violent means will resolve its problems, the conclusion is that one must try to influence this population and convince it that there is another, alternative position that is preferable in order to achieve its objective. There are, however, situations in which no convincing or relevant “alternative opinion” can be defined. In these cases, it is possible to conduct an influence campaign that is made up of a number of stages: the first stage is an attempt to create “a degree of discomfort” among the target audience by intensively disseminating information (see “information bombardment” below). After a situation assessment that determines whether there are cracks in the opinions of some of the members of this population, it is then possible to move to the stage of influence, which seeks to change existing opinions and to adopt alternative ones.

## **Influencing Public Opinion**

Influence means changing the opinion of a public, which is defined as having a specific position that we seek to change and replace with an alternative one. What characterizes the population as a target audience and as a uniform object is its “basic cognition” (Sunni Muslim or Shiite Muslim in Jordan,

Lebanon, Egypt, or Sweden, or a Jew who is an Israeli Jew or an American Jew or a British Jew) and opinion on a specific issue. An example is the wish to influence those Shiite Muslims who have a violent inclination, desire, or stance. The wish in this case is to remove the violent stance and replace it with an alternative one. This is similar for Jews who believe that violence toward one adversary or another is the right solution and are imbued with the sense that they should engage in violence toward the adversary.

### Similarity Groups

A central element in the influence process is the concept of “similarity groups.” Research institutes in the United States have found that convincing a group of “similar” people, for example, who have a similar education, locale, or background (military service in the same unit, went through a significant shared experience, and/or are connected in some manner) to change their opinion is many times more effective than attempting to convince a mixed group of subjects/people of the same objective.<sup>2</sup> Media campaigns, such as through television and radio, are, in effect, a process of influencing all segments of the population, and thus have less relevance. As a result, television and radio campaigns have to carry out a long and expensive process of repetition, meaning continually employing components of influence – advertisements – over time in order to convey the message. These messages are usually targeted at the common denominator of the different population segments, necessitating the use of additional avenues of influence in order to fill in the gaps.

This means that the start of any process of influence based on social media is to divide the population into “similarity groups.”<sup>3</sup> Here lies the great advantage of an influence campaign on social media: In traditional media, like television and radio, it is not possible to produce “similarity groups,” while on social networks it is. When it comes to a population of 50

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2 P. Karen Murphy and Lucia Mason, “Changing Knowledge and Beliefs,” in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, ed. Patricia A. Alexander and Philip H. Winne (New York: Routledge, 2006).

3 In the construction of “similarity groups,” one must take into consideration the premise that these networks are not free from the influences of additional actors, which also include fictitious users, and that the real actors are careful not to share information that reveals their true opinions.

million people, for instance, this must be implemented through an advanced technological system. Such a system enables:

- a. Identifying the people with the opinion that one seeks to change, as well as those with the “preferred” opinion (which is usually the opposite of that of the target audience). These people must have a clear opinion on the issue, and their social or professional standing is of great importance when choosing them for the influencing activity. These people will serve as sources of influence within the discourse produced during the campaign (the methodology of the concept of change).
- b. Determining the interests and characteristics of both the influencers and those being influenced. Advanced technologies are also required for analyzing connections, texts, and knowing systems such as the Big Five model (see below).
- c. Creating “similarity groups” of people. Advanced technological capabilities are required, especially if some members of the group are not connected to one another.
- d. Defining the relevant strategy for each group; that is, the process of influence and the alternative viewpoint.

### **The Alternative Viewpoint: The Methodology of the “Concept Change”**

An alternative viewpoint is the one that the side trying to influence seeks to instill in those willing to change their opinions. Choosing the alternative viewpoint is not simple. First of all, it must be convenient for us and preferred by us, with the potential to produce additional benefits. Second, it must be possible to intensify this position should certain events occur (just as miracles serve as a justification for the existence of a god). Note that not all expected events can be realized through networks.

### **Situation Assessment**

Every campaign, whether it involves influence in a military operation or a match of chess or basketball game, requires a situation assessment before any other step. The ability to create a snapshot of hundreds of thousands or tens of millions of people is possible thanks to social media. Without having intended to do so, Twitter and Facebook provide metrics for analyzing the personalities of millions, known as “psychometrics.” As early as 2012, it was

possible to analyze the personalities of millions of people just by following the number of posts they “liked” or by the number of followers they had, and whom they followed. Facebook at that time was an open network and each person was able to know how many posts a person “liked” and whose posts they liked.

