MEDIA MANIPULATION:

IDEOLOGIES OF INFLUENCE AND POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF INTERVENTION IN A DIGITAL WORLD

9:30-18:00, Friday 29 June 2018, Anglia Ruskin University
Lord Ashcroft Building, CB1 1PT Cambridge

PROGRAMME

9:00	Tea & coffee
9:30	Welcome & introduction
9:45	Karin Ahlberg, University of Chicago *State-based or commercial manipulation – deceit or simply skillful handling?* James Williams, University of Oxford *A search for defensible metaphors*
11:15	Refreshments
11:30	James Cuffe, University College Cork *Media manipulation in China: difficulties in criminalising fecundity* Samuel Lengen, Anglia Ruskin University *Chinese media manipulation, or When the medium becomes the message*
13:00	Lunch
14:15	Rebekah Larsen, University of Cambridge *Media manipulation, visibility, and human rights rhetoric: exploring public discussion around the Right to Be Forgotten* Taras Fedirko, University of Cambridge *Anxieties of influence: unfree speech in Ukrainian news journalism*
15:45	Refreshments
16:00	Olga Zeveleva, University of Cambridge *Exercising power over media by manipulating news media capital: the case of Russia* Gregory Asmolov, King's College London *Media manipulation and participation in conflicts*
17:30-18:00	Discussion
19:15	Dinner

ABSTRACTS

State-based or commercial manipulation – deceit or simply skillful handling?
Karin Ahlberg, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago

This paper thinks through manipulation in a time of "perfect addressability," nation branding and integrated marketing communication (IMC), to highlight the different standards of judgment used for evaluating the activity of state actors compared to commercial marketers. The word manipulation commonly denotes the act of influencing someone by artful, unfair or insidious means to the senders' advantage. But in medicine or agriculture, manipulate means to maneuver, shape, or handle skillfully.

The latter meaning describes recent practice in commercial marketing. While knowing the market is inherent to commercial and marketing success, two recent developments have fundamentally modified the conditions to know and address target groups: IMC and user data. IMC use different means (advertising, branding, PR and advertisements) and platforms (newspapers, internet, face-to-face interaction, give-aways,) to communicate commercial messages, even in places where people do not expect them (e.g. sponsored content or feature stories). Second, through sophisticated infrastructures and digital listening, user data is now being harvest to create personalized ads according to our digital footprints – a process that William Mazzarella (2017:108f) calls "perfect addressability." These trends enable the marketing industry to manipulate, or calibrate their message, adjust misperceptions, and place commercial messages in subtle and personalized ways.

Building on research on Egypt's tourism marketing, this paper outlines how Egyptian tourism *authorities* use ICM and user data to calibrate and promote Egypt's tourism image. When state actors employ these techniques, another set of concerns are soon raised: over surveillance, privacy and propaganda; the actions become framed in terms of deceptions or propaganda, rather than skillful marketing. In short, the word "manipulation" takes on negative valence. By highlighting this different valorization inherent in the word manipulation and its application, the paper bring attentions to our own analytical positions and discriminations to stake out how we ought to conceptualize manipulation in the future.

Media manipulation and participation in conflicts
Gregory Asmolov, King's College London

Media manipulation is often approached as a strategy for shaping perception of the reality among specific target audiences. That said, recent studies of the ICTs highlight the role of digital platforms in enhancing participatory practices and digitally mediated mobilization of the human resources. The latter is known as 'crowdsourcing'. This paper explores how media manipulation shapes the structure of relationships between the subject (media user) and the object of manipulation. For that purpose, it relies on exploring the interrelation between two mediational perspectives on the role of digital technologies. The first approach focuses on the mediation of meanings (Silverstone, 2002). The second considers the mediation of activity (Engestrom, 1987; Kaptelinin, 2014). As a case study, the paper investigates the role of media manipulation for mediation of the relationships between digital users and conflicts, specifically within the context of the Russia-Ukrainian conflict. It highlights that media manipulation is related not only to the construction of reality among consumers of media content, but also to the structure of potential conflict-related activity of users relying on either mobilization, or neutralization of the resources of digital crowds. A specific attention is dedicated to the analysis of the media manipulation for neutralization of human resources via manifestation of disconnective power (Light, 2014) and mediation of passivity.

