

Narrative Warfare, Communication Theories, and Countermeasures against Narrative Control

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Abstract: This paper explored the mechanics of psychological manipulation and narrative control during the COVID-19 pandemic by utilizing Chase Hughes' "Six Layers of Control" framework. As digital landscapes increasingly prioritized algorithmic engagement over authentic discourse, this study deconstructed how public perception was transitioned from a biological reality into a managed simulation. Using a multidimensional qualitative analysis, the research employed Theoretical Triangulation to map Hughes' layers—Mediated Reality, Human Conditioning, Collapse of Information, Fear/Identity Control, Narrative Warfare, and the Theater of Power—onto established communication theories, including Baudrillard's Hyperreality, Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, and Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence. The study applied this synthesized framework to the COVID-19 pandemic as a primary case study, analyzing how digital dashboards, social-distancing markers, and vaccine-status signaling functioned as practical tools for social conditioning and tribal segmentation. The findings suggested that the pandemic served as a catalyst for "narrative warfare," where nuance was sacrificed for "prepackaged moral frames" and performative symbolic gestures. To address these challenges, the paper concluded with a Curriculum Comparative Analysis of the Bachelor of Arts in Communication programs at St. Paul University Manila. It proposed specific pedagogical interventions—such as Phenomenological Literacy and Algorithmic Awareness—integrated into core courses like Communication Theory and Media Ethics. By shifting higher education from a model of content production to one of critical discernment, this paper provided a strategic roadmap for equipping students to ethically recognize and dismantle the machinery of modern mind-manipulation.

Keywords: Six Layers of Control, COVID-19, Hyperreality, Narrative Warfare, Communication Education, Algorithmic Conditioning

I. Introduction

Chase Hughes is a relevant discourse builder because his "Six Layers of Control" framework provides a systematic linguistic and psychological map for deconstructing modern narrative manipulation (Hughes, 2024). His relevance stems from his unique background as a former military intelligence officer specializing in psychological operations (PSYOPS), allowing him to bridge high-level communication theory with the digital "simulation" experienced by everyday users. Hughes acts as a significant contributor to public literacy by synthesizing complex academic concepts—such as Baudrillard's (1981) Hyperreality and Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Analysis—into an accessible critique of how "mediated reality" and the "theater of power" function as a distraction machine to keep populations "emotionally occupied" (Hughes, 2024). By identifying specific "conditioning signals" and "visibility rewards" within modern algorithms, he highlights a "death of authenticity" where individuals flatten their personalities to fit what is socially "sharable" (Hughes, 2024; Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Furthermore, Hughes is a pivotal voice in exposing "narrative warfare," arguing that the deliberate removal of nuance is a tactic used to segment society into "two simplified tribes" with "predictable reaction sets" (Hughes, 2024; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). His work aligns with Noelle-Neumann's (1974) Spiral of Silence, as he identifies the "fear of ostracism" as the primary mechanic used to enforce conformity through social threat (Hughes, 2024). Ultimately, Hughes' framework possesses significant educational utility, offering a pedagogical basis for common communication courses—such as those found in the St. Paul University Manila (2024) curricula—to teach students how to move from being "trained" by content to being "educated" through critical discernment and moral reasoning.

II. Narrative Warfare and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Narrative Warfare during the COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by the rapid polarization of information into two rigid, competing stories, where scientific nuance was replaced by tribal loyalty. Instead of a collaborative global inquiry, the information landscape became a battlefield of "predictable reaction sets" where every new data point was immediately weaponized by one "tribe" against the other (Hughes, 2024).

The following incidences reflect how Narrative Warfare manifested during the pandemic:

The Lab-Leak Controversy. Early in the pandemic, the hypothesis that the virus may have originated from a laboratory was not treated as a scientific possibility to be investigated but as a "narrative landmine" (Hughes, 2024). Mentioning it became a marker of tribal identity; for one side, it was a "conspiracy theory" to be silenced, while for the other, it was an absolute truth being suppressed. This "deliberate demonization" of the opposing view ensured that the actual origin of the virus remained secondary to the war over the "prepackaged moral frame" (Hughes, 2024).

The Ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine Debates. The discourse surrounding these drugs moved quickly from clinical trials to "symbolic gestures" of group belonging. Public figures and social media users did not discuss dosage or pharmacology; instead, the drugs became "props" in a "Theater of Power" (Goffman, 1959; Hughes, 2024). One side used them as symbols of "medical freedom," while the other used "horse dewormer" tropes to signal intellectual superiority. This "audience segmentation" provided both sides with "full-blown permission to hate people" based on their stance on a pharmaceutical (Hughes, 2024).

Digital Badging and "Vaccine Passports". The use of "Vaccinated" badges on social media and the implementation of physical passports functioned as "conditioning signals" (Hughes, 2024). These were not just health tools but "lapel pins" that signaled conformity with the dominant narrative. Those who refused these symbols were met with "social threat" and the "fear of ostracism," reflecting an environment where "signaling replaces moral reasoning" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Hughes, 2024).

The "New Variant" Cycle. The consistent media focus on variants like Delta and Omicron served to keep the population in a "constant state of moral emergency" (Hughes, 2024). Each variant was presented with an urgent "frame" that decided "who's a victim [and] who's a villain" before the science was clear. Because "resolution ends the engagement cycle," the narrative was structured to prevent "silence," the space where critical thinking occurs, keeping the public "emotionally occupied" rather than "materially informed" (Hughes, 2024).

III. The Failure of Communication during COVID-19 Pandemic

The failure of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic can be characterized as a breakdown of objective information exchange in favor of **Narrative Warfare**. Rather than serving as a tool for public health clarity, communication was weaponized to create "two simplified tribes" with "predictable reaction sets,"

effectively replacing medical nuance with binary ideological loyalties (Hughes, 2024). This failure manifested through the deliberate removal of context, where scientific uncertainty was reframed as moral certainty to manage population behavior rather than to inform it.

The following points outline the specific failures of communication within this context:

The Weaponization of Uncertainty. A primary failure was the inability of communication systems to host "nuance," which is always the "first casualty" in narrative warfare (Hughes, 2024). Scientific debates regarding the virus's origin—such as the lab-leak hypothesis—were not treated as inquiries but as "narrative landmines." These topics were immediately categorized into "prepackaged moral frames," where questioning the dominant story was labeled as "misinformation" or "conspiracy," effectively utilizing the **Spiral of Silence** to suppress dissenting scientific voices (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Hughes, 2024).

The Shift from Information to "Content". Communication failed because it shifted from providing "information" (which answers questions) to producing "content" (which triggers emotion and occupies attention) (Hughes, 2024). By maintaining a "constant state of moral emergency" through the "new variant" cycle, media and political actors ensured that "nothing ever resolves," because resolution would end the "engagement cycle" (Hughes, 2024). This kept the public "emotionally occupied" by the "Theater of Power" rather than "materially informed" about actual risk (Goffman, 1959; Hughes, 2024).

Signaling Over Moral Reasoning. Communication failed to promote critical thinking, instead rewarding "performative gestures" (Hughes, 2024). Rituals such as digital badges or the public shaming of the unmasked became "conditioning signals" that replaced internal "moral reasoning" (Hughes, 2024). Identity became a "lapel pin" or a "costume," where individuals adopted "ready-made positions" primarily to avoid "social punishment" and the "fear of ostracism" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Hughes, 2024).

Deliberate Demonization and Tribalism. Perhaps the most significant failure was the "deliberate demonization" of those outside the prescribed narrative. Communication was used to create "full-blown permission to hate people" based on their adherence to specific protocols (Hughes, 2024). By segmenting the audience into "virtuous" and "dangerous" groups, the system ensured that as long as the tribes were fighting each other, the "actual sources of instability" and policy failures remained "completely untouched" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hughes, 2024).