We can add the smartphones to this new kind of information, as they have the capacity to indicate a person’s level of mobility, his response speed to phone calls, and the responses of others. Thus, smartphones serve as a kind of “central station” for the activity of each human being. In the context of social media, we can say that the smartphone is the ultimate analyzer of the personalities of many millions of people without their even being aware of it.

This is the basis, for instance, of the Big Five model.<sup>4</sup> This model, created in 2012, conducts statistical analyses of big data and makes conclusions from them. The model, along with social media and smartphones, enables us to produce insights on the personalities of people who have been active on social media, according to their number of “likes” and whom they follow, based on five characteristics: “openness,” or the extent to which it is possible to interest that person in additional topics; “conscientiousness,” referring to the person’s level of perfectionism; “extroversion,” or to what extent the person is outgoing or social attention is important to him; “agreeableness,” or how cooperative the person is; and “neuroticism,” referring to the extent of the person’s inclination toward negative emotions, such as anger and guilt. These five characteristics together are known as OCEAN (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism). These characteristics served as the basis for the capabilities that were used by Cambridge Analytica, which later considerably influenced elections worldwide, especially in the United States, where it helped the election campaign of Donald Trump, as well as the Brexit campaign in England. Cambridge Analytica studied the research and products of the group of researchers who created the Big Five model, continued to process them, and succeeded in formulating situation assessments that enabled Trump’s campaign to convey the right messages and, ultimately, win the elections.

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4 Wu Youyou, Michal Kosinski, and David Stillwell, *Computer-Based Personality Judgements More Accurate than Those Made by Humans* (Riverside: University of California, 2015).

In addition, we can add additional technologies that are already active in the field of influencing consciousness, such as extremely advanced text analysis systems, based on deep learning and machine learning; innovative statistical techniques for analyzing topics of discourse, based on enormous amounts of texts; and technologies based on analyzing networks and further research on the ideas of OCEAN. One example is the study conducted by the RAND Corporation in the United States that found a word that characterizes ISIL supporters and another word that characterizes its opponents. This study has enabled researchers to locate supporters and opponents of ISIL in texts that they have written, even if the word “Daesh” (ISIL) itself does not appear and even if the topic of the discourse was not ISIL.<sup>5</sup>

Together, all of these now create the ability to formulate innovative situation assessments that nullify and obviate the traditional public opinion polls, which are based on representative samples (inadequate in their own right) and are quite limited in their ability to identify the personalities, interests, and inclinations of hundreds of millions of people (the new capabilities detailed above enable, for example, the identification of homosexuality).

## **Influence Campaigns**

An influence campaign is a process that takes place over time, meaning that it is not “local” in time but rather is a long and patient process. This campaign is based on a discourse between people with “our” opinion and people with the opinion that we seek to change, and it must include concepts that are characteristic of the influence process (relatively new concepts that are used by the influence campaign). Eventually, these concepts will serve as anchors that will support the ability to estimate the campaign’s level of success; that is, they are important in that they have the ability to be tracked, which is a critical component of an influence campaign’s success.

A campaign focused on changing positions and opinions requires a monitoring system that periodically or continuously examines whether the relevant people are being influenced and who have been influenced; that is, what type of profile (people’s characteristics and interests) has been influenced, what type of profile has not been affected, and who has been

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5 Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Todd C. Helmus, Madeline Magnuson, and Zev Winkelman, *Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2016).

affected in ways other than expected. This ability to monitor makes it possible to update the campaign according to both periodic tests and alerts that the monitoring system can produce.

## **Profiles**

Profiles of people within the group defined as the “similarity group” must be created in order to identify a common denominator (interests and characteristics) among those people who were not affected by the influence strategy or upon whom it had the opposite effect. These profiles can be produced by the technological monitoring system, which should operate continuously and provide automatic alerts.

The last presidential elections in the United States provides an example of this kind of profile: they are people whose location is North Carolina, are characterized as mine workers, and have either have been fired or still work at mines that have not yet been closed and are about to be fired, as well as their family members. The campaign that targeted these people is different from the campaign that targeted groups of academics and members of the tech industry in San Francisco, suggesting that different cognitive campaigns are needed for various groups. The group composed of the blue-collar workers from North Carolina – who have been fired from mines that closed in recent years, or who are concerned that they will be fired and those dependent upon them – creates a profile of people who are defined as a “similarity group.”