Media manipulation in China: difficulties in criminalising fecundity
James Cuffe, Department of Sociology & Criminology University College Cork

Against the backdrop of an authoritarian political regime, an optimistic and vibrant youth culture blossoms. New identities and new modes of experience are characteristic of a rapidly changing Chinese society, particular for the expanding middle class. This paper explores the role of communications technology in social change, and, social control by interpreting the political and

public reception of talent shows in contemporary China. The double-sided nature of digital mediation is an intriguing feature of modern social life when discourse in contemporary society is something embedded and intertwined with the technological. Thus, the investigation seeks to understand the effects of the technological on cultural transmission in an era where technological means have altered the modes for cultural transmission (tradition, education, experience) towards an instantaneous, and, permanently available 'standing reserve'. What does this mean for human identity and representation in the digital age? What does it mean for the ability to manipulate or curate the media? This paper tries to navigate between optimistic and pessimistic readings of technology to show how the power of story-telling and the fecundity of language itself are inherent protectors of cultural transmission in the face of oppressive forces whether political or technological. It aims to accomplish this through observations of the reality TV talent search format in China.

Anxieties of influence: unfree speech in Ukrainian news journalism
Taras Fedirko, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

To say that something is socially constructed, means to say that it (or its idea) is a contingent outcome of social factors, and therefore not essential or inevitable. It does not mean to say that construction is an effect of intentional action: social construction is not social engineering. What to make, then, of an empirical context in which actors are not only aware of the constructed nature of the political reality they inhabit, but see this quality of reality as allowing for socially consequential interventions, and behave accordingly? The context, explored in this paper, is contemporary Ukraine, where mass mediation of politics has been routinely described as a domain of manipulative influences. Journalistic speech in particular is seen as carrying a threat of interested ventriloquism or intention to deceive and control its audiences.

Building on field research with news journalists in Kyiv, my paper explores how media professionals themselves debate manipulation; how they detect and explain it; why these debates make sense to them; and how they shape their work. Discourses of manipulation can be broadly understood as ways of attributing agency and responsibility for influence in the socio-political order, and thereby determining legitimate forms of such influence. However, I argue, the particular shape these discourses take in Ukraine, might have to do with certain (post-Soviet) understandings of cultural production as intentional ideological construction; *information* as the relevant aspect of public speech through which such construction happens; and an ideology of power postulating a vertically organised social order in which influence tends to flow downwards.

Media manipulation, visibility, and human rights rhetoric: exploring public discussion around the Right to Be Forgotten
Rebekah Larsen, Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge

The right to be forgotten (RTBF) has been a recurring topic in public discussion over the last five years. From parliamentary halls to social media, from civil society conventions to traditional media, the RTBF has been variously cast as a human right, an affront to democracy, a ball and chain to 'digital innovation', and a much-needed reputation tool for marginalized groups. Which of these framings are most powerful, and by what type(s) of media manipulation?

I examine the concept of media manipulation via an empirical study of public discussion surrounding the right to be forgotten. I do so by exploring control of visibility as evidence of power —and thus, the ability to manipulate. I will focus particularly on framings involving freedom of expression, as well as other framings that employ human rights language. What are the technological affordances surrounding visibility in this context? Which framings of the RTBF are most visible, the most powerful—and whom do they serve? Which framings are on the fringes of discussion, and thus less powerful? With which groups are these framings affiliated? I begin to explore these questions mainly by examining online discussion situated in a 'networked public sphere'. I will show that 'broader grammars of influence' play into visibility, and thus manipulation, of discussion via the media. For example, I will briefly explore how Latin American development of data protection is being influenced by both Spain and the United States in public discussion using a 'rights' ideology, and how some critics have pegged this as manipulation.

