Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation

Edited by
**Nelson Ribeiro
and Barbie Zelizer**

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MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA IN AN AGE OF DISINFORMATION

A critical and timely collection that argues for the centrality of propaganda in discussions about the contemporary media landscape and its informational ecosystems.

This book explores how "propaganda," a foundational concept within media and communication studies, has recently been replaced by alternative terms (disinformation, misinformation, and fake news) that fail to capture the continuities and disruptions of ongoing strategic attempts to (mis)guide public opinion. Edited by Nelson Ribeiro and Barbie Zelizer, the collection highlights how these concepts must be understood as part of a long legacy of propaganda and not just as new phenomena that have emerged in the context of the digital media environment. Chapters explore the strategies and effects of propaganda through a variety of globally diverse case studies, featuring both democracies and autocratic regimes, and highlight how only by understanding propagandistic forms and strategies can we fully begin to understand how public opinion is being molded today by those who resort to deception and falsehood to gain or keep hold of power.

An important resource for students and scholars of media and communication studies and those who are studying and/or researching media and propaganda, media and power, disinformation, fake news, and political communication.

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ON THE CENTRALITY OF PROPAGANDA

Barbie Zelizer and Nelson Ribeiro[1]

Imagine a world without media, and then ask yourself: would propaganda still be possible? How would governments convey their truest, even if most malign, intentions? How would corporate executives give shape to products still unfamiliar to their consumers? How would platforms sustain public engagement? How would local municipalities keep people safe and informed in times of natural disaster or war? How would children learn?

Now imagine a world without propaganda and ask yourself: would the media still work? Most of us who still believe in functioning media might readily argue they would do just fine. We hang onto the media for a slew of reasons related to our ability to come together as collectives. This is so particularly in democracies, where our expectations of the media align with their potential for sustaining a healthy public. Even when they don't do as well as we might hope, our expectations linger. We expect the media to socialize us into preferred ways of thinking, ensure we have the needed information to go about our day, and keep us entertained. Nowhere in this picture is propaganda seen as a necessary component of the mediated environment.

The different valences here should be clear, and they give rise to an additional question: why do most of us gravitate immediately to recognition of the media's centrality for propaganda but push back on propaganda's importance for the media? Recognizing that the intersection linking the media and propaganda is more granular and counterintuitive than we might assume at first glance, this volume wrestles with the tensions created by imagining the media and propaganda as necessary inhabitants of the

same neighborhood. What does it mean that we admit the media into that neighborhood far more easily than we do propaganda?

Let's start with a report grabbed from the headlines. In September 2021, one news story making headlines in the United States was a warning to parents and teachers about the so-called Slap a Teacher TikTok Challenge.[2] First reported by a local television channel in Florida, it alerted viewers to the dangers of a supposed challenge that was becoming viral on TikTok. According to the report, teenagers were being urged to slap or punch a teacher at school, record the assault, and post it on TikTok, where it would yield engagement in the form of likes and comments. In the story, school officials told reporters that they would press charges for any students who slapped or punched their teachers and promised these cases would be prosecuted to the "full extent of the law."[3]

At a point in time when TikTok had been behind other challenges like ripping out soap dispensers or removing toilets from stalls on school premises, the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" was in some sense predictable. Yet it differed by promoting physical assault in schools at a time when violence against teachers was already rising. Within days, similar cases were being discussed, reported, imagined, or anticipated across the United States. The list of impacted locations spanned the country: California, South Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, among others.[4] "It's criminal behavior," a South Carolina district school official weighed in.[5] By late October, local TV and print outlets in a wide variety of locations, including West Virginia, Missouri, Georgia, Nebraska, North Carolina, South Carolina, Iowa, Hawaii, and California, had run stories attributing student assaults to the "Slap a Teacher Challenge," and op-eds and letters to the editor criticizing TikTok were not far behind.[6]

