

Putting an End to Media Manipulation and Misrepresentation

By Lucy Weiner for *The New York Times*, 9 December 2024

We have all seen how powerful media exploitation is and how it can pressure public figures to make decisions to please the public at large. Take President Biden stepping down from the 2024 presidential election or Kevin Hart rescinding from hosting the Oscars in 2019 after he received backlash for a politically incorrect tweet that resurfaced from years prior. The influence of media exploitation is not isolated; it impacts everyone, even lesser known individuals. Media exploitation causes so much hurt and the loss of human dignity to those targeted because consumers of the media are more interested in drama and human misery.

However, this backlash is not only limited to the truth. Oftentimes viral media obscures truthful intentions in the lies that sell. Does the media have the right to manipulate stories for the sake of entertainment? If producers of the media lack such empathy and prioritize success over morals, then maybe policy makers should re-examine the use of media to prevent the consequences of media exploitation and misrepresentation.

Media can be a powerful tool in spreading awareness on social issues and offering viewers insight on diverse experiences lived by different people across the world. It has never been easier to reach and connect an audience of people across the globe. Sharing vulnerable moments with the media has the power to appeal to viewers' emotions and create lasting change; however, this power can be dangerous if used unethically. When someone decides to lend their story to a member of the media for them to document, control of their depiction is handed over to the creator.

[*The Amplifier Magazine*](#) article “The Traumatic Impact of Media Misrepresentation & Public Shaming” tells author Christine Marie, PhD’s story of how her attempt to share her experience as a survivor of human trafficking was manipulated. She shares, “Sound bites were spliced together to create entire sentences I did not say, making me look brainless and culpable. An actor unrelated to my survival story showed up on camera portrayed as a witness, blaming me for the crimes against me. He was even coached to use degrading words about me.” Marie's story was complex and was an opportunity to spark an important conversation about human trafficking, but rather than telling her story in an accurate way, the story was manipulated to benefit the producers. The world viewed her as someone who she simply was not and she had completely lost control of her own identity.

This was an isolating and depressing feeling for Marie “Suicidal ideation is not uncommon... When you need the most support, people ghost you, avoid you, and fear publicly defending you... You mourn the loss of your good reputation, the death of your life legacy, the derailing of your life purpose, hopes, and dreams.” Although Marie was unsuccessful in her efforts to spread

awareness on human trafficking, her traumatic experience inspired her to conduct research on the psychological repercussions of media humiliation and misrepresentation (MHM).

Marie was inspired to get her PhD in Media Psychology at Fielding Graduate University. Her experience inspired her dissertation topic: the intersection of media and trauma. Her research helped her make sense of her situation and she discovered that humiliation is not the only outcome of media humiliation and misrepresentation; “I explored the nature of the lived experience of MHM through interviews, and sure enough, participants described a mountain of posttraumatic stress symptoms. This confirmed my theory that media-based trauma was a thing and could be a potential catalyst for PTSD... my survey participants indicated that their media experience was traumatic on two different trauma scales which were strongly correlated.” Marie’s research confirmed that media misrepresentation has psychological impacts on the lives of the victims. Manipulating the truth of stories for the sake of views rather than accuracy has life threatening consequences.

Marie shares that a significant factor contributing to PTSD due to media misrepresentation is the social isolation and backlash that follows. While consumers of media often chase the dopamine hit of quickly typing out and sending a hateful message, they often forget to sympathize with the victim behind their cyberbullying. *Imotions’* article [“What is Attribution Theory?”](#) written by Morten Pedersen outlines how the Attribution Theory is “a fundamental concept in social psychology” and it “explains how individuals interpret the causes of behavior and events.” The attribution theory often causes consumers of the media to be more critical when judging a media representee. “The Actor-Observer Bias is the tendency to attribute our own negative actions to external factors while attributing others’ actions to internal factors.” When people are exploited in vulnerable moments it is often actually a product of their situation or even misrepresentation rather than their personality traits and character. It is easy for consumers of the media to forget to analyze situations before sharing an opinion. This human tendency amplifies the feeling of isolation that victims of media misrepresentation face, making it necessary to protect the truth and ensure that innocent people do not receive consequences for actions that they did not take.

As artificial intelligence becomes more accessible to the general public, the risk of media manipulation and misrepresentation is quickly increasing. An *Anti-Defamation League* article [“The Dangers of Manipulated Media and Video: Deepfakes and More”](#) discloses the threat that “synthetic media” poses on the reliability and integrity of the media. The article defines synthetic media as “content which has been fully or partially generated by technology, typically through artificial intelligence or machine learning processes. This includes any combination of video, photo or audio media formats, and may or may not be created with malicious intent.” Specifically, the article shares examples of fake advertisements and A.I. generated photos and videos of celebrities, such as a video of actress Emma Watson reading Adolf Hitler’s autobiographical manifesto, *Mein Kampf*.

A.I. is particularly dangerous because it is rapidly becoming more user-friendly, making it very easy for anyone to tell convincing lies. The creation of synthetic media is inevitable, however, something must be done to prevent innocent people's reputation from being tainted by the spread of misinformation in the media.

Alternatively, efforts to prevent the spread of harmful media, spark a debate on whether or not setting boundaries would infringe on media users' freedom of press. [The United States Constitution](#) protects American citizens' freedom of press by stating "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." However, defamation is a limit to this constitutional amendment.

While social media can serve as a platform for anybody to share their voice honoring the democratic right to the freedom of press, the truth is an essential part of nurturing a fair and thriving democracy. Limiting the spread of misinformation in the media allows media users to speak out on what they believe in and educate themselves with the truth, all while honoring the limits to the first amendment.

In order to protect the truth and prevent media misrepresentation and public shaming, policy makers must reexamine the guidelines on what content can be shared with the media. Rather than A.I. contributing to the spread of synthetic media, it should be used to create a system for all media companies to easily fact check and filter out harmful content. Additionally, there needs to be some accountability for those who spread false information and cause harm. Defamation, libel and slander laws need to be strengthened. Through delegating funds towards strengthening A.I. detection systems and giving legal consequences to those who contribute to the spread of false and harmful information in the media, it is possible to make the media an honest place for self expression, education and awareness.

Work Cited

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