

The Power of Influence

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Abstract: *This journal article examines the term influence as a multidimensional form of power that operates across interpersonal, institutional, and technological environments. Influence is shown to shape beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making through mechanisms that are often subtle, indirect, and difficult to detect. Drawing on foundational theories of social influence, including conformity, persuasion, and social impact, this article situates influence as a relational and structural force embedded within communication systems, social norms, and cognitive processes. The analysis explores four core dimensions: deception, manipulation, persuasion, and coercion. Deception is conceptualized as the intentional use of misleading information to shape another's beliefs, while manipulation operates by covertly steering emotions and perceptions in ways that bypass rational deliberation. Persuasion is framed as an evaluative communicative process grounded in reasons and symbolic appeals, whereas coercion marks the point at which influence becomes compulsory, restricting meaningful freedom of choice. These mechanisms are further examined within the institutional context, where propaganda and organized persuasive power transform influence into a coordinated system of governance, producing streamlined, emotionally charged narratives that legitimize dominant interpretations while marginalizing alternative viewpoints. Through repetition and selective framing, it establishes an immersive communicative environment in which curated messages continuously circulate, narrowing opportunities for critical examination and reinforcing existing power arrangements. This article also considers how emotionally charged narratives heighten vulnerability to misleading or manipulative communication, especially within digital systems where algorithmic processes intensify the reach and impact of such messages. It also identifies key forms of resistance—metacognitive awareness, systematic evaluation of information sources, and collective forms of scrutiny—and emphasizes their significance for sustaining democratic robustness in environments increasingly shaped by persuasive technologies. Overall, the article argues that influence is not merely a communicative act but a structural force that shapes social realities, requiring sustained critical engagement to protect epistemic autonomy in an increasingly mediated world.*

Keywords—Power; influence; lying; deception; manipulation; persuasion; coercion; propaganda; organized persuasive power; emotions, emotional appeal; artificial intelligence; digital media; mediated world; resisting influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Influence operates as one of the most pervasive and contested forms of power in contemporary society (Scott, 2008; Tarrow, 2022; Wrong, 2017). Across political communication, interpersonal interaction, digital media, and emerging artificial intelligence (AI) and the mediated world, influence can shape beliefs, behaviors, and collective decision-making in ways that are often subtle, indirect, and difficult to detect (Auliya, Kudina, Ding and Van de Poel, 2025; Baltezarevic, Lovic and Baltezarevic, 2025; Battista and Mangone, 2025; Beck, Dalton, Greene and Huckfeldt, 2002; Mutz, 1998; Tump, Deffner, Pleskac, Romanczuk and Kurvers, 2024). Rather than relying on direct, face-to-face experience, a mediated world is the social setting in which technology shapes how reality is encountered and understood (Chen, Xu and Tien, 2026; Dumlu and Demir, 2026).

Modern forms of influence can blur traditional boundaries between persuasion, manipulation, and coercion (Borchers, 2012; Botes, 2023; Sabir, 2017; Susser, Roessler and Nissenbaum, 2019). This can raise ethical and epistemological questions about how individuals and institutions shape public understanding. An epistemological question investigates how knowledge is obtained and whether a given belief qualifies as justified understanding rather than assumption, opinion, or error (Chisholm, 1966; Goldman, 1976). Recent research

highlights how deceptive practices, ranging from strategic lying to sophisticated propaganda, function as organized systems of persuasive power capable of engineering consent, manufacturing doubt, and exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018; Hutchens, 2023; Jones and Bergen, 2026; Selchow, 2024). These dynamics can be intensified by emotional appeal, which leverage affective triggers to bypass rational deliberation and thought while strengthening the persuasive force of symbolic messages (i.e. the meaning of communication is carried by symbols rather than by direct or literal statements) (Deshpande, 2025; Hadlington, 2026; Kumar, Dadwal, Modi, Ghouri. and Jahankhani, 2025; Rice-Bailey and Baker, 2026; Winstone, 2025).

Within this landscape, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative actor in the ecology of influence (Peters, 2026; Rauter, 2021; Vladimir, 2025). Large language models and generative systems can replicate, amplify, and automate persuasive techniques, enabling new forms of manipulation, deception, and behavioral influence at scale (Brundage, Avin, Wang, Belfield and Anderljung, 2024; Hwang, 2024; Jones and Bergen, 2026). Furthermore, AI systems can be intentionally or unintentionally deployed to shape user attitudes, simulate authority, and generate persuasive content that can rival human communicators/communication (Brundage, Avin, Wang, Belfield and

Anderljung, 2024; Hancock, Naaman and Levy, 2024; Hwang, 2024; Tarsney, 2025). As persuasive AI becomes increasingly integrated into political discourse, education, journalism, and everyday communication, its capacity to influence, ethically or manipulatively, demands rigorous scrutiny (Diakopoulos, 2024; Kalla, and Broockman, 2024; Krafft, Young and Katell, 2025).

