

Technological Manipulation in “Ghost in the Shell” and Disinformation on Social Media

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In a rapidly changing world, how do we determine what is fair and just? As humans, individuals often ponder about a world that could be and what is possible as available knowledge of the world increases and human limitations decrease. Will the world of the future be more equitable, or is doom and disparity an inevitable truth of human action? The desire for a “better place” can be traced all the way back to 1516, with Thomas Moore’s “Utopia” which described the political system of a “perfect” imaginary world system through political satire. Through binary opposition, the linguistic concept of basing the definition of one word as the opposite of an existing word, the word dystopia was created to represent a world which was a “bad” place. Nonetheless, the two words merely exist as polar opposites, representing extremes which cannot be maintained realistically. Where the characters of utopian literature realize that what appears to be a perfect society is far removed from perfection, characters of dystopian society recognize the disparities existing in their society and fight against the oppression existing within it. Dystopian societies are seen as fictional literary works depicting fictional injustices, but if there are real world examples of dystopian circumstances, could these media be seen as predictions of a future of the world that already is?

“Ghost in the Shell” was originally a manga series which was written by Masamune Shirow, beginning in 1989. It was adapted into an anime film shortly after, in 1995, when it was picked up by Kazunori Ito, Japanese screenwriter and artist, and the story goes as follows. It is 2029, and corporate networks have filled the earth with electronic and optical communication, computerizing the world with technology capable of imitating and advancing human function to a point it has never reached before. The ghost of consciousness can now be taken from its organic form and be placed into a human shell which creates new standards for the longevity of human life. Our story is that of Major Motoko Kusanagi who has endured a procedure such as this, having her consciousness transferred into a cyborg body. Now, in adulthood, she utilizes her technologically advanced abilities to fight the threat of cyberhacking from world class criminal hackers. Cyberhacking, as it can be explained in the movie, is the manipulation of one’s consciousness to alter or delete their memories for the sake of control over an individual or a group of people. It is initially thought that this is only being done by individual criminals for the sake of their own personal gain, but the viewer learns as the plot unfolds that it is the government and corporations who are the true, mind-controlling criminals. Public Security Section 9 is the task force which Major Motoko Kusanagi leads and she utilizes her cyborg body to enact social

and political agendas at the whim of the Japanese governments and corporations. These missions often are politically corrupt, doing things such as killing political leaders, engaging in terrorism under the guise of counterreaction, and programming artificial intelligence programs meant to obtain critical information from other countries. The government aids in the creation of public fear by showing news stories surrounding the threat of cyberhacking from criminals to cover up its own harmful agendas surrounding lies and manipulation. Kusanagi comes to this realization herself when she encounters cyberhacker, The Puppet Master, who accompanies her in questioning her humanity, wondering the degree to which the government is attempting to hide its crimes from the public.

“Ghost in the Shell” does a good job of showing how one’s perception of the world and people around them can be altered through social and political agendas of which one may not be consciously aware. From the types of advertisements which are seen to the very way in which people view themselves and others, the public’s thoughts and memories are being manipulated to aid agendas which are being delivered by one’s government. By having the main character be a cyborg, the viewer is shown how the progression of technology strips individuals of their humanity, often leaving them behind with a detached view of the world and themselves. Together, these concepts from the movie show the direction the world is to take if people do not humanize their lived experiences and stand up for themselves and others, which is my main criticism of this movie. In this film, the main themes are individualism, identity, and defining humanity, and yet, the main character does little to engage in a fight against the injustices she feels she has experienced, which is being manipulated by and having an attempted killing from the government. Dystopian media exists not only to showcase the oppression existing within a society but also, to show how the oppressed parties fight and overcome. Unfortunately, this was not explored within the film, and thus, it does not serve as a fervent call to action. Rather, it is a subtle commentary encouraging conversation if the viewer so chooses to engage on a deeper level, diminishing its strength as a dystopian film. Nonetheless, the movie still represents a sociopolitical truth which is shown through social media as it is utilized in the real world.

Negating their intended purpose, social media platforms contribute to misleading the masses within the United States by enabling the spread of disinformation and contributing to the loss of individual humanity. The last seven years have been an onslaught of criticism about social media and the way that it is utilized to fuel a political agenda. Often confused for each other, the

two terms which were discussed the most were misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation is any false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is the intent to mislead (dictionary.com). However, disinformation is deliberately misleading or biased information, such as manipulated narratives, manipulated “facts,” or propaganda (dictionary.com). During the Trump presidency, Former President Trump argued that many news outlets were “fake news,” spreading constant disinformation to rally his political supporters. Time and again, Former President Trump posted several perfectly crafted, sensational, and emotionally charged tweets on his Twitter that went viral among those who fell victim to what researchers call “information overload” (Menczer & Hills, 2020). Information overload refers to the intense competition for [individual] attention due to the amount of information being generated, creating a limited capacity to pay attention (Menczer & Hills, 2020). The natural human urge to survive lead to the evolution of ability of one’s brain to adjust its understanding of new information based upon the information that is already known (Menczer & Hills, 2020). As human thought and the physical world became more modern and complex, this trait exhibited itself through confirmation bias, which is the tendency individuals have to seek out, recall, and understand information that best confirms what they already know (Menczer & Hills, 2020).

The internet is created in a way which encourages the user to interact with more of what they are already interested in by constantly gathering their searches, interactions, and interests. Based upon this alone, algorithms keep individuals within a cycle of media which reinforces their beliefs. They never have to be challenged because they are constantly exposed to pictures, videos, accounts, and information that spread disinformation. Eventually, they begin to believe their reality to be an inarguable truth because that is all they see. Large corporations, politicians, and the government at large use this to their advantage, knowing that if they censor some information and amplify other kinds of information, then the public will not have an informed backing to oppose them. Furthermore, the average individual will begin to believe the information they have been fed so strongly, that they will oppose anyone who opposes those spreading disinformation. Many social groups, political organizations, and movements in 2020, such as the Black Lives Matter Foundation and its accompanying peaceful protest movement, experienced extreme scrutiny due to the disinformation being spread by corrupt United States government officials and their supporters on social media. Now, in 2023 with the rise of regressive policies, the same is still occurring on their Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or news

outlet with little questioning or mental resistance. Politicians use their social media to degrade social justice leaders and certain political organizations create spaces for communities to develop that have the sole purpose of denying certain individuals their rights, such as Indigenous individuals, Black individuals, and individuals belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. These people receive and spread disinformation which fortifies their beliefs and infringes upon the beliefs and lives of others on a grand scale because their reality is constructed in a way which justifies and affirms their actions. Government manipulation of social conditions causes individuals to strip themselves and others of their humanity for the sake of social approval and affirmation.

In this way, social media disinformation is very dystopian due to its corrupt uses by an oppressive United States government. They know that if they create a closed space which traps people and constantly cycles disinformation which feeds and reinforces their personal beliefs, that people will follow them without question and often at their own expense. People cannot realize that they are being oppressed if they believe that they are the individuals under scrutiny, adopting a sense of power that is not available to them. However, alternately, this circumstance is lacking in relation to the definition of dystopia because this oppression is somewhat self-imposed. One can only be misled so far as they are ignorant and uninformed, and so, it is the duty of every citizen to question what they see and hear, do their own research, and come to their own conclusion, even if it is uncomfortable. In a world where disinformation is not only rampant and common, but it is also encouraged and accepted, we have to stand up against oppressive conditions we know in our heart to be wrong and fight for change and reform.

References

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