IV. Research Gap

The research questions provided address a significant **transdisciplinary research gap** that exists at the intersection of behavioral intelligence, classical communication theory, and pedagogical application. Specifically, the research addresses the lack of a structured, ethically-grounded framework for deconstructing and countering modern narrative manipulation in both public crises and higher education.

The specific gaps being filled include:

The Integration of Behavioral Intelligence into Communication Theory. While Chase Hughes' "Six Layers of Control" provides a tactical map of human influence, it has largely remained within the domain of behavioral profiling and intelligence. There is a research gap in **theoretically articulating** these tactical layers using established academic frameworks like Hyperreality, the Spiral of Silence, or Dramaturgical Analysis. By answering how these layers are supported by formal theory, the research moves from "tactical observation" to "systemic academic critique."

Theoretical Application to the COVID-19 Information Crisis. While much has been written about "fake news" or "misinformation" during the pandemic, there is a gap in understanding the **mechanics of control** that allowed for such rapid societal polarization. The research addresses this by using the Six Layers to explain the "struggle for control," moving beyond simple fact-checking to analyze how the pandemic was turned into a "simulation" or a "Theater of Power."

The Lack of "Counter-Control" Pedagogies in Higher Education. The most critical gap addressed is the **lack of actionable ethical interventions** within communication curricula. Most curricula focus on *how to communicate* (production), but few address *how to resist* sophisticated narrative weaponization (discernment). This research bridges the gap between identifying a problem (manipulation) and providing a solution (curriculum integration), specifically recommending how common courses can ethically immunize students against these six layers of control.

V. Philosophical Underpinning

The philosophical underpinning connecting behaviorism, social psychology, and cognitive science within the "Six Layers of Control" is rooted in **Naturalism** and **Functionalism**, which treat human consciousness as a predictable, biological system. Naturalism provides the basis for "human conditioning," viewing individuals as biological machines that respond to "conditioning signals" and "visibility rewards," while Functionalism frames the mind as an information processor where "content" can be strategically used to "trigger emotion" and "occupy attention". This perspective facilitates the transition into **Hyperreality**, where "mediated reality" and "symbolic layers" replace lived experience, making "truth optional" as long as the narrative is socially enforced. Furthermore, Social Constructivism allows for "identity control" through the "fear of ostracism," forcing individuals to adopt "prepackaged moral frames" and "ready-made positions" to avoid social punishment. Ultimately, this synthesis results in a "Theater of Power" that utilizes **Dramaturgical Analysis** to keep the population "emotionally occupied" with "performative outrage" while the "actual sources of instability remain completely untouched."

VI. Statement of the Problem

Articulating Mind-Manipulation during the COVID-19 Pandemic through Chase Hughes' Six Layers of Control

1. What are the mechanics of Hughes' Six Layer of Control?
2. How are the Six Layers of Control articulated by communication theories?
3. How can communication theories explain the struggle for control during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How can higher education ethically address each layer of control through communication education?

VII. Methodology

The methodology conducted for this paper involves a multidimensional qualitative analysis that synthesizes media criticism, communication theory, and curriculum evaluation. The process was structured to deconstruct the mechanics of modern narrative control and propose educational counter-measures.

The methodology can be broken down into the following key phases:

1. Thematic Deconstruction of Source Content

The primary step involved a deep thematic analysis of the "Six Layers of Control" framework reflected in the transcript of Chase Hughes (1.6 million subscribers) YouTube video titled "We Are Livestock. It Was All

a Lie” (with 1,067,710 views since its upload on March 6, 2026). This phase focused on identifying the specific "mechanics" of each layer—ranging from the replacement of direct experience with "mediated reality" to the use of "narrative warfare" and "identity fragmentation" to manage public perception.