This article examines the power of influence through a number of interrelated dimensions that include the following: lying, deception, manipulation, persuasion, coercion, propaganda, organized persuasive power and emotional appeal. By synthesizing insights from communication theory, political philosophy, cognitive science, and AI ethics, this journal article argues that influence is not merely a rhetorical tool but a structural force that shapes social realities (Allen, 2016; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Krafft, Young and Katell, 2025; Zuboff, 2019). A rhetorical tool can be described as a communicative technique used to shape how a message is interpreted and is a deliberate method of crafting language, structure, or emphasis that strengthens the persuasive force of a statement as to how a message is understood (Dumlu and Demir, 2026; McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Understanding how influence operates, and how it can be resisted, has become essential for safeguarding democratic deliberation, protecting epistemic autonomy, and navigating an era in which human and machine agents increasingly compete for persuasive power. Epistemic autonomy refers to a person's capacity to think, judge, and form beliefs independently (Fricker, 2007; Zagzebski, 2012).

For the purpose of context, the following section provides key definitions being discussed in this journal article. These include the terms: power, influence and artificial intelligence.

2. DEFINITIONS TO CONSIDER WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THIS JOURNAL ARTICLE

2.1 Definitions of power

Foucault (1980) defines power as a dispersed and relational dynamic that operates through everyday practices, institutional arrangements, and dominant ways of thinking. Rather than functioning primarily through direct coercion, it shapes the conditions of knowledge, speech, and identity by setting the societal and organizational patterns that govern how reality is understood and lived. For example, Couldry and Hepp (2017) consider power through communication systems that mediate experiences and, in doing so, actively shape the contours of social reality.

Influence, therefore, operates not as a simple act of persuasion but as a deeper structural process embedded within media infrastructures that guide how societies interpret and understand themselves.

Giddens (1984) defines the term power as a capacity woven into social structures, shaping and directing human behavior by both limiting and enabling what people are able to do. It influences the formation of social reality by setting the

conditions under which certain actions, forms of knowledge, and modes of interaction become possible.

Power can, therefore, be understood as a distributed force embedded within social, communicative, and cognitive structures, shaping the conditions under which people act, interpret, and relate to the world. Rather than functioning only through direct persuasion or explicit control, it operates by structuring the environments, norms, and meaning-systems that make certain forms of behavior, knowledge, and social understanding possible. In this sense, influence becomes a foundational mechanism through which social realities are continually produced and sustained.

2.2 Definitions of influence

Parsons (1963) defines influence as a generalized social mechanism that is embedded into wider communicative processes and can help shape and change opinions or attitudes.

The term influence is also placed within the context of the stakeholder's capacity to shape organizational outcomes. Stakeholder influence can be defined as the ability to affect organizational strategies, structures or decisions whether this be directly through resources and authority or indirectly through relational positioning and perceived legitimacy (Kim, Kim, Marshall and Afzali, 2018; Lee, 2011; Roome and Wijen, 2006).

French and Raven (1959) identify influence in terms of a non-coercive form of power that is grounded in social relations. Zaaiman (2020) also places influence as a relational form of power. It occurs when one person shapes another's actions, interpretations, or choices without relying on the need for coercion. A person can influence through credibility, persuasion, or normative alignment (i.e. to conform to ethical principles, accepted social standards and/or human values) (French, Raven and Cartwright, 1959; Foucault, 1982; Kelman, 1958).

Without relying on force or direct coercion, influence can, therefore, be considered as the ability to shape how others feel, think or act by altering their expectations, interpretations or choices through communication, social cues, or perceived legitimacy.

2.3 Definitions of artificial intelligence (AI)

Artificial intelligence (AI) can be defined as a computational system that performs human like tasks that normally require human cognitive abilities, such as reasoning, learning, and problem-solving (Russell and Norvig, 2021).

Jordan and Mitchell (2015), refers to AI as adaptive algorithms that can improve their performance by detecting patterns in data and adjusting their behavior without explicit human instruction.

Mittelstadt, Allo, Taddeo, Wachter and Floridi, (2016) regard AI as sociotechnical systems (i.e. the interdependence between human social behaviors and the technologies they

use) in which algorithmic processes interact with human users, institutions, and norms to influence behavior and decision-making.

Silver, Huang, Maddison, Guez, Sifre, et al (2016) define AI systems as being engineered to classify, recognize and interpret complex patterns in data with accuracy comparable to or exceeding human performance.

Artificial intelligence can, therefore, be considered as a class of computational systems that are capable of autonomously interpreting information, learning from structured or unstructured data, and executing goal-directed actions through adaptive algorithms that emulate or extend core human cognitive functions such as reasoning, inference, prediction, and problem-solving.