It wasn't long before labor unions and the US legal system weighed in. The California Teachers Association declared "Educators beware!" on Facebook, adding in a statement on its website that "Slapping an educator, regardless of whether it results in injury, is assault and battery, and is completely unacceptable," while the National Education Association appealed to executives at Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok to "prioritize the safety of people over profits." The Connecticut Attorney General accused TikTok of failing "to control the spread of dangerous content" and urged its executives "to come to CT to meet with educators and parents and commit to reforms that stop this reckless content." Shortly thereafter, US Attorney General Merrick Garland ordered the FBI to address the spike in teacher harassment.[7] By then, both national and international news outlets – in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Spain, Mexico, Chile, and New Zealand – had picked up the story.[8]

If few of the reporters given bylines or news outlets running their stories on the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" rang familiar, it was not an accident. It was by design. For this could have been any other news story about school fads, social media, and public safety, except for one thing. The "Slap a Teacher TikTok Challenge" never existed. Instead, it was the brainchild of a propaganda campaign developed by Targeted Victory, one of the most prominent (Republican) communication consulting companies in the United States. Although TikTok executives protested that "we have not found related content on our platform, and most people appear to be learning about the offline dare from sources other than TikTok," the pushback went mostly unheard. Even as Snopes, Gimlet Media, VICE, and others shared early on that they could not yet find evidence to support the claims against TikTok, the campaign continued to gain steam.[9]

In fact, the design and roll-out of the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" had very little to do with teachers, students, education, or the school system. Though not clear at first, six months later it was called out as an act of pushback between competing social media platforms, with one – Meta – discrediting another – TikTok – in the public eye. As later disclosed by the *Washington Post*, Meta had funded the news item on the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" because it intended to start an anti-TikTok movement by targeting small news outlets with few resources. Such outlets tend to lack resources as a direct consequence of bigger tech platforms having disrupted journalism's traditional business model by offering cheaper ways to reach consumers.[10] In other words, Meta was taking advantage of the fragile newsrooms in small local outlets that were unable to disseminate stories capable of disrupting Meta's campaign to undermine competitors. At best, the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" was a case of corporate greed.

The timing was not accidental. According to the *Washington Post*, with this campaign, Meta aimed to create the perception that TikTok was dangerous for children and teenagers at a time when Meta subsidiary Facebook was being criticized for not only failing to counter fake news but also benefiting from its circulation on its own platform. Facebook was also losing young social media users to TikTok, and teens were spending twice as much time on TikTok as on Meta's other subsidiary, Instagram. In one internal memo, Meta executives explained that their dream was to have newspapers and television channels share "stories with headlines like 'From dances to danger: how TikTok has become the most harmful social media space for kids'."[11] In another, a Targeted Victory director asked for details on local political reporters who could act as a "back channel" for anti-TikTok messages, explaining the campaign "would definitely want it to be hands off."[12] The strategy had an immediate impact. As one unknowingly compliant expert weighed in after an incident in South Carolina,

"TikTok does not have any parental control functions, and they do not have a kid algorithm versus an adult algorithm."[13]

It took almost a year for the story to be more thoroughly vetted. By the time that the *Washington Post*, followed by *VICE*, *Business Insider,* and other news outlets, began looking more closely into the claims against Tik-Tok, staffers at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy were carefully tracking what they saw as a strong case of media manipulation.[14] Largely through their work, the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" revealed its truer side – a campaign to convince news outlets to spread negative stories about TikTok.

Back to the nexus connecting the media and propaganda. This story demonstrates how problematic our persistent, if not blind, belief in the media is, raising questions about which media we believe in and whether our belief has any bearing on the desire and ability to create and disseminate propagandistic messages. But it also shows how complex are the ways in which propaganda makes itself visible. Even when we think we know what propaganda looks like, we often let slide a set of assumptions about who engages in it, against whom, and for which purposes. Propaganda being used to advance purely commercial aims? Most of us would assent to its probability, but for only a few would it surface as the main impulse underlying the forceful drive to propagandize.