2. Theoretical Triangulation

Once the layers were identified, the methodology employed Theoretical Triangulation to validate the transcript's assertions against established academic communication theories. This involved mapping the "simulation" described in the source to:

- Hyperreality (Baudrillard) to explain the dominance of the "symbolic layer".
- Cultivation Theory (Gerbner) to explain "human conditioning" via algorithmic rewards.
- Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw) to explain the "collapse of information" into "content".
- Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann) to explain "fear and identity control" through "social threat".
- Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner) to explain the "left versus right illusion" in "narrative warfare".
- Dramaturgical Analysis (Goffman) to explain the "theater of power" in modern politics.

3. Case Study Application

The paper applied the synthesized theoretical framework to the COVID-19 pandemic as a real-world case study. This phase involved identifying specific pandemic-era events—such as digital case-count dashboards, social distancing markers, and vaccine-status signaling—and analyzing them as practical manifestations of the six layers of control.

4. Curriculum Comparative Analysis

The methodology concluded with a comparative review of the 2024 Revised Curricula for Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Visual Design Communication from St. Paul University Manila.

- **Identification of Integration Points:** The researcher identified common "CMM" (Communication) courses, such as Communication Theory (CMM 102), Media Laws and Ethics (CMM 105), and Multimedia Storytelling (CMM 124).
- **Pedagogical Intervention Design:** For each identified course, a specific educational intervention was designed—including activities, outcomes, and success indicators—aimed at ethically equipping students to recognize and counter the identified layers of manipulation.

VIII. Results

What are the mechanics of Hughes' Six Layer of Control?

Hughes outlined a systematic "simulation" designed to replace direct experience with a symbolic, controlled environment. This process functions through six distinct layers that transition individuals from authentic living to algorithmic conditioning.

Layer 1: Mediated Reality. The process begins by shifting the individual away from direct, lived experience into a world that is entirely mediated by external interpretations. Instead of witnessing events firsthand, people experience "coverage, preframed interpretations of ideas, avatars, personality, costumes, personas, and masks". This layer functions by replacing deep understanding with headlines and substituting human complexity with political labels. Because symbols become dominant in this layer, the transcript asserts that "truth becomes

optional" because it no longer needs to be accurate; it only needs to be "repeatable, emotionally charged, recognizable, and socially enforced".

Layer 2: Human Conditioning. Once reality is mediated, the system implements a training regimen that replaces genuine learning with algorithmic reinforcement. This layer relies on "conditioning signals" where "whatever gets rewarded gets repeated" and "whatever gets ignored disappears". As a result, individuals begin to flatten their personalities into "something that's sharable" and predictable. This creates a profound internal break where "external performance doesn't match your internal experience," leading to a universal feeling of being "hollow".

Layer 3: The Collapse of Information. To maintain control, the system replaces "information," which answers questions and creates understanding, with "content," which is designed solely to stimulate responses. The mechanic of this layer is to "occupy attention, trigger emotion, maintain your engagement, and prevent silence". This constant state of urgency ensures that nothing ever resolves, as "resolution ends the engagement cycle," effectively trapping the individual in a loop of perpetual, non-productive participation.

Layer 4: Fear and Identity Control. The fourth layer hijacks the evolutionary human need for belonging, utilizing the "fear of ostracism" to enforce social conformity. Fear is weaponized because it "scales engagement better than any other emotion" by speeding up reaction times and reducing nuance. Under this pressure, individuals abandon the slow development of personal values in favor of a "prepackaged moral frame" consisting of "ready-made positions, approved language, approved emotions, [and] approved enemies".

Layer 5: Narrative Warfare. Narrative warfare involves the total construction of frames that dictate who is a victim and who is a villain, often before an individual has time to think. This layer uses the "left versus right illusion" to segment audiences into "two simplified tribes" with "predictable reaction sets". By removing context and complexity, the system ensures that "nuance is always the first casualty," allowing narratives to radicalize people through "heroes and enemies and moral certainty".