To understand the term influence, it is important to reflect on earlier classical theories including Asch, Sherif, Hovland (Yale School) approach, Kelman's social influence theory, Deutsch and Gerard's Dual-Process Theory and Latane's Social Impact Theory.

3. THE CLASSIC THEORIES OF INFLUENCE

Influence has long been examined through foundational theories that explain how attitudes and behaviors shift within social contexts. Classic models emphasize conformity, persuasion, and cognitive processes, showing how individuals respond to social norms, authority, and communication cues. Early work by Asch (1951, 1955, 1956) and Sherif (1937; 1961, 2015; Sherif and Cantril, 1945) demonstrate the power of group pressure.

3.1 Asch's theory

Asch's theory is associated with normative conformity and the pressure to fit in. Normative conformity is when a person goes along with a group's behavior or expressed views to gain social acceptance or avoid social disapproval, even though they may privately disagree (Asch, 1955; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). This theory focuses on situations where the correct answer is clear (Asch, 1956). Whereas participants may resist group pressure others may conform to group/ social pressure so as to avoid social disapproval or to fit in (Asch, 1951, 1955). Even when they know the group is wrong, they may align their response to avoid standing out (Asch, 1955, 2016; Hornsey, 2006).

3.2 Sherif's theory

Sherif's theory is associated with non-formation and informational conformity; using others as a source of reality. Non-formation is when people encounter a situation where the correct judgement is unclear; they often rely on the behavior or opinions of others to shape their own understanding (Sherif, 1961). Through repeated interaction, their personal judgements gradually converge, producing a group norm; a stable, shared belief about what is considered as correct (Sherif, 1954, 2017). Once formed, these norms become

internalized, guiding future behavior even when the group is no longer present (Hargie, 2006; Sherif, 2015).

The difference between these theories is that Asch's theory shows how people conform to a clear majority even when the correct answer is obvious, whereas Sherif's theory explains how people form shared norms when the situation is ambiguous and no correct answer is available.

Other foundational theories include Hovland (Yale School) approach, Kelman's social influence theory, Deutsch and Gerard's Dual-Process Theory, and the later Latane's Social Impact Theory. These are discussed below.

3.3 Hovland (Yale School) approach

Hovland (Yale School) approach highlights source, message, and audience factors in persuasion (Cohen, 1978; Coultas and Van Leeuwen, 2015; Crano, 2000; Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953; Hovland and Weiss, 1954; Hovland and Pritzker, 1957; Hovland and Rosenberg, 1959; Price and Allen, 1990; Sherif, 1961).

This approach is associated with persuasion variables and effectiveness and emphasizes how specific communication variables shape attitude change (Crano, Cooper and Forgas, 2010; Johnson, Maio, and Smith-McLallen, 2005). Persuasive effectiveness is understood to depend on four elements: 1) the characteristics of the communicator, 2) the way the message is constructed, 3) the medium through which it is delivered, and 4) the qualities of the audience receiving it (McGuire, 2013; Miller and Burgoon, 1978; Rosenberg, Marshburn and Siegel, 2016). Each of these influence how information is processed and evaluated (Kelman and Hovland, 1953).

Furthermore, source credibility, message structure, emotional appeals, and audience characteristics are shown to affect whether individuals accept or resist persuasive attempts (McGuire 2001; Rabindranath and Singh, 2024). The Yale approach also highlights the importance of attention, comprehension, and retention as sequential stages in persuasion (Maio, and Haddock, 2007).

The Hovland's Yale approach, therefore, explains the role of persuasion as being a process shaped by who delivers the message, how the message is constructed, and how the audience receives it, emphasizing systematic, step-by-step changes in attitude through attention, comprehension, and acceptance.

3.4 Kelman's social influence theory

Kelman's social influence theory (1958) later formalizes compliance, identification, and internalization as core mechanisms of attitude change (Brinol and Petty, 2012).

- Compliance occurs when individuals adjust their behavior to gain approval or avoid sanctions, without necessarily accepting the underlying belief (Kelman, 2017).
- Identification reflects influence based on a desire to maintain a meaningful relationship with the influencing agent,

leading people to adopt attitudes that align with valued others (Kelman, 2006).

- Internalization represents the deepest form of influence, where individuals accept a belief because it fits their own values and understanding (Kelman, 2008).

Kelman's theory, therefore, relates to how social influence works through compliance, identification, and internalization, each reflecting a different depth of belief change.

3.4 Deutsch and Gerard's dual-process theory

Deutsch and Gerard's Dual-Process Theory (1955) extend the theories put forward by Asch and Sherif and is considered part of the same classic era (Bond and Smith, 1996; Crano, 2000; Pervez, 2023; Spears, 2025). Deutsch and Gerard's Dual-Process Theory proposes that social influence operates through two distinct mechanisms: normative and informational influence (Deutsch, and Gerard, 1955).