This is worth noting at the outset because propaganda is more omnipresent in contemporary societies than we tend to recognize, at the same time that the media perform less in line with our expectations than we assume. Propaganda not only occupies a central stage in the more obvious venues related to war or elections but also influences every dimension of how the public perceives reality and the different solutions being offered to solve collective problems. Much has changed since it was first perceived as a top-down phenomenon controlled by the state.

Today, propaganda unfolds energetically through not only vertical but also horizontal networks, designing and customizing its messages in ways that increase and vary impact on different demographics. While it uses an unprecedented number of media, platforms, and networks – analogue and digital – to assert its influence over both domestic and international audiences, its many techniques ensure that falsehoods – instantly shared by bots but also by individuals who find them entertaining and worth disseminating – circulate at high speed.

For most, propaganda remains at heart a poisoned word, especially in democracies. Long associated with manipulation, falsehoods, and brain-washing, today it is so much more. Current forms of propaganda align themselves with the underside of what we expect information relays – about public events, new products, identity formations, even travel plans – to do

for us. Political actors reject having their persuasion campaigns labeled propagandistic and instead reserve the word to characterize the communication practices of their opponents. Commercial actors – favoring vanilla terms like advertising, influence, or public relations – are quick to emphasize they are only putting public desires into action. Educational actors insist they offer unformed minds the capacity to develop and mature.

In each area, propaganda is so prevalent that it is difficult to imagine its absence. Today's political campaigns may be among the most vicious and slanderous of any in recent memory. Platforms – as we saw earlier – are eager to diminish market competition and establish monopolies, hiding behind corporate strategies so their objectives remain obscure. Books, curricula, and entire subject areas are being banned with an aggressive and unprecedented frenzy in schools.

But the concept of propaganda itself is mostly absent from current debates on the information environment. In fact, as we have discussed elsewhere, the word "propaganda" has been mostly relegated to invisibility by communication and media scholars. This has occurred for multiple reasons, including the negative connotation it acquired after 1945 and the field's never-ending quest for the new.[15] Though not all scholars have supported propaganda's early retirement – see, for instance, a special 2021 issue of the *Harvard Kennedy School HKS Misinformation Review* on propaganda, where its absence is explained as both an intellectual blindness to theory and a structural blindness to corporate media structure[16] – the concept's suppression in current debates about how people are being exposed to false information is itself an illustration of how propaganda works and how semantics plays a central role in shaping public perception. As Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* brilliantly illustrates, controlling the words used to describe events and reality is central to controlling how people think about such events and shapes their understanding of the options ahead.[17]

By avoiding the concept of propaganda to describe cases like the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" and using terms like misinformation, disinformation, fake news, or media manipulation instead, we risk embracing the narrative created by techno capitalism. This narrative claims that the norms, values, and concepts used to regulate and understand how societies work no longer apply in the digital era.[18] The assumption creates a quandary because it suggests that refusing to call digital propaganda by name increases the possibility that we will end up stuck in a quest for new concepts and theoretical constructs to explain it. It also suggests that in turn we may unknowingly curtail our capacity to explain what is at stake when political, corporate, and other actors resort to propaganda to advance their agendas.

We see this in discussions of the "Slap a Teacher Challenge," where Meta used one of the most traditional propaganda techniques to discredit

TikTok: planting a story. The technique involves finding a third-party source with some credibility who can be the first to disseminate a false story and wait for it to be picked up by different media outlets. Planting a story makes it appear as if the story, quickly reaching large audiences in different countries, was produced by a source with no connection to the propagandist. Widely used during the two world wars and the Cold War, when government officials in charge of propaganda – or "information," as many countries called it – took the lead in publishing "news" stories aimed at presenting the enemy as immoral and capable of the most horrendous atrocities, the technique of planting a story has become one of the most prevalent mechanisms for creating and disseminating false stories without being held responsible for their content.