Layer 6: The Theater of Power. The final layer reveals modern politics as a "distraction machine" and a "stage with roles and costumes" rather than a system for solving material problems. This "theater" uses "performative outrage and symbolic gestures" to keep the population "emotionally occupied, not materially informed". While the public argues over symbols and team loyalty, the "actual sources of instability remain completely untouched," ensuring that the simulation remains intact while progress remains stagnant.

IX. How are the Six Layers of Control articulated by communication theories?

The "Six Layers of Control" function as a cohesive system of "narrative warfare" designed to replace reality with a symbolic simulation. This process is articulated through several foundational communication theories that explain how human perception and social behavior are manipulated at scale.

Layer 1: Mediated Reality and Hyperreality. The first layer involves the transition from direct experience to a "mediated" existence. This aligns with **Jean Baudrillard's theory of Hyperreality**, where symbols and signs become more real than the objects they represent (Baudrillard, 1981). The transcript notes that in this layer, "a headline starts replacing understanding" and "a political label replaces a human being" (Hughes, 2024). Because reality is "replaced layer by layer," the simulation becomes the primary point of reference, making "truth optional" as long as the narrative is "repeatable, emotionally charged, recognizable, and socially enforced" (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 2: Human Conditioning and Cultivation Theory. The second layer, "human conditioning," functions through **Gerbner's Cultivation Theory**, which suggests that repeated media exposure shapes a person's long-term perception of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The transcript describes this as a shift where "training is what replaces learning" through "algorithmic reinforcement" and "visibility rewards" (Hughes, 2024). Individuals are shaped by "conditioning signals" and begin to ask, "How will this be received by other people?" rather than "Is this how I feel?" (Hughes, 2024). This results in a "death of authenticity" as people flatten their personalities to fit the rewarded narrative.

Layer 3: Collapse of Information and Agenda Setting. Layer three utilizes **McCombs and Shaw's Agenda Setting Theory** to prioritize "content" over "information" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While information "answers questions," content is designed solely to "stimulate responses" and "occupy attention" (Hughes, 2024). The mechanic here is to maintain a "constant state of moral emergency" so that "nothing ever resolves because resolution ends the engagement cycle" (Hughes, 2024). By preventing "silence," the system ensures that the space "where thinking happens" is entirely crowded out by urgent, emotionally charged stimuli.

Layer 4: Fear/Identity Control and the Spiral of Silence. The fourth layer exploits the **Spiral of Silence**, leveraging the evolutionary "fear of ostracism" to enforce conformity (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The transcript asserts that "conformity is enforced with social threat" and "questioning the frame is dangerous" (Hughes, 2024). As identity becomes "unstable," individuals accept "prepackaged moral frames" and "ready-made positions" to feel safe. In this stage, "signaling replaces moral reasoning" and "virtue becomes a lapel pin," turning personal ethics into a "performative... costume" (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 5: Narrative Warfare and Social Identity Theory. Layer five employs **Social Identity Theory** to segment the population into "two simplified tribes" through "narrative warfare" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Narratives are weaponized by removing context until "complexity completely disappears" and "nuance is always the first casualty" (Hughes, 2024). By constructing stories with "heroes and enemies," the system provides "full-blown permission to hate people" (Hughes, 2024). This "deliberate demonization" ensures that while people "fight each other, nothing upstream is ever examined" (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 6: The Theater of Power and Dramaturgy. The final layer, the "theater of power," is articulated through **Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis**, where politics is viewed as a "stage with roles and costumes" (Goffman, 1959). The transcript argues that "modern politics is not a system for solving problems" but a "distraction machine" (Hughes, 2024). Events are treated as "props" for "performative outrage and symbolic gestures" (Hughes, 2024). By keeping the population "emotionally occupied, not materially informed," the system ensures that "actual sources of instability remain completely untouched" (Hughes, 2024).