- Normative influence arises when individuals align their behavior with group expectations to gain approval or avoid social sanctions (Deutsch, and Gerard, 1955; Spears, 2025).

- Informational influence occurs when people accept others' judgements as evidence about reality, particularly in situations of uncertainty (Deutsch, and Gerard, 1955; Spears, 2025).

The theory emphasizes that conformity can stem from either a desire for social acceptance or a belief that others possess more accurate information (Capuano and Chekroun, 2024). By distinguishing these processes, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) provide a foundational framework for understanding why individuals yield to group influence in different contexts.

3.5. Latane's social impact theory

Latane's Social Impact Theory (1981) is considered to be a later second-generation classic theory. Latane argues that social influence follows predictable patterns, allowing group effects to be modelled mathematically (Nowak, Szamrej and Latane, 1990). This framework shifts attention toward quantifying influence and understanding how group dynamics shape individual behavior. It is, however, a foundational model describing how strength of the influencing force, immediacy of its presence, and number of people exerting influence (Latane, 1981, 2000; Latane and Wolf, 1981; Wolfe and Latane, 1983).

- Strength refers to the social power or importance of the influencing source, such as status or expertise (Hartson and Latane, 1997; Latane, 2013).

- Immediacy captures the proximity of the source in time and space, with influence increasing when the source is physically or psychologically close (Latane, Nowak and Liu, 1994), and

- Number reflects how many people exert pressure, with larger groups producing greater impact, though with diminishing returns (Marwell and Oliver, 1993).

Latane's Social Impact theory, therefore, argues that the force of social influence depends on the strength, immediacy, and number of sources acting on an individual, determining how powerfully a person's beliefs or behaviors are shaped in any given situation.

Together, these theories establish the structural foundations for understanding how influence operates across interpersonal, organizational and societal levels.

Building on the classic theories, the following section considers examples of mechanisms as to how influence can be applied.

4. LYING, DECEPTION, MANIPULATION, PERSUASION, COERCION

4.1 Lying

Social science research demonstrates that lying is a pervasive human behavior, emerging early in childhood and developing in sophistication across the lifespan (Evans and Less, 2016; Evans and Lee, 2022; Talwar and Crossman, 2011). In adult contexts, lying becomes more strategic. For example, individuals may lie to protect reputations, gain advantage, or manipulate others (Boukarras, Placidi, Schepisi, Era, Panasiti, et al, 2025; Miura, Dewdney, Walker and Joinson, 2025).

Within power dynamics, lying often functions to maintain asymmetries (Dunbar, Jensen, Bessarabova, Burgoon, Bernard, et al, 2014; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017). In power relations, asymmetries refers to unequal distributions of authority, resources, or influence, enabling situations where deception can be strategically employed to sustain those imbalances (Bachrach and Baratz, 2017; Foucault, 1982). Those in positions of authority may use deception to control how information flows, frame narratives, and/ or obscure intentions (Chadwick and Stanyer, 2022; Turner, Edgley and Olmstead, 1975). This aligns with classic theories of influence, where power is exercised not only through coercion but through shaping what others believe to be true.

4.2 Deception

Chadwick and Stanyer (2022:5) define deception as an identifiable actor "*who intends to mislead and this intention results in attitudinal or behavioral outcomes aligned with that intention*".

Rubin (2022:31) put forward the definition of deception as "*an uncooperative communicative act involving false, inaccurate, or misleading messages designed to create a false impression in another's mind*".

Kalbfleisch and Docan-Morgan (2019:30) define deception as "*communication in which a sender knowingly conveys inaccurate information, violating the normative*

expectation of truthfulness” (Talwar, Crossman, Robinson, Geoffroy, Cote, et al, 2026; Zhong, Du, Gao and Yin, 2026).

Deception is deeply intertwined with social cognition, allowing individuals to anticipate others’ mental states and exploit them for influence (Saryazdi, Fadaei, Ebrahimi, Ghanbari, Shariat, et al, 2026; Walczyk, Harris, Duck and Mulay, 2014). Deception evolves as individuals learn to manage social impressions and navigate interpersonal expectations, highlighting its role as a tool for social influence (Evans and Talwar, 2024; Talwar, Crossman, Robinson,

Deception can, therefore, be considered as the deliberate use of misleading or false information to shape another person’s beliefs or actions while concealing the communicator’s true intentions.

4.3 Manipulation

Fischer (2022) refers to the term manipulation as a non-rational and non-coercive form of influence that can shape a person’s affective states (for example emotions, moods) rather than engaging with deliberative reasoning. Rudinow (1978) explains the term manipulation where a person is successful in getting someone to do something, or to omit something, by influencing their behavior in a way that is not transparent, while maneuvering them into a situation with limited options. Faden and Beauchamp (1986) define manipulation as any intentional act that can alter a person’s mental processes through means other than understanding; relying on emotional leverage, psychological pressure, or cognitive distortion rather than using rational persuasion.