Planting a story can only work when journalists are knowingly or unknowingly complicit. As governments in autocratic and democratic countries have had little problem deceiving those in newsrooms, leading them to publish false stories or biased information with the intention of increasing the public impact of their propaganda, journalists surface time and again as one of propaganda's main targets.

The technique of planting a story thus draws from a long-standing reliance among propagandists on news outlets as venues for its circulation. Helped along by mechanisms and practices designed to cede information control to those in power, propaganda has made its way into the news through mechanisms as wide-ranging as the subterranean cable connecting Europe with America during World War I or the faked eyewitness accounts in the early 1990s of Kuwaiti babies being killed by Iraqi soldiers. Both seemingly transparent settings depended on strategic action in the background to facilitate propaganda being effectively embraced as news – the British cutting the cable that linked Germany with the United States to ensure only news from Britain would cross the Atlantic or the Kuwaitis hiding the identity of the eyewitness to murder during the Iraqi invasion, who happened to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States. As fake stories are being planted regularly in newsrooms, they turn journalists inadvertently into active players in the dissemination of lies. And when no journalists are available to start circulation, they too can easily be made up.

Today, examples of planting a story amidst fakery abound. Consider the claim, appearing in an obscure French website courtesy of Russia, that Ukraine's first lady, Olena Zelensky, had bought an expensive sports car with military funds from abroad, or the claim, appearing in an obscure Texan website again courtesy of Russia, that the FBI was bugging Donald Trump's Florida estate. Both examples, according to the BBC, are part of a larger network of websites used to circulate planted stories under

names parroting either defunct or imaginary but plausible news outlets. In the United States, they currently include websites like the Boston Times, Houston Post, Chicago Crier, DC Weekly, and more, where stories are attributed to fake journalists with fabricated names and unrelated pictures pulled from the Internet.[19]

Why do such practices continue today? What is it about social media and digitization that leads political and corporate actors to continue to invest in deceiving through newsrooms? Even though social media and AI constitute central parts of the contemporary information landscape, journalism continues to play an important role due to the credibility it potentially brings to the stories it reports. As tech companies are displacing traditional journalism in the attention economy, on the one hand, they continue to see it as a central institution for guiding public opinion and impacting perceptions of reality, on the other.

All this suggests that reinstating propaganda as a theoretical construct is a necessary pivot to fight efforts that are widespread, sophisticated, and growing. Critical for analyzing the contemporary information ecosystem, propaganda's inclusion in discussions of information disorder could foster a deeper understanding of how different techniques used for deception are transformed and evolve through time, assuming multiple forms and making use of new technologies for production and dissemination. It could enable scholars to problematize the continuities and disruptions in the strategies and techniques used to propagate messages, persuade, and manipulate people. More importantly, it could clarify how the media, alongside politics and corporations, cannot exist without propaganda. We live immersed in a propagandistic culture where politics, corporations, social activists, and government officials are among those who use various technologies and a plethora of media to influence people's decisions: how they vote, which social media platform they use, which causes they support, and which measures and behaviors they are willing to adopt to improve their health and well-being.

So what are we to make of the fact that most academics still neglect calling propaganda by name? In the academy, disinvestment in the concept of propaganda came together with an investment in concepts such as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and post-truth, all of which have occupied a central stage in discussions about contemporary information disorder. This book argues that such concepts need to be understood as part of a longer legacy linked to propaganda and not as new phenomena that have emerged in the context of the digital environment. Only by understanding the continuities and disruptions of propagandistic forms and strategies over time can we more fully understand how public opinion is being molded today by those who resort to deception and falsehood to

gain or keep hold of power. By creating a divide between what we perceived as propaganda in the analogue world and what propaganda looks like in the digital era, we are not only limiting our ability to understand how its techniques of the past continue today to foster uncertainty, hate, and fear. We are also constraining our ability to comprehend what is really new about propaganda's current forms.