This “similarity group” must be provided with relevant messages that can inspire hope among those belonging to it and lead them to change their opinion – from voting for the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, for example. In effect, this was one of the results of Cambridge Analytica in the last US presidential elections, which led to the victory of Donald Trump, among other things. This happened despite the fact that the majority of blue-collar workers traditionally constituted a political force that supported the Democratic Party; however, the party was not able to understand their needs and assumed that they would vote for it in any case, as they had voted over the years. It can be said that these voters changed their traditional political position thanks to the Republic campaign among “disaffected voters.”



## **Influencing the Influencers**

In principle, there are two kinds of influencers. The first kind includes those who are able to sway specific populations to change their opinion. These influencers should be activated in the influence campaign, and they are quite effective, especially when they are matched with the discourse groups based on shared characteristics and the level of similarity between them and those targeted. For example, it is likely that the physicist Michio Kaku can be influential among physicists and those interested in physics but would not be influential among soccer players, while Cristiano Ronaldo cannot influence a group of physicists but certainly can sway a group of soccer players and their fans, even if the issue on which he tries to influence them is strategic or political.

The other kind of influencers are “epicenters” for the opinion that we are seeking to change. The concept of “epicenters” in this context means that these people have many connections, followers, and receive numerous reactions (such as “likes,” tweets, and so forth) to their statements/opinions. As a result, influencing them is almost impossible, as their status is almost their entire being, and changing opinions or attitudes is equivalent to destruction. In some situations we do not need to change others’ opinions but rather convince them to move from an agreed-upon position to a kind of action (demonstration or signing a petition and so forth). In such cases, the influence is not embodied in changing opinions but rather in creating momentum so that the person will quickly carry out an action. In this situation, influential “epicenters” have great value in accelerating the process.

## **“Dissatisfaction”**

Influence, in the sense of changing opinions, needs to focus on groups who are in a state of dissatisfaction. This means groups of people who still have a problematic viewpoint according to those seeking change but who have also expressed a certain dissatisfaction and criticism of some components of the viewpoint that they hold. A group of dissatisfied people is the most convenient platform for influence in the sense of changing opinions. Dissatisfied people can also be identified using the tools described above, including a sophisticated version of the Big Five and text analysis.

## **“Information Bombardment” as a Means of Influencing**

Another method of influence that is intended for very specific situations is creating massive amounts of information that are connected to or perceived as connected to the alternative opinion that we seek to instill, at the expense of an existing opinion that is not advantageous for us. Information bombardment means producing news and presenting data, research, and inferences quickly and at a level that is newsworthy and relevant to the various “similarity groups” (for example, in numbers and graphs for academics and in pictures for truck drivers). This kind of “bombardment” can create cracks in the perspectives of people who are part of our target audience. Sometimes an additional stage is needed, in terms of the conceptual change methodology (CCM), while exploiting the success of the “bombardment” stage in order to expand the cracks and create dissatisfaction among the target audience.

## **The Synergy between the Different Methods**

In order to achieve the desired result, the tools presented above can also be used in parallel and in sequence. The CCM approach, along with information bombardment, creating momentum, and other tools, all serve as means for creating change. Thus, the tools should be used according to a preformulated plan, although any influence campaign can be adjusted and should be dynamic, thanks to the ability to monitor it.

One essential element of an influence campaign, which, in effect, serves as its backbone, is the ability to automatically monitor its results; that is, there must be a system that conducts continuous assessment of the “cognitive status report” of the target audience. Such a monitoring system should also provide alerts about any changes – with the change threshold defined in advance – and produce a periodic “cognitive status report” to be analyzed by those managing the campaign.

## **Conclusion**

This article discusses changing public opinions and offers ways to design an influence campaign for this purpose. This campaign is made up of a number of stages, is synergetic, and includes influencing the influencers and information bombardment.

Influencing consciousness is based, in part, on the Big Five model, which means the ability to collect and process enormous amounts of various

kinds of data and produce insights from it. These are insights about the personalities of people who are active on the internet, according to the number of “likes” attributed to them and whom or what they have “liked.” Such an analysis enables the characterizing of people’s qualities, such as openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (the tendency toward negative emotions, such as anger and guilt). Mapping these qualities is necessary for characterizing the population we wish to influence. By characterizing these qualities, we are able to create communities (“similarity groups”) and to more easily influence them.