

Charles K. West, *The Social and Psychological Distortion of Information*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981, 160 pp., \$17.95 (cloth), \$8.95 (paper).

The simultaneous distortion and growth of information within the past few decades has increased the manipulation of the public. Charles K. West states that this manipulation occurs through the use of "information distortion." After analyzing this process, the author concludes that by following certain outlined procedures, information distortion can be reduced, ultimately resulting in a more democratic society. Although West may be optimistic about the future, he recognizes that in the present, information control will remain in the hands of an elite (such as corporate executives, governmental officials and the wealthy); for more equality to emerge, manipulation and control must be recognized and change must be consciously sought.

West builds to his conclusion by progressively expanding on his initial definition of information: "knowledge communicated or received concerning some fact" (5). Regarding the issue of whether information is subjective or objective, West (like philosopher Alfred North Whitehead) responds that "knowledge is the subjective interplay between subject and object" (11). Since information is subjective, distortion is rampant in its translation. This is due to the action of various "stimuli" which inhibit persons from viewing and perceiving information in the same manner. Furthermore, one cannot comprehend all stimuli in the environment, and hence perception necessitates selectivity.

The next step in West's analysis of information distortion is a description of the stimuli that produce confusion. These include external stimuli from the five sensory perception systems: kinesthetic, auditory, touch, taste or smell, and visual. Stimuli from one's "frame of reference" include six components; "concepts (fragmented, separate portions of knowledge), structures (organized bodies of knowledge), affects (mainly feelings, dispositions, and temperaments), needs (deficiencies), values (the person's idea of worth), and interests" (21). In addition

to these individually based stimuli, West describes two other primary sources of information distortion: (1) the "social group" (which is a productive force for influencing what one perceives by using "reinforcement" and "modeling"); and (2) language (which is the "nature" of how information is communicated).

Following his description of how information is distorted, West outlines specific processes for reducing manipulation. Persons must be aware that the problem exists, then strive to analyze information objectively. West delineates four stages in this process, including the analysis of: (1) distortion effects during problem conceptualization; (2) distortion effects during information selection; (3) distortion effects during conceptualizing the solution; and (4) implications. Subjectively, this would seem to be a more simple process than it actually is. Continuous conscious analysis of how one perceives information entails much effort, for we are met with a vast range of information. However, even if this was only partially accomplished, we would benefit from our efforts. By following these steps and reducing information distortion, "policy making" and "problem-solving" would be more productive for the entire population rather than just for the elite.

The ultimate step for reducing manipulation is the actual involvement of the public in governmental policy making. "for this is the single most important issue that we face in our culture today" (109). West states that this involvement is achievable. With the advancement of technology (specifically the computer), information can be readily accessible to all and communication can be acquired almost immediately. As West states, perhaps

the greatest tragedy of Western culture is that we have not systematically used modern informational technology to extend democratic functioning. We must immediately employ electronic media to our own free purposes, or we may find increasing encroachments on our liberty (124).

*The Social and Psychological Distortion of Information* is a very understandable and readable book. West's ideas are

portrayed in a succinct and lucid fashion. The author competently reviews past research when providing empirical support for his ideas. For this reason, this monograph provides good reference material for future studies and papers that deal with the use and abuse of information. West's theory may be somewhat utopian, however his book still deserves to be read by anyone seeking a better informed society.

McPherson College

James K. Janzen