

## PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT BY THE MOVIE “WAG THE DOG” REVIEW

**Arş. Gör. Sare GÜRLER<sup>1</sup>**  
**LL.M Halil Emre GÜRLER<sup>2</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

Since technology developed, media swiftly became effective in society. The media increasingly plays significant and influential role on lives of people through their perception to the events. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television are effective in media communication. Besides, cinema is one of strong mass media tools. There are many films about media on individuals and societies. One of them is “Wag the Dog” narrate about relationship between media and politics. A political satire film called Wag the Dog includes subjects which is common in politics of many states. The media effect is commonly used as state apparatus for political campaigns, political decisions and conducting the masses. In this article, perception management, manipulation, CNN effect, manufacturing consent, agenda setting theory will be conceptually explained. Afterwards, the review of the film “Wag the Dog” is to be held as analysis through these explanations and will be concluded.

**Keywords:** Perception Management, Manipulation, CNN Effect, Manufacturing Consent, Agenda Setting Theory, Wag the Dog.

## ALGI YÖNETİMİ ÇERÇEVESİNDE ”BAŞKANIN ADAMLARI” FİLMİNİN İNCELENMESİ

### ÖZET

Teknolojinin gelişmesiyle birlikte medya, toplumda hızla etkin bir hâle gelmiştir. Olayları algılayış biçimiyle medya, insanların yaşamları üzerinde giderek daha önemli ve etkin bir rol oynamaktadır. Medya iletişimde gazete, dergi, radyo ve televizyon etkili araçlardandır. Ayrıca güçlü iletişim araçlarından biri olan sinemada etkisini göstermektedir. Medya hakkında bireyler ve toplumlar hakkında birçok film bulunmaktadır. Bunlardan biri de medya ve siyaset ilişkisini anlatan “Wag the Dog” hikayesidir. ”Wag the Dog” adlı bir siyasi hiciv filmi, birçok devletin siyasetinde ortak olan konuları içermektedir. Bu filmde de etkisini gösteren medya etkisi; yaygın olarak siyasi kampanyalar, siyasi kararlar ve kitleleri yönetmek için devlet aygıtı olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bu makalede algı yönetimi, manipülasyon, CNN etkisi, üretim onayı, gündem belirleme teorisi kavramsal olarak açıklanacaktır. Devamında teorik çerçevedeki bulgular, “Wag the Dog” filmi ile analiz edilerek incelemesi yapılacak ve sonuçlandırılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Algı Yönetimi, Manipülasyon, CNN Etkisi, Üretim Onayı, Gündem Belirleme Teorisi, Başkanın Adamları.

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<sup>1</sup> Nişantaşı Üniversitesi, Uygulamalı Bilimler Yüksekokulu, ORCID: 0000-0002-4177-1712, saregurler@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Gürler L/LC Hukuk & Danışmanlık, ORCID: 0000-0002-7585-3417, av.emregurler@gmail.com

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## CONCEPTUAL ASSESSMENT

The media increasingly plays significant and influential role on lives of people through their perception to the events. There are many forms of perception management that affect people. A few of them are listed as follows: perception management, manipulation, CNN effect, manufacturing consent, agenda setting theory. Perception management and manipulation are the dominant factor in the media field, because it always presents the news by making a choice, that is, by making a choice (Al, 2017: 209).

Perception management is briefly a tool to be used systematically for manufacturing consent among target audience of a nation/s, group/s or individuals for a specific purpose. This operation called 'Perception Management' usually utilizes for political, economic, martial aims by leaders, companies, states. As is evident from it's name, perception management differentiates from manipulation through it's objective. Manipulation is misdirection of target audience. These two different kinds of persuasion techniques derived from the term propaganda. Propaganda is defined in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition as ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage and opposing cause (Mish, 1993). Eventually, we all see surroundings how we perceived and the interpretation process of people about issues will be affected by intervention of a source of information to be used for an objective (Karabulut, 2014:32).

These concepts "perception management" and "manipulation" are effective tool in order to give desired message by media. Especially, in this movie, we encounter many example of manipulation and methods of changing people's perception. One of methods of changing perception, which used by media, is manufacturing consent which means basically that media is always supported by government. In the manufacturing consent, government play important role on media and controls it. For example, when government wants tho change public's perception for their own interests, it appeals media. Media produces new products like factory for government's interests by distracting public's perception. This is called manufacturing consent. There are many examples of manufacturing consent in this movie.