Manipulation can, therefore, be understood as a form of interpersonal influence that bypasses rational thought and deliberation by shaping a person’s emotions, mental states, or behavioral options in covert ways. It involves intentionally steering another person’s choices through affective psychological leverage and pressure, that can limit transparency and constrain alternatives. Rather than appealing to reasoning, manipulation works by altering how individuals feel or perceive their circumstances. This enables the influencer to secure changes in behavior and actions, or lack of actions, in the other person(s) who may not otherwise support or endorse under conditions of full awareness.

Manipulation can, therefore, be described as a covert attempt to shape another person’s feelings, perceptions, or choices in ways that steer their behavior without relying on open reasoning or transparent communication.

4.4 Persuasion

McKenna (2024) defines the term persuasion as an attempt to bring about a rational change of mind by presenting relevant reasons, while operating within ethical constraints that distinguish it from coercion or indoctrination. O’Keefe (2016) associates the term persuasion with intentional influence and explains it as a communicative act designed to intentionally shape another person’s attitudes or behavior(s) through argument, appeal, or symbolic expression. Perloff (2020)

places persuasion in the context of attitude change. They describe persuasion as a process in which a communicator seeks to alter attitudes by presenting messages that encourage recipients to evaluate information and revise their beliefs (Perloff, 2020).

Persuasion can, therefore, be considered as a deliberate communicative process in which one person seeks to shape another person’s attitudes or behaviors by offering reasons, appeals, or symbolic messages that the recipient can evaluate. It operates through cognitive and emotional pathways, allowing individuals to revise beliefs based on argument strength, credibility cues, or affective content rather than force or deception.

Manipulation and persuasion sit on a continuum of influence techniques, with deception frequently operating as the boundary between legitimate persuasion and unethical manipulation (Muir, Dewdney, Walker and Joinson, 2025).

People’s limited ability to recognize deception means they may rely on superficial behavioral cues, many of which have been shown to be unreliable indicators of lying (Vrij, 2008). This vulnerability allows deceivers to present themselves as credible or trustworthy, increasing the likelihood that their false claims will be accepted (Levine, 2019).

The difficulty in identifying deception can enhance the persuasive power of liars, who can then exploit emotions, cognitive biases and trust (Levine, 2019). Levine (2019) continues by explaining that when individuals assume honesty as a default, they become even more susceptible to deceptive influence, particularly in emotionally charged interactions.

The cognitive load (processing demands, mental effort, information processing pressure) involved in evaluating truthfulness may also reduce a person’s capacity to scrutinize persuasive messages effectively (Vrij, 2008). As a result, liars can strategically exploit these weaknesses to guide decisions, shape perceptions, and subtly manipulate behavior (Van Dijk, 2006).

4.5 Coercion

Coercion represents a compulsory mode of influence in which an individual or institution restricts another’s freedom of choice through threats, force, or the imposition of severe negative consequences (Carr, 1988; McCloskey, 1980; Vigoda-Gadot, 2006).

Within the broader study of the power of influence, coercion is analytically significant because it marks the point at which influence ceases to be persuasive or relational and becomes a mechanism of domination (Simon and Oakes, 2006). Coercive influence operates by structuring a person’s available options so that compliance appears to be the only viable path, thereby undermining autonomy and meaningful consent (Fisher, 2013).

Coercion can be physical, such as direct bodily force, or volitional, where threats reshape a person’s decision-making

environment (Dubljevic, 2013; Nelson, Beauchamp, Miller, Reynolds, Ittenbach, et al, 2011; Stark, 2007). Volitional describes actions or choices that arise from a person's deliberate will, reflecting intentional and consciously directed behavior rather than automatic or imposed responses (Frith, 2013). Volitional coercion is especially significant for understanding political, organizational, and interpersonal power because it shows how individuals or groups can enforce compliance without resorting to physical force (Raven, 1993; Sturm and Antonakis, 2015; Turner, 2005).

Coercion can be in the form of inflicting fear, punishment, force, sanctions or painful consequences. This is described as condign power, where coercion is used as a core instrument of authority (Galbraith, 1983). Coercion is not merely an individual act; it can be embedded in institutional practices that normalize compliance through intimidation or structural disadvantage (Anderson, 2010; Edwards, Mitchell, Abe, Cooper, Johansson, et al, 2024; Washington, 2022).

