

Words of power or manipulation?

How we can protect our ability to think freely from both.

We go to great lengths to protect our bodies and our lives, our property and our computers from unauthorised access. Considering the spread of fake news, it is becoming absolutely crucial to also guard our thoughts and feelings from unchecked influences.

In our pluralistic society, many different conceptions exist about how life ought to be lived. Each and every group advocates their own personal, political and religious ideology. Oftentimes the demand for personal freedom leads to the desire to convince everyone of the same idea. This is the result of a centuries-long struggle for freedom of speech and is now a given in our culture.

For quite some time, experts and laypeople have been complaining about the slow decay of communication in politics and business, as the border between fact and opinion blurs. The task of advertising and political propaganda is no longer constrained to winning over customers and voters with the use of better arguments, but to transmit that message in such a way that the recipient no longer perceives it as such: They ought to buy this product, vote for that party, change their convictions – or simply stay confused and disoriented.

Someone might argue that this is nothing new since powerful elites have always used the people in order to preserve their own power. What is new is the methodology at play: in authoritarian or totalitarian systems, influence was exerted by way of restricting freedom, reducing election choices and through violence. In democratic societies we live under the premise of freedom – which, under closer inspection, is revealed as an illusion: instead of the words of power, manipulation reigns here. If you cannot force someone to do something directly, then people are made to “voluntarily” do what one wants them to do.

We have been able to see through these mechanisms for a long time, but now the technique seems to have become more uncontrollable. We seem to act against our own interests, e.g. by voluntarily handing over our data when using apps, Facebook or when shopping online. Although we are aware of the risks, we don't do anything about it. It becomes more difficult for us to detect invasive messages before they infect our psycho-emotional system like a pathogen.

And once they have exerted their devastating effect, we become mentally lazy and our ability to resist grows weary. Defense-strategies such as background research and critical thinking are no longer of help against these new threats as we have been weakened by this permanent assault on our system. After some time, we no longer believe our own thoughts and are no longer able to represent our own interests.

This also permanently destroys the achievements of our cultures: Respect, civility, collaboration, solidarity and verbal conflict resolution are lost. Instead of negotiations we see an increase in the desire to maximise mere self-interest.

Amid this atmosphere of uncertainty, many try to break through the manipulation by speaking their own words of power: They lose their readiness to look for compromise and to forego their own demands. In fact, we currently witness a “falling back behind the Enlightenment” among both individuals as well as political movements: any form of dialogue is rejected and differing opinions simply bounce off this mental barrier.

This turns individuals into fanatics and systems into autocracies. Advertising campaigns and political candidates surpass each other with their contradictions until voters can no longer tell who is manipulating them and how. Totalitarian regimes promise to emancipate the population from this “diabolical” free thought by taking strong and clear positions on issues and violently suppressing any debate about them. They convey the hope of having easy solutions to all problems.

It would be easy to attribute these strategies solely to the politically right-wing parties or to various Islamic tendencies. This is not the case: people on the left, greens and liberals are increasingly condemning other opinions, personally defaming the individuals behind them.

When society's leading thinkers no longer respond to arguments of their opponents, but merely attack them as a person, then the language of power can be heard everywhere.

However, we are not entirely defenseless. All we have to do is employ our most crucial resource: reason. Reason is freely available to all of us and it must be used consistently. We need to acknowledge any in-



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coming message, analyse its background and contradictions, as well as the used terminology, and then begin to look for solutions and counter strategies.

There is a saying in the IT industry: "The greatest risk does not come from the computer, but from the person in front of it." In the end, security measures are futile if the person shouldering responsibility is not fully focused. This applies to all areas of life.

If we are more attentive in everyday life, we will be able to spot risks sooner and have more time for appropriate reactions. Diseases, conflicts, money woes and political upheavals often announce themselves quietly and prematurely. We often miss warning signals and end up being surprised by catastrophes.

When engaging with all of these possible dangers, we run the risk of fear catching up with us. We must not let shock reports irritate us but must concentrate on solutions instead. Viktor E. Frankl speaks of the "defiant power of the human spirit", the human ability to take one's fate into one's own hands and to rise above oneself.

People who have learned to use their reason are able to recognise that a change in circumstance also requires a change in behaviour. This means having to accept that we can no longer live with the same sense of security that we used to have and that we will have to shape our engagement with others in a more conscious and deliberate manner.

When people rid themselves of fear and helplessness and begin to employ reason, then a quantum leap towards a life with more freedom, equality and solidarity is possible. We should promise ourselves to keep our health and our sense of humour, even when facing great challenges, until the times are finally better again. We urgently need people who are able to feel consciously and reason clearly.

BOOK TIP

Machtwort

Christine Bauer-Jelinek explores the relationship between language and power, analyses mechanisms and manipulation, and shows ways in which one can achieve one's goals privately and in

professional life through better use of communication and language.

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