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### Stewarding the Public Opinion: The Boundaries of Freedom

As one can deduce from the young adult novel *Divergent*, within fictional dystopian worlds it's dangerous, even deadly to be radically different. However, many are aware that such concepts concerning bravely challenging the status quo are palatable when housed in the clearly fictional. It is easy and entertaining to consume such real and potent concepts because audiences are given a decent plot and are presented with well-written protagonists that one *wants* to love and antagonists one *wants* to hate. The story often feels removed from anything immediately concerning the reader. It turns out that creating propaganda and spreading it is quite similar, in the ways of crafting an entertaining story and writing the protagonists and antagonists in a way that makes mainstream society support one group or person that the audience feels closer to, and condemn the opposing parties. During and before the Civil Rights Movement, most can agree that white supremacist propaganda ran rampant. However, the American government and mainstream American society has, and continues to use certain tactics as a way of influencing the minds of American citizens to coerce them into following whatever mainstream America dictates--which, today is considerably intertwined with white supremacism.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was criminalized because it was dubbed a national threat by the FBI. Thus, it would be useful for the American government to convince the American public to support the American government and wholeheartedly trust its judgment. During the 1960's, "The majority of Americans, however – especially white middle- and working-class Americans – saw no reason whatsoever to celebrate the Panthers. In their eyes the group was a clear threat to law and order: a dangerous band of gun-wielding macho revolutionaries who sided with

America's Cold War enemies and who seemed to hate the US and everything it stood for" (10). J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI launched 233 (out of 295) counterintelligence actions against the BPP through the COINTELPRO program and the BPP was declared the "number one threat to national security" (19). Interestingly enough, the FBI record reflects that COINTELPRO also targeted groups such as the KKK (7), despite the fact that the BPP was subject to 79% of the COINTELPRO FBI operations (19). While the government cryptically admits "COINTELPRO was later rightfully criticized by Congress and the American people for abridging first amendment rights and for other reasons" (7). However, nowhere in the description is there any information specifically the suppression of the BPP because the US government at the time, based their decisions and actions on fundamentally racist ideals. The omission of specific details on the crimes that the US government committed, and the equivocal statement of 'other reasons' is where ambiguity arises- ambiguity being in which the problem of misinformation lies. Ambiguous information allows for the masses to accept incomplete or misinformation as the truth.

Thus, when there is ambiguity concerning the merit of the actions taken by the American government there is then room for multiple skewed perceptions to take root and grow within American society. During the 1960's, the *"US News and World Report and Reader's Digest"* tantalized readers and added black nationalist prestige with tales of their revolutionary articles... "Who Are the Terrorists Among Us," and "Terrorism Is Developing into a Form of War"- articles that were all about the BPP (19). However, the propaganda of the 1960's fails to address the fact that the Panthers worked to revitalize their impoverished (primarily black) communities through free medical clinics, free breakfast program for children, and free legal aid programs (3) (8) (9) (10) (17) (20). That omission is so, presumably because it's much harder to convince one's audience of the protagonist's legitimacy if the antagonist of the story (the BPP) has honorable motives reflected via consistently expressed honorable actions. The BPP, while being supporters of Marxism/communism, they were far more than the aggressive, dangerous black nationalists that many believed they were. Through portraying a powerful, undaunted

pro-Afro image they challenged the status quo about what a self-confident person with power must be, a concept that most likely intimidated and unsettled the aforementioned mainstream white majority. That same concept posed a considerable threat to the US government's ability to control the collective consciousness of minorities because a united, physically, and mentally empowered group of minorities is much harder to influence and control than an impoverished and uneducated minority population. The pervading perception of the BPP during the 1960's still endures today, and the epitome of such a survival of the public opinion of the BPP merged with the progressive movements of the 2000s can be exemplified through Beyoncé's Superbowl performance of Formation, with costumes (afros, berets, leather jackets, etc.) and notions of black empowerment reminiscent of the Black Panther Party. "As thousands of African Americans took to social media to praise Beyoncé, they were opposed by white conservatives who vented their fury over the artist's celebration of the 1960s' radicals" (10). Thus, while recently there has been a renewed recognition of the validity of an empowered black population in America, there has been an equally renewed opposition to such notions. The government's influence on public opinion hinges on the media's endorsement of perceptions and portrayals of canonized government ideologies.

Earlier, it was mentioned that the American government admitting to "abridging first amendment rights" (7) through the tactics of the COINTELPRO program. However, such restrictions on freedom of speech continue to pervade society. A prime example being that at Marquette University in 2015, a group of students (endorsed by the founding director of the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center, Susannah Bartlow) painted a mural of Black Panther Assata Shakur, (an alleged murderer) with one of her quotes about how the reigning institution will not give you the education necessary to overthrow them, and they will not teach a person's true history if that knowledge sets them free (2). (She is an *alleged* murderer because if the US government had a clear bias against Black Panthers and a clear agenda to eliminate and incriminate them then there is motive for intervention and injustice

concerning her trial. Such 'biased justice' being shown on many occasions concerning Assata, one of which being when she was being tried for the murder of New Jersey state trooper Foerster and the jury of her 'peers' was that of "(counting substitutes) twelve white women and four white men" (4). Six weeks later the mural was painted over with white paint (literally whitewashed), and Bartlow was fired. Bartlow goes on to write an article, in which she says, "what was whitewashed was evidence of a power that could not be tolerated. The mural represented student empowerment and resistance to white supremacy, independent and collective decision making, and incorporation into the body of the university" (2). Just as with the empowerment of the black community through the BPP, the Assata mural was similarly eliminated. What's more is that Bartlow observed that, "The right-wing sources carried out an expert manipulation of current media systems in its grassroots-to-nightly news cycle" (2) when avoiding the topic of the Assata mural or reframing it to (yet again) demonize a panther. Once again, the goals of enforcing the common law of white society were fulfilled with support of the media and the endorsement of the reigning power (in this case with Marquette University). Once again, first amendment rights were 'abridged', but this time by a respected university instead of the U.S government.

While there is undeniable progress that has taken place in the fields of human rights and justice, there is still a thin layer of seemingly impenetrable residue from the era of overt racist propaganda that still suffocates today's media and heavily restricts the educated public's tolerance for radical, yet empowering free speech. The spreading of an incomplete narrative on the true nature of the BPP through strategic, structural racism practiced by the U.S. government was a trademark of the recent past. Now, there has been a subtle shift from outright conspiracy against black empowerment to a normalized condemnation of black empowerment by mainstream white society- a viewpoint that is kept alive through media support. It seems that all Americans are free up until the point to which their views begin to contradict the clearly observable, yet unofficial common laws of mainstream white society, and

unless an individual has the riches and media influence of Beyoncé, they may end up criminalized like the BPP or condemned like Bartlow and the students at Marquette University. To combat this fate, society as a whole must be willing to utilize critical analysis in order to develop thoughts and viewpoints that are independent of the ideologies and perceptions people are presented in their everyday lives. We must collectively be willing to look beyond the preconceived notions of what makes a protagonist and an antagonist and develop our own conclusions in order to transcend the boundaries imposed upon our freedom.

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