4.6 Summing up of this section.

In summary, deception involves intentionally providing false or misleading information to create beliefs the communicator knows are untrue (Ulatowska and Cislak, 2022). Manipulation goes further by covertly shaping a person's emotions, perceptions, or available options in ways that bypass rational thought (Fischer, 2022; Rudinow, 1978). Persuasion, by contrast, aims to influence attitudes through reasoning, or evidence, that the recipient can evaluate, preserving voluntary rational choice and decision-making process (O'Keefe, 2016; Perloff, 2020). Coercion differs from all three by operating through threats or sanctions that restrict an individual's meaningful freedom to refuse, making compliance the only viable option (Anderson, 2010). It, therefore, represents the point at which influence becomes a form of enforced control rather than communicative engagement (Galbraith, 1983).

The next section reflects on how deception and propaganda are used within the organizational context.

5. DECEPTION, PROPAGANDA AND ORGANIZED PERSUASIVE POWER

5.1 Deception and propaganda

At institutional levels, deception can become systematized through propaganda and organized persuasive communication (Soules, 2015). Propaganda relies on selective truth, emotional manipulation, and strategic misinformation to shape public opinion and maintain political or organizational power (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018; Myers, 2025). Within the context of organized persuasive communication, deception can be used to manufacture consent, obscure accountability, and steer collective behavior (Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson, 2019; den Nieuwenboer, Cunha, and Trevino, 2017).

Propaganda functions by simplifying complex realities into emotionally resonant narratives that discourage critical

scrutiny, thereby enabling institutions to guide public interpretation of events in ways that serve strategic interests (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018). This process often involves repetition, symbolic framing, and the construction of in-group and out-group identities, which together cultivate compliance and suppress dissent (Diesen, 2022; Hinck, Hawthorne and Hawthorne, 2018).

Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson (2019) emphasize that such organized persuasive efforts are not merely communicative acts, but structural practices embedded within media systems, political institutions, and corporate environments, allowing powerful actors to normalize particular world views, while marginalizing alternatives. As a result, propaganda becomes a mechanism through which influence is exercised at scale, transforming deception from an interpersonal tactic into a coordinated tool of governance and social control (Chadwick and Stanyer, 2022; Ellul, 1973; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018).

5.2 Propaganda and organized persuasive power

Propaganda and organized persuasive power constitute central mechanisms through which institutions shape public understanding, legitimize authority, and coordinate large-scale social control (Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson, 2019; Brady, 2009; Soules, 2015).

Unlike interpersonal deception, which operates at the level of individual interaction, propaganda functions as a structured system of communication designed to influence collective attitudes and behaviors (Beiswanger, 1939; Myers, 2025; Parsons, 1942). It achieves this by simplifying complex realities into emotionally charged narratives, amplifying selected information while suppressing alternative viewpoints (Joaquim, 2025; Spencer, 2024). Through repetition, symbolic framing, and the strategic use of fear or national identity, propaganda constructs interpretive frameworks that guide how populations perceive political events, social problems, and institutional actions (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2019). Within this system, organized persuasive communication becomes a tool of governance.

Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson (2019) argue that modern institutions (governments, corporations, and media organizations) deploy coordinated messaging strategies that normalize particular ideologies and marginalize dissenting perspectives. These practices embed influence within organizational routines, transforming persuasion into a structural feature of political and economic power. Propaganda thus operates not merely as a communicative technique but as an institutionalized process that shapes the informational environment in which people make decisions (Bakir, Herring, Miller, and Robinson, 2019; Parsons, 1942; Sussman, 2012).

Propaganda creates a total environment in which individuals are continuously exposed to curated messages that limit critical reflection and reinforce dominant power structures (Ellul, 1973; Sandlin, Burdick and Norris, 2012; Soules, 2015). Curated messages are communications that

have been carefully selected, shaped, and arranged by a controlling source, such as a media organization, political institution, or algorithmic system, to produce a particular interpretation of events or reinforce a preferred world view (Coudry and Hepp, 2017; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Tufekci, 2015).

Organized persuasive power can, therefore, become a means of managing public consciousness, aligning mass behavior with institutional interests, and sustaining systems of authority (Gunningham, 2017). Marlin (2013) similarly highlights that propaganda's effectiveness lies in its ability to coordinate deception at scale, turning influence into a mechanism of social regulation rather than voluntary persuasion.

The next section discusses the role emotions play in influencing others.

6. EMOTIONS, EMOTIONAL INFLUENCE AND DECEPTIVE APPEAL

Emotion plays a central role in deceptive influence bypassing rational thought (Ekman, 2009; Hordern, 2013; Hrubes, Feldman, Tyler and Loggins, 2004). Such deception often succeeds because it appeals to fear, hope, empathy, or trust (Martin, 1986). Emotional influence can make deceptive messages more memorable, more persuasive, and more resistant to correction creating cognitive shortcuts (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Cook, Schmid, Fazio, et al, 2022; Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz and Cook, 2012).