Indeed, the quest for reinstating propaganda as a valid theoretical construct to make sense of contemporary information ecosystems has deep roots. In his seminal work, Jacques Ellul was well aware of how much the word "propaganda" was despised, especially in democracies. For this reason, he opened his book by calling it "modern propaganda," describing it as a "modern technique" based "on one or more branches of science," sharing their successes and bearing "witness to their failures."[20] Acknowledging the challenges that arose when using the term, he stressed its ability to reinvent itself through both changing forms of technology and evolving scientific knowledge. Not only does he point us toward the relativity inherent in the differences between traditional media and the digital media of today, but he suggests also that the point of origin across knowledge formations inevitably shifts understanding of how it works. While Ellul was possibly thinking of how propaganda acquires new facets through knowledge produced in sociology, psychology, communication, and media studies, today the picture has changed yet again. Now, engineering, computer science, and marketing are among the fields whose most recent developments are being closely and carefully followed by those who aim to deceive.

If we return to the story of the "Slap a Teacher Challenge" one more time, we see that its unfolding followed a pattern that repeats itself too often across the information environment. Meta's PR agency planted a false story in small news outlets without the resources to check the veracity of what they were reporting. The story swelled across similar markets until it took on first national and then international recognition. By the time that academics, misinformation and disinformation researchers, journalists at *VICE*, *Business Insider,* and other news outlets got around to studying the story enough to declare it patently false, it was too late to halt its spread.

The goal ahead of us, then, is twofold. It's up to researchers to think more cogently about the links between current information disorder and propaganda. But it's also up to political and corporate actors, media practitioners, journalists, and the public to pay greater heed to what academics say. With academe working on timelines that complicate its ability to keep up with the fast and ongoing tempo of information disorder, figuring out how to accommodate its pacing seems like a small challenge when

seen against the larger problems arising from our misunderstood and ever-changing information environment.

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Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation assembles a collection of chapters that look specifically at the intersection of media and propaganda by adopting broad parameters to be used in reflecting on it from anew. By positioning each chapter within a context designed to challenge limits on how we think about the topic, the book aims to jumpstart inquiry in ways that hopefully can yield generative insights about its placement and centrality.

First, the book looks at media and propaganda through the lens of different disciplines, ranging across communication and media studies, journalism studies, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, history, gender studies, information and library science, literature, and platform studies. Recognizing that disciplinary prisms offer alternative insights for thinking about any topic, the book situates media and propaganda at the center of multiple disciplinary conversations.

Second, the book underscores how central propaganda is for understanding contemporary public communication across the Global North and Global South. It offers both capacious surveys of its parameters in Europe, North Asia, and Africa, as well as targeted discussions of China and the United States. Providing a broad examination of the traits and permutations that make today's information disorder into one of the most critical current problems on a global scale, it forces to the foreground questions about how the intersection of media and propaganda differs widely across place and geography.

Third, the events this book revisits are vast: the Great War, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Cold War, electoral violence in Kenya and other East African countries, the Rwandan genocide, the invasion of Ukraine, and the Israel-Gaza war. It alights on settings that range from functioning or cobbled democracies to autocratic regimes, from commercial platforms to political activism. And it probes topics like enmity, free speech and academic freedom, commercial ethics, misogyny and sexual violence, stereotypes and images, the mechanisms and strategies of propaganda, and the evolution of propaganda's conceptualization.

Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation is organized across three sections: Laying the Groundwork for Thinking About Media and Propaganda; Alternative Spaces for Thinking About Media and Propaganda; and Current Challenges for Thinking About Media and Propaganda.

Laying the Groundwork for Thinking About Media and Propaganda

Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation leads off by considering how we have learned to think about media and propaganda over time. Focusing on how the two entities have been linked, who has defined the link, and what has become of the link today, the three chapters in this section consider the nomenclature, phraseology, and mechanisms of propaganda that make it recognizable in earlier and current mediated environments.