The CNN Effect is a political science theory which have major impact on states' foreign policy since Cold War. Reliable and 24 hours broadcasting international news channels are considered to have impact on society called CNN Effect. Domestic people can not substantiate real time events at foreign lands. Society earns the information through these resources by what they publishes and how they publishes. This impact of media directs or misdirects the reactions of people according to who is in control over media. So, theorists take the CNN effect as it is capable of driving policy (Robinson, 1999: 303).

The selection of news and how they reflected are important to influence masses. The interaction between state and media examined by two scholars, who are Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald Shaw (Hasanov, 2015: 3). The publishing channel, photograph, language, length of news, titles, tags are elements that unwillingly affects opinion of audience (Hasanov, 2015: 8).

Two common assumptions are leading in research articles, which are, the media do not reflect reality, it interprets it, and presented news becomes catchy for people (McCombs, M.E. & Shaw, D. 1972: 177). This attitude of media called agenda-setting is one of the cognitive effects of media on society. The titles as activation tags and memory traces as symbols trigger information processing when individuals make judgments about people or issues (Scheufele, 2000: 299). Bernard Cohen argues that, mass media do not mention people what to think, it mentions successfully its readers what to think about (Scheufele, 2000: 304). This effect of media is used by political leaders for political decisions and implementation, presidential campaigns, elections and perception management processes.

### **1. THE STORYLINE**

The film is released in 1997. There is less than two weeks for American presidential elections. A girl from a children group called Firefly Girls, who visited the United States president's office in the White House, claims that president had sexually harassed her. President is at the point of losing his chance to be re-elected. When this accusation is heard, the president is at his visit in China. President appoints Conrad Brean in order to manage the scandal. He does not try to deny the scandal. Instead, Brean makes a fake war story to cover this scandal and make distraction. Brean appeals for help of Stanley Motss, a Hollywood producer, in order to create a fictional battle. They find a mannequin to play in the teaser trailer, however, girl does not know anything. The girl plays a role of who escapes with the cat in a war. Before the teaser released at media, Brean and the team has prepared and spread rumors by press conferences. For instance, in the scene that Brean talking to the Hollywood producer, there is a press conference at tv, and reporters start to ask questions about B-3 Bombers and Albania to president's press executive. People believe in this scenario of war day by day and forget sexual harassment scandal. After a while, CIA finds out the event and declares that war has been over. After this announcement of CIA, Brean and his assistants immediately think about a new event. According to the new story, Albanians captured an American sergeant. People forget president's scandal once again. According to the plan, sergeant will be brought to the United States by plane, the sergeant will become a hero and the scandal will be completely forgotten. In that day, they will wait for William the sergeant on the plane. He boards the plane in handcuffs with polices, because he is a prisoner for 12 years by crimes of rape and drug use. The plane falls into a town due to an accident. In the town, William tries to rape a woman and get killed by her father. Then, they create a new story. They spread news of sergeant and he comes to the United States with death ceremony. At the end of this story, president wins election with rate of 89%. Motss would be very happy, because he fictionalizes this story and president win the election due to Motss' story. However, president's victory is affiliated with only advertisements by tv broadcasters. For this reason, Motss get so angry and he decides to explain what really happens. Audiences heard the news that he died by heart attack at the pool on next day. Thus, the movie ends.

## 2. REVIEW OF “WAG THE DOG”

The movie starts with that scene “Why does a dog wag its tail? Because a dog is smarter than its tail. If the tail were smarter, the tail would wag the dog.” (Wag the Dog, 1997). This analogy says that some people control others and these others directed by governors. They use their minds in the direction of their own interests or ideologies. Whereas others are the public who is like tail that wagged/managed. Shortly, this expression shows us that people are manipulable. The tool to wag is media which directs perception and attention of society. The metaphor fits the film by this way.