6.1 Emotional influence as a cognitive shortcut

Human cognition relies heavily on affective cognitive shortcuts. When people experience strong emotions (for example, fear, hope, empathy, anger) they can become more susceptible to persuasive messages, including deceptive ones (Buller, and Burgoon, 1996; DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wegener and Braverman, 2004; Tor, 2002). Emotional arousal reduces analytical thinking and increases reliance on heuristics (mental shortcuts) (Blanchette and Richards, 2010; Moons and Mackie, 2007). This creates fertile ground for deception, as emotionally charged messages can override skepticism and encourage rapid acceptance of false or distorted claims (Norris, 2022; Perloff, 2020; Phillips, Wang, Carley, Rand, and Pennycook, 2025).

Emotions can also shape memory. Emotionally salient information such as feelings, thoughts or stimuli that are emotionally charged are more likely to be remembered, even when inaccurate (Bookbinder and Brainerd, 2016; Brainerd and Bookbinder, 2020; Chang, Brainerd, Toglia and Schmidt, 2021; Lemaire, 2012). This means deceptive messages that evoke strong feelings can become deeply embedded in memory, influencing future judgments long after the original lie is encountered (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Cook, Schmid, Fazio, et al, 2022; Kaplan, Van Damme, Levine and Loftus, 2016; Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz and Cook, 2012).

6.2 Emotional influence and power

Within power dynamics, emotional influence can become a strategic resource (Bachkirov, Razzak and Palalic, 2025; Cosic, Popovic and Wiederhold, 2026). For example, leaders, institutions, and media actors may deploy emotionally charged deceptive narratives to maintain authority, mobilize support, or suppress dissent (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018; Jones, 2022). Fear-based messaging can steer public behavior by exaggerating threats, while hope-based deception can create unrealistic expectations that sustain loyalty or compliance (Cohen-Chen and Pliskin, 2025; French, 2026; Krett, 2011; Olver, 2005).

In digital environments, emotional deception is amplified (Serrano-Puche, 2021; Suherman, Mulia and Maulana, 2026). Algorithms prioritize content that evokes strong emotions, increasing the visibility and impact of deceptive messages (Gombar and Cvitkovic, 2025; Ruckenstein, 2023). Emotionally manipulative misinformation can, therefore, spread more rapidly online (Ferrara, Cresci and Luceri, 2020; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Zollo, Novak, Del Vicario, Bessi, Mozetic, et al, 2015). This, in turn, can enhance the algorithmic influence and entrench its power (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, and Cook, 2012; Vieira and Figueira, 2025).

6.3 Deceptive appeal and the manipulation of trust

Deception often succeeds because it manipulates trust; an inherently emotional construct. Vrij (2008) argues that liars frequently rely on warmth, confidence, and empathy to appear credible, exploiting the emotional cues people use to judge honesty. When trust is established, deceptive messages gain persuasive power, shaping beliefs and behaviors with minimal resistance (Boush, Friestad and Wright, 2015; Gass and Seiter, 2022).

Emotional appeal can also allow deception to mask itself (Ekman, 2009; Von Hippel and Trivers, 2011). By framing falsehoods within narratives of vulnerability, urgency, or moral righteousness, deceivers can make their claims feel intuitively true (Appel and Richter, 2007; Feinberg and Willer, 2015; Levine, 2019; Seymour, 2014). This aligns with Levine's (2019) findings that people are more likely to believe lies that resonate emotionally, even when factual evidence is weak or absent.

6.4 Summing up of this section

Emotional influence and deceptive appeal are deeply intertwined. Deception gains power when it resonates emotionally, and emotional messages gain persuasive force when they distort truth. Together, they shape perceptions, guide behavior, and reinforce power structures. This is often without individuals realizing they have been influenced at all.

The next section discusses approaches that can be applied in resisting influence.

7. RESISTING INFLUENCE

Resisting influence requires a deliberate combination of cognitive vigilance, contextual awareness, and reflective judgement (Gate, 2026; Zarouali, 2025). In contemporary communication environments, where persuasive appeals are increasingly personalized, emotionally charged, and algorithmically amplified, the capacity to resist undue influence has become a central component of democratic and organizational resilience (Dichio, and Logvinenko, 2024; Yesilkagit, Bauer, Peters, and Pierre, 2024).

People are most susceptible to influence when cognitive load is high, when messages trigger strong affective responses, and/ or when claims appear to align with pre-existing beliefs (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook, 2017; Muscanell, Guadagno and Murphy, 2014; Zemborain and Johar, 2007). Developing resistance, therefore, begins with recognizing these psychological entry points. It is, therefore, helpful to understand and engage in effective strategies in addressing influence. These strategies include metacognitive monitoring, source security and collective resistance.

7.1 Metacognitive monitoring

One of the most effective strategies in resisting influence is metacognitive monitoring. This is the practice of observing one's own thought processes (Epstein, Siegel and Silberman, 2008; Son, and Schwartz, 2002). It is also associated with encouraging people to slow down and think, to question their emotional reactions, and to evaluate evidence; by doing so, can significantly reduce susceptibility to misleading or manipulative claims (Pennycook and Rand, 2019a). This aligns with dual-process theories of reasoning, which argue that shifting from intuitive, rapid judgement to more analytical evaluation disrupts the persuasive power of emotionally resonant falsehoods (Kahneman, 2012).