This case study thus also provide some insight into vernacular ideologies surrounding the concept of media manipulation in the digital age—namely, that of human rights. I will briefly

explore how some of my informants conceptualized manipulation of public discussion around the right to be forgotten—and how these conceptualizations can be tied to respective identities on a political economy map.

Chinese media manipulation, or When the medium becomes the message

Samuel Lengen, StoryLab Research Institute, Anglia Ruskin University

This paper explores "media manipulation" as a conceptual lens through which to revisit Chinese digital media politics. It explores political responses to a popular online movement, in which countless Chinese Internet users proclaimed their "loser" or "diaosi" status in self-mocking online performances. Beginning in 2012, the online phenomenon pushed off a national debate about the lack of economic opportunity and social inequality. In this context, I argue, to think about media manipulation requires us not to focus primarily on false media content or disinformation in online media but to look at how the possibilities of digital media technologies themselves are framed. In China's digital economy, the existence of disadvantaged online users was rearticulated as an economic opportunity—discussions of the "loser economy" went so far as to present access to such a low-income market as an opportunity for the "losers" themselves. Drawing on ethnographic research, I suggest that these negotiations shed light on "the systemic efforts of governments to stabilize the symbolic logic of infrastructure" (Larkin, 2008: 3). Rather than taking shape primarily as government censorship of online media, I argue, government responses to the "loser" phenomenon sought to present participatory digital media infrastructures as an opportunity to disenfranchised Chinese Internet users. A focus on manipulation, I suggest, can highlight a kind of media politics which, instead of suppressing public sentiment, channels and redirects existing digital trends and potentialities. Instead of censoring discontent, the Chinese government offered as a solution to socioeconomic anxieties the very medium in which these anxieties were expressed in the first place. Considering such media manipulation, I aim to broaden notions of power and media in contemporary China and shed light on a media politics, in which the medium becomes the message.

Exercising power over media by manipulating news media capital: the case of Russia

Olga Zeveleva, Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge

In this presentation, I will address manipulation in a broader framework of how states exercise power over media during times of rapid political change. I will focus on the relationship of news media professionals to the field of power, understood as the intersection of state representations and state practices. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Crimea after Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014, I show that during a time of rapid political change, the Russian state first employed a series of direct measures to limit professional autonomy of journalists, followed by indirect measures which enabled the state to redistribute and redefine 'news media capital' among news media professionals and news organisations. Direct measures employed by the state included: 1) legislation; 2) increasing concentration of media ownership; 3) violence. These measures enabled the subsequent indirect processes of redistributing and redefining 'news media capital' among journalists and news organisations. Redistribution included two main elements: changing the ways in which journalists access their sources and information (limiting access for some and enabling access for others); and centralising news media production (editorial decision-making shifts from periphery to central news rooms). Redefinition of capital included: imposing and rewarding the reproduction of a dominant discourse; delegitimising certain news media funders; changing routes to career advancement among journalists. Once news media capital was redistributed and redefined, the state could begin to use fewer of its resources on direct measures, as news media professionals who adapted to the new capital structure began reproducing it.

A search for defensible metaphors

James Williams, Oxford Internet Institute / Oxford Data Experience Lab, University of Oxford

The varieties of interpersonal influence occupy a complex and fragmented linguistic terrain. While this has long been the case, today new technologies enabling intelligent influence at scale bring new practical urgency to the task of defragmenting, defining, and generally clarifying the boundaries of the varieties of influence. Here I will discuss what this task entails and requires. Drawing inspiration from Gordon Pask's description of cybernetics as 'the art and science of manipulating defensible metaphors,' I will advance a view in which clarifying the varieties of influence may be usefully understood as 'a search for defensible metaphors.' I will also discuss why this perspective may be particularly useful in the context of digital technologies.