After this expression, a movie begins with a campaign advertisement. In the advertisement, there is this slogan emphasizes of the re-election of president, “never change horses in mid-stream” (Wag the Dog, 1997) which means it is not right to make changes in the constancy. While slogans releases, a sexual scandal breaks out which endangers president’s re-election campaign. A man called Conrad Brean comes the White House and an officer introduces him as a fixer to president’s press officers. When Brean hears scandal of harassment for the first time, he tells that it is not important whether news is true or wrong, important thing is the source of news. It is the “Washington Post”, he says “This is not good”, because he knows that in the news, resource liability is more important than accuracy of news. The CNN effect is seen here, because the accuracy of sexual scandal is not proved, but published in NY Times and Washington Post, but president lose credits in the eyes of people. So, they prepare a plan to fix re-election process by work of perception management and decide to use media. They prepare press releases and serves the media about delay of return to U.S. because of illness of president. Thus, Brean gains time to distract the perception of public for solution of president’s harassment scandal with a crisis that he will produce. For this reason, he tries to draw attention to the creation of extraordinary heroism of the president and perception of power and unity, convincing the people to a fictional war. They start their plan by creating a basis by rumors at a press conference. A journalist ask a question about the relation of president’s delay in China and the event of Albania, another one ask question about non-existed B3 bombers as if they exist. Even only rumors out of the blue started to spread from press conference and take attention of people above the sexual scandal. Brean and his team started to manage the society’s perception and attention.

For manufactured of the war, while Brean go to Stanley Motss who is a Hollywood film producer to create an impression of war in a teaser, he says to the White House official, who is worry about this war,” Do not worry. During the Reagan period, 240 sailors were killed in Beirut. We have surrounded Grenada in 24 hours! Change the story, change the lead. This is not new concept.” (Wag the Dog, 1997). Then, he continues to talk with Amelia, who is government official and worry about if public learn this fictional war, that “Who learns? American people? Who will tell them? What did they learn about the Gulf War? They saw a bomb falling on the roof and flying the building. That building could be a toy block.” (Wag the Dog, 1997). The Gulf War was an example of how the war propaganda was done for years in the U.S. because before the Gulf war, the gulf war showed people governments had huge power but after the 1991 conflict, it appeared how media shapes this war (Robinson, 1999: 72).

This message is that such manipulations and agenda changes have been made for a long time by people who have power. The only thing that change is the government rulers. System –as manipulation- is the same. Because, people of a country hear news of foreign lands only by media, and they accept the situation how the media releases. What media gives attention, the society perceives. In the movie, how can American citizens understand the war in Albania? By media channel. So, Brean uses this cognitive effect of media for election, to draw attention far from sexual scandal. This is called agenda-setting. Once the agenda was sexual scandal, they plan to create bigger crisis to cover hostile scandal, like Motss said “They will ruin the president, you need a war.” Also, they save president’s reputation by agenda-setting, because he will become a hero by finishing the war in Albania, according to the plan.

After the aircraft scene, we saw dialogues between Brean and Stanley Motss. He wants the of Motts to help war agenda. Motss asks Brean “I am in the world of shows, right? Why did you come to me?”. Brean's answer "We remember the slogans, but we forget the goddamn war. Do you know why? The show world. That's why we came to you. Naked girl covered with napalm, V mark for victory, 5 sailors Surabachi hill with flag” (Wag the Dog). Therefore, they remind photographs that have become the symbol of major events to spectators. Then he continues “The photo is remembered for 50 years, but the war is forgotten. The Gulf War, a smart bomb coming in from the nose ... A bomb image, Mr. Motss. The American people believed this faked war. We are here for the war show business” and he help from Motts, saying, “We need a theme, a song, some visuals. So show. It is like an Oscar ceremony (Wag the Dog). This scene leads to questioning of people about whether the news, that they have heard previously from the media, is correct or not. In order to fight, a country seemed to have no information about it, and it seemed possible for them to be able to fight themselves because of their life style and possible internal confusion. This country was Albania. Because it was an easy enemy to be guided as a social perception and to be convinced that no one knew anything about it. Then, necessary arguments are designed and artificial mass images are created in order to convince the people. The White House official announces on TV screens that it has entered the war with Albania. During a conversation, a journalist asks whether insurrection is or not related to Muslim fundamentalists against Americans. Actually, the ever-used common enemy has been targeted in order to legitimate war in the eyes of public. Society reminds past events by symbols like these, and changes attitude towards events. For instance, in the teaser, a girl who escapes from war carries a cat, that makes people feel sorrow for her and her cat. On the other hand, no one could approve the war in Albania in a short period of time until elections. So, it would work and cover the scandal. They use tags, symbols, emotion to affect people and not to question it. The storytelling about unknown but possible event and make people believe in it is possible when the story is sensible in itself. There are true and false informations; for instance as true arguments muslims live in Albania, United States interfere armed conflicts in eastern lands, as false arguments which is the war, the escaping girl and non-existed terrorists in Albaina. But true and possible issues make false arguments invisible and unquestionable. They create a perception by manipulation on behalf of president by distract people from the scandal.