7.2 Source security

A second mechanism involves source scrutiny. People are more likely to resist influence when they actively assess the credibility, motives, and expertise of communicators (Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders, 2010; Sohn and Choi, 2019). People tend to assume honesty unless given reason to doubt, making intentional skepticism a necessary corrective (Levine, 2019; Schwarz and Jalbert, 2020). Similarly, exposure to diverse viewpoints has been shown to reduce the persuasive impact of ideologically framed narratives, particularly those that rely on moral or identity-based appeals (Feinberg and Willer, 2015; Mutz, 2002; Taber and Lodge, 2006).

7.3 Collective resistance

Finally, collective resistance plays a crucial role. Collective resistance represents not merely a social preference for critical engagement but a structural defense against the escalating sophistication of contemporary influence tactics (Bakir and McStay, 2018; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Lewandowsky, Cook and Ecker, 2020.). When communities

cultivate shared expectations of scrutiny, deliberation, and openness, they create communicative environments in which manipulative strategies struggle to gain traction (Bakir and McStay, 2018; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2020; Pennycook and Rand, 2019b).

Such environments function as distributed cognitive systems, where individuals draw on collective knowledge, diverse perspectives, and shared evaluative norms to challenge persuasive attempts that rely on emotional provocation, misinformation, or authority cues (Freelon and Wells, 2020; Sloman and Fernbach, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). This communal vigilance is particularly important in digital contexts, where algorithmic amplification can rapidly normalize deceptive narratives (Bakshy, Messing, S. and Adamic, 2015; Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, and Van Bavel, 2017; Lazer, Baum, Benkler, Berinsky, Greenhill, et al, 2018.).

Research on media literacy and democratic resilience suggests that collective resistance is most effective when embedded in everyday practices that include public debate, peer correction, collaborative fact-checking, and transparent institutional communication (For example, Ashley, Maksl and Craft, 2017; Mihailidis, 2014. Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017; Vraga, and Tully, 2021). These practices can help recognize patterns of manipulation (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook, 2017; Pennycook and Rand, 2019). Moreover, collective resistance fosters social accountability, making it more difficult for organized persuasive campaigns to operate without challenge (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Freelon and Wells, 2020). As Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson (2019) argue, enhancing public understanding of persuasion techniques is central to countering organized deception. When such understanding becomes widely shared, it transforms from an individual skill into a communal safeguard. In this sense, collective resistance is both a cultural resource and a democratic imperative.

Together, these strategies highlight that resisting influence is not a passive condition but an active, ongoing practice of critical engagement.

8. CONCLUSION

Influence can emerge, not as a single act of persuasion, but as a structural force that shapes how individuals and societies interpret reality. Influence operates across multiple layers that include interpersonal engagement, institutional/ organizational relationship, and technology. Each is capable of guiding behavior and shaping belief.

Classic theories of conformity and persuasion reveal that human judgement is deeply sensitive to social cues, authority signals, and group norms. Asch's work shows that people may conform even when a person knows the group may be wrong; while Sherif illustrates how shared norms can influence collective understanding. These foundational insights establish the psychological groundwork upon which subsequent theories and models of influence are built.

The discussion of deception, manipulation, persuasion, and coercion highlights how influence can move from benign to harmful depending on the transparency of intent and the degree of autonomy preserved. Deception becomes especially potent when paired with emotional appeal. Emotional influence bypasses analytical reasoning, embedding falsehoods into memory and shaping future judgement. This dynamic is intensified within digital environments, where algorithms amplify emotionally charged content and accelerate the spread of manipulative narratives.

Propaganda transforms deception into a coordinated system of persuasive power. The use of propaganda creates a “total environment” in which curated messages normalize dominant views and suppress alternatives. In this context, influence becomes a mechanism of governance, structuring public consciousness and legitimizing authority.

The rise of AI further complicates this landscape. Generative systems can automate persuasion, simulate credibility, and scale manipulative techniques beyond human capacity. This makes resisting influence an essential democratic skill that can be achieved through a) metacognitive monitoring (observing one’s own thought processes), b) source scrutiny (actively assessing the credibility, motives, and expertise of communicators), and c) collective vigilance (where a group of individuals work together to look out for dangers, threats, or wrongdoing).

Overall, the article demonstrates that influence can be a pervasive and evolving force. Understanding its mechanisms and cultivating resilience and resistance against its more coercive forms, is vital for protecting epistemic autonomy (the capacity to think, judge, and form beliefs independently) in an increasingly mediated world (the social setting in which technology shapes how reality is encountered and understood).

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