Table 1

Comparison of Narrative Control Layers and Communication Theories

Layer of Control	Core Mechanic from Transcript	Corresponding Communication Theory	Theoretical Focus
1. Mediated Reality	Experience is replaced by "avatars, personas, and masks" where the "symbolic layer" becomes dominant.	Hyperreality (Jean Baudrillard)	The state where a sign or symbol becomes more real to the viewer than the reality it represents.

2. Human Conditioning	"Algorithmic reinforcement" and "visibility rewards" ensure that "whatever gets rewarded gets repeated."	Cultivation Theory (George Gerbner)	How repeated exposure to media over time shapes a person's perception of social reality.
3. Collapse of Information	Information is replaced by "content" designed to "occupy attention" and "prevent silence."	Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw)	The ability of media to influence the importance placed on topics, telling the audience what to think <i>about</i> .
4. Fear & Identity Control	"Conformity is enforced with social threat" and the "fear of ostracism" to manage group behavior.	Spiral of Silence (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann)	The tendency of people to remain silent when they feel their views are in the minority for fear of isolation.
5. Narrative Warfare	Context is removed so "nuance is the first casualty," creating "two simplified tribes."	Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner)	How individuals categorize themselves into "in-groups" and "out-groups," leading to intergroup conflict.
6. Theater of Power	Politics becomes a "stage with roles and costumes" used as a "distraction machine."	Dramaturgical Analysis (Erving Goffman)	The idea that social life is a theatrical performance where actors manage impressions for an audience.

X. How can communication theories explain the struggle for control during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The struggle for control during the COVID-19 pandemic can be analyzed as a systematic application of narrative weaponization, where public perception was transitioned from a biological reality into a managed simulation. This process is demonstrated through the following six layers, supported by communication theories and specific pandemic-era events.

Layer 1: Mediated Reality and Hyperreality. According to the framework, the first layer replaces direct experience with a "symbolic layer" of "coverage, prefamed interpretations of ideas, avatars, personality, costumes, personas, and masks" (Hughes, 2024). This aligns with Baudrillard's theory of **Hyperreality**, in which the representation becomes more real to the public than the phenomenon itself (Baudrillard, 1981).

The digital "COVID-19 Dashboard" (e.g., Johns Hopkins University) became the primary reality. For the majority of the population who were not in intensive care units, the pandemic was experienced as a series of red dots on a map and scrolling tickers of "case counts." As Baudrillard (1981) noted, the "map precedes the territory"; the statistical model became the reality people lived in, where "a headline starts replacing understanding" (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 2: Human Conditioning and Cultivation Theory. Control was reinforced through "algorithmic reinforcement" and "visibility rewards," turning health protocols into "conditioning signals" (Hughes, 2024). This

reflects Gerbner's **Cultivation Theory**, where repeated media exposure shapes a person's long-term perception of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

The implementation of social distancing floor stickers and plexiglass barriers in low-risk environments functioned as "conditioning signals" (Hughes, 2024). These physical markers, combined with constant "Stay Home, Save Lives" media saturation, cultivated a "Mean World Syndrome" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Individuals began to ask "How will this be received?" by their digital peers before expressing doubt, leading to a "death of authenticity" (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 3: Collapse of Information and Agenda Setting. The system prioritized "content" designed to "occupy attention" and "prevent silence" (Hughes, 2024). Utilizing **Agenda-Setting Theory**, the media dictated not necessarily what to think, but "what to think about" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The "New Variant" cycle (Delta, Omicron, etc.) served as a mechanic to maintain a "constant state of moral emergency" (Hughes, 2024). Each variant was presented with immediate frames that "decide who's a victim, who's a villain" before facts were established. Because "resolution ends the engagement cycle," the narrative never allowed for a return to normalcy, ensuring the space "where thinking happens" was crowded out by urgent stimuli (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 4: Fear/Identity Control and the Spiral of Silence. The "fear of ostracism" was used to enforce "conformity with social threat" (Hughes, 2024). This is the core of the **Spiral of Silence**, which posits that people self-censor to avoid social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