Besides that, the CNN effect is also seen here by release of the teaser, almost all channels show that short-video, and it is at foreign country, so United States citizens can only reach the information by media. That effect make people believe that there is a war.

The most reliable source is President's statements. Newsreader says "The president expressed that Albania is the source of terrorism in the world. For this reason, there declared war very soon between the Albanian Republic and the United States" (Wag the Dog, 1997). Thus, the public will fully believe in the legitimacy of the event, as they hear about the war from the most reliable source. The scenario has been partially successful, and the agenda in the country has been changed. All of a sudden, no one mentions about scandal of Firefly Girl. There are little supporters for the manipulation of people. For instance, president dress up a woman with his jacket and demonstrates an image that he take care of oppressed people. There is a song recording about the unity, freedom, rights, life, happiness and protecting borders. It is a part of propaganda by support of artists that society loves, respects, believes. And it reminds a song of "We Are The World" for Africa released in 1985. This also effective part which would calls out hearts and patriotism of people. But single does not released.

While there are many plans for the president's interests, the units, that responsible for protecting the interests of the country, are already aware of the fact, CIA has explained that the problem with Albania was solved and war over by considering the country's interests. A short conversation between CIA officer and Brean demonstrates the public's point of view as follows, CIA officer says "There is no war", Conrad answers as "Of course there is a war, I am watching on tv." So, it makes sense that people trust and confine by news in media about events abroad. After that, the president's men have to find a B plan because agenda was changed. They think that the only thing that will save the fictional ending war is a hero leaving behind in battle and a song is written to be dedicated to this hero. According to the new scenario, William Schumann, the sergeant in the U.S., was forgotten during the war like an old shoe and he was captured by the Albanians. William wrote the word "Courage Mother" in Morse script on top of his scum and he takes a photo in order to send this message his mother. This event is reflected on the press and a record, which related to song of old shoe, is filled and placed in the old collection. Shortly, each detail is considered one by one in order to show perception as propaganda. William Schumann is symbolized and the old shoes are hanged on trees, telephone and electric wires. Then, Brean emphasizes approach of "as Plato said: It does not matter how you reach it once. Just get it!" (Wag The Dog, 1997). With this approach, they accomplish the objective. This whole event has been turned into a social campaign and the agenda has been changed again. In addition to all these perception management strategies, the film itself reflects a perception management by legitimising US foreign policy. Brean says, future wars will not happen with states, but nuclear terrorism and opposite groups. This is what happens in 21st century.

According to the plan, sergeant will be brought to the US by plane, sergeant will become a hero and the scandal will be completely forgotten. In that day they will wait for William on the plane. He boards the plane in handcuffs with polices because he is a prisoner for 12 years because of many crimes, which are rape, drug use. The plane falls due to an accident.

When they went into a town, William tries to rape a woman again and killed by her father. Then, they create a new story again. A military ceremony is held on the death of William Schumann and the president makes welcoming ceremony as war hero. During the ceremony, public opinion surveys announce the president reaches from 41% to 89% of the votes. Motss sees this game as its own success and greatest achievement and proud of himself. At the moment, this slogan is given on TV “never change horses in mid-stream” and TV programmers say that the president owes everything to these advertisement –never change horses in mid-stream-. This news make Motss lose his temper because he finds these ads old and simple. For this reason, he decides to explain all happens. Audience heard the news that he died because of heart attack at the pool on the next day. Thus, the movie ends.

### CONCLUSION

Under the ironic structures of the film contains important clues about everyday politics. We saw that how media shaped people’s perception changing agenda in this movie. Especially, the media reconstructs real life events in a way that is consistent with the views of the ruling powers. The main purpose of use to this method to get the desired responses from the target groups. The election process is affected by make-up arrangements in the film. But, people believed that Albania event is real. Because, even if this story is an arrangement at the backstage, it is real in the eyes of people. The reason of this comes out of Motts’ words “Because it is so honest.” The reality is shaped by media for a purpose. So, it is understood from a statement from film that they only base not only events, but the spin given to those events. Perception management had done by explained reasons and elements. In the film, the holders of the power and media relations lead worse results, manufacturing war and its related to events as stated above. Shortly, this film indicates how media-government relation and is example of manufacturing consent because media are supposed by government and media produced new events in order to change people’s perception for president’s interest.

Although media has power, the government is the only power which direct people’s perception. Overall, it is given that concepts of CNN effect, propaganda, perception management and manipulation through media, agenda setting theory is analyzed. In the process of perception management, these methods properly have been used in the film.

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