The use of "Vaccinated" badges on social media profiles or the public shaming of those without masks. In this stage, "signaling replaces moral reasoning," and virtue is reduced to a "performative... costume" (Hughes, 2024). Individuals feared being "labeled" or "seen as one of them" (Hughes, 2024), choosing to align with the perceived majority opinion to avoid the "social punishment" of being cast out from the "righteous" group (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Layer 5: Narrative Warfare and Social Identity Theory. The pandemic was funneled into a "left versus right illusion" to create "two simplified tribes" (Hughes, 2024). Drawing on **Social Identity Theory**, the system used "deliberate demonization" to ensure intergroup conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The debate over Ivermectin or lab-leak theories. These topics were not treated as scientific inquiries but as "narrative warfare" (Hughes, 2024). "Nuance is always the first casualty" as individuals defended their tribe's "prepackaged moral frame" even when the data was unclear, because "abandoning the story means abandoning the identity" (Hughes, 2024).

Layer 6: The Theater of Power and Dramaturgy. Finally, the pandemic functioned through **Dramaturgy**, where political leaders engaged in "performative outrage" on a "stage with roles and costumes" (Goffman, 1959; Hughes, 2024).

Televised daily briefings and symbolic "essential worker" flyovers. These events often felt "emotional and change nothing" regarding the actual material conditions of the healthcare system (Hughes, 2024). These were "props" used in a "distraction machine" to keep the population "emotionally occupied" while the "actual sources of instability"—such as wealth transfers or policy failures—remained "completely untouched" (Hughes, 2024).

XI. Discussion

How can higher education ethically address each layer of control through communication education?

Higher education has a unique ethical obligation to dismantle the "simulation" by moving from a model of information consumption to one of critical discernment. To address the Six Layers of Control, communication education must shift its focus from teaching students how to *produce* content to teaching them how to *deconstruct* the machinery of mediated narratives.

1. Deconstructing Hyperreality (Layer 1). To address the transition from direct experience to mediated symbols, higher education must prioritize **Phenomenological Literacy**. Ethically, educators should encourage students to distinguish between "the map" (data/headlines) and "the territory" (lived reality).

Curriculum should include exercises where students compare raw, unedited footage or primary source documents against the "preframed interpretations" found in mainstream and social media (Hughes, 2024). This helps students see how "a headline starts replacing understanding" (Hughes, 2024).

2. Counteracting Cultivation (Layer 2). Higher education can ethically address "human conditioning" by fostering **Algorithmic Awareness**. Since the system rewards "performative... costumes" over authenticity, communication departments must teach the mechanics of visibility rewards (Hughes, 2024).

Students should analyze the "conditioning signals" of digital platforms (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). By understanding how algorithms reward outrage and repetition, students can move from being "trained" to being "educated," reclaiming their internal experience from external performance.

3. Reclaiming Information from Content (Layer 3). Ethical communication education must defend the space "where thinking happens" (Hughes, 2024). Higher education should move away from the "constant state of moral emergency" and prioritize **Slow Information Processing**.

Instead of reacting to the "new variant" or the latest "viral cycle," students should be assigned longitudinal studies. Using **Agenda-Setting Theory**, educators can show how "content" is designed to stimulate responses rather than answer questions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Teaching students to value silence and deep research breaks the "engagement cycle" (Hughes, 2024).

4. Breaking the Spiral of Silence (Layer 4). Higher education must protect the diversity of thought by addressing the "fear of ostracism" (Hughes, 2024). Ethically, the university should be a sanctuary where "questioning the frame" is not seen as "dangerous" (Hughes, 2024).

Communication courses should explicitly teach the **Spiral of Silence** to help students recognize when they are self-censoring due to "social threat" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Creating debate environments where "signaling" is discouraged and "moral reasoning" is required helps students move past "prepackaged moral frames" (Hughes, 2024).

5. Dismantling Tribalism (Layer 5). To combat "narrative warfare" and "deliberate demonization," higher education must emphasize **Nuance and Complexity**. Ethically, educators must reject the "left versus right illusion" that segments the audience into "two simplified tribes" (Hughes, 2024).

By applying **Social Identity Theory**, students can study how "nuance is always the first casualty" in a conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Assignments should require students to argue for the "enemy's" narrative using only the "enemy's" values, effectively humanizing the "other" and dissolving the weaponized narrative (Hughes, 2024).

6. Exposing the Theater of Power (Layer 6). Finally, higher education should teach students to look "upstream" at the "actual sources of instability" rather than the "stage with roles and costumes" (Hughes, 2024).

Using **Dramaturgical Analysis**, students can deconstruct political events as "performative outrage and symbolic gestures" (Goffman, 1959; Hughes, 2024). By teaching students to ignore the "distraction machine" of the "spectacle," higher education empowers them to focus on material solutions rather than emotional occupancy (Hughes, 2024).

The ethical role of higher education in addressing narrative weaponization involves a shift from teaching students how to produce content to fostering a state of critical discernment. To dismantle **Layer 1 (Mediated Reality)**, communication education must prioritize phenomenological literacy, where students are taught to distinguish between "the map" of data and the "territory" of lived reality. Educators can ethically counter **Layer 2 (Human Conditioning)** by implementing "Algorithmic Awareness" training that exposes how "conditioning signals" and "visibility rewards" pressure individuals to flatten their authentic personalities into predictable, "sharable" performances.

To reclaim **Layer 3 (The Collapse of Information)**, the curriculum must distinguish between "content" designed to stimulate response and "information" meant to answer questions, emphasizing "silence" as the essential space where actual thinking occurs. Breaking the **Layer 4 (Fear and Identity Control)** requires universities to be sanctuaries for diverse thought where "questioning the frame" is encouraged rather than treated as "dangerous". This helps students resist the "fear of ostracism" and the adoption of "prepackaged moral frames".

Finally, to combat **Layer 5 (Narrative Warfare)** and **Layer 6 (The Theater of Power)**, higher education must emphasize nuance as a defense against "audience segmentation" and the "left versus right illusion". By applying dramaturgical analysis to modern politics, students learn to view "performative outrage and symbolic gestures" as a "distraction machine". This empowers them to look "upstream" at the "actual sources of instability" rather than remaining "emotionally occupied" by a theatrical simulation.

Table 2

Comprehensive Course Integration Plan

Layer of Control	Primary Common Course	Recommended Educational Intervention
Layer 1: Mediated Reality	CMM 101: Intro to Comm Media	Phenomenological Literacy: Students analyze how "a headline starts replacing understanding" by comparing raw event data against "preframed interpretations".
Layer 2: Human Conditioning	CMM 102: Communication Theory	Algorithmic Deconstruction: Students identify "conditioning signals" and "visibility rewards" that pressure individuals to "flatten their personality into something sharable".

Layer of Control	Primary Common Course	Recommended Educational Intervention
Layer 3: Collapse of Information	CMM 103: Communication Research	Information vs. Content Lab: Students research how "content stimulates responses" while "information answers questions" , focusing on breaking the "engagement cycle" that prevents deep thinking.
Layer 4: Fear & Identity Control	CMM 104: Comm, Culture, and Society	Spiral of Silence Workshop: Students explore the "fear of ostracism" and how "conformity is enforced with social threat" , practicing the defense of "unstable identities".
Layer 5: Narrative Warfare	CMM 108: Development Communication	Nuance Restoration: Educators dismantle "audience segmentation" and the "left versus right illusion" by requiring students to find the "nuance" that is typically the "first casualty" in narrative war.
Layer 6: Theater of Power	CMM 105: Comm Media Laws & Ethics	Dramaturgical Analysis: Students evaluate political "performative outrage" as a "distraction machine" , learning to focus on "actual sources of instability" rather than "symbolic gestures".

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