The section opens with the chapter "Is Propaganda by Any Other Name Still Propaganda?" by Barbie Zelizer. She lays out the setting for considering the global entrenchment of propagandistic logics and practices in today's information environments. Giving an overview of how the concept of propaganda has developed over time, the chapter discusses why this entrenchment is happening without the critical attention it deserves, especially in democratic regimes that avoid using the word "propaganda" to describe practices of obfuscation like disinformation, misinformation, fakery, and lying. Instead, in the so-called post-truth environments where information resides, there is a tendency to appraise such practices as a direct outgrowth of digital technology and to see them as the obvious result of stridently polarized political climates. Zelizer discusses how this poses a risk, especially for democracies that are stuck in a Cold War mindset and thus refuse to recognize propaganda in their midst.

In "Know Your Enemy: Propaganda and Stereotypes of the 'Other' from World War I to the Present," David Welch argues that one of the most striking means by which the media have influenced social attitudes – both changing and reinforcing opinions – has been through the use of stereotypes. Welch demonstrates how this aspect of propaganda is full of confrontations between order and chaos, good and evil, and he argues that in each case the contrast serves to force the individual into desired and firmly established commitments. In this ultimate purpose, propaganda is aided by man's psychological need for value judgments in simple black-and-white terms, particularly useful in the context of crisis or war. The chapter analyzes how different regimes have used stereotypes in their propaganda to justify war and employs a number of case studies – ranging from World War I to the current conflict in Ukraine – to demonstrate the power of the "image of the enemy" in wartime propaganda.

The third chapter, "Manufacturing Public Perception: Big Lies, Alternative Facts and Controlled Language" by Nelson Ribeiro, centers on the need to revive propaganda as a theoretical construct if we are to understand today's information ecosystems. It argues that the propaganda

techniques of the 20th century, such as the production of "big lies" and "alternative facts," remain central in contemporary attempts to persuade people to believe in falsehoods. Likewise, pre-propaganda, the control of language and the rewriting of history, which Jacques Ellul and George Orwell described in their seminal works, continue to be at the forefront of propagandistic strategies, particularly from those aiming to promote war and sustain their own power. Using examples that range from the Spanish Civil War to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ribeiro discusses how contemporary propaganda can be understood through the lens of concepts that have shed light on earlier regimes and leaders, who used propaganda to lead people to support war and authoritarian regimes. The chapter also discusses citizens' agency in countering propaganda and how subversive media consumption practices can help circumvent the control imposed by dictators on people's access to information.

Alternative Spaces for Thinking About Media and Propaganda

Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation then pivots toward the alternative spaces where media and propaganda intersect, asking us to reconsider what we think we know. Spanning across three separate regions of the world, the three chapters in this section probe the situated logics that merit attention when thinking about media and propaganda.

The first chapter in this section, "Chinese Journalism and State Propaganda: Changes and Continuities From the 1990s to the 2020s" by Francis L.F. Lee, analyzes how the news media constitute a core part of authoritarian propaganda machines. He demonstrates that this is far from a linear process. Instead, the relationship between journalism and state propaganda changes over time. In addition to maintaining power, authoritarian states also devise ways to ensure proper governance and facilitate desirable social and economic developments. Therefore, depending on the current social, economic, and political conditions, the state may impose different degrees of media control and ideological propaganda. The chapter reviews the relationship between journalism and state propaganda in China from the 1990s to the 2020s, illustrating both the continuities and changes in the journalism-propaganda nexus and highlighting the varying impact of media commercialism under different social and political conditions. It also discusses possible limitations of the power of media propaganda in authoritarian states.

This section's second chapter, "Vladimir Putin's Russia: Living in George Orwell" by Nina Khrushcheva, discusses the development of the propaganda formulas deployed by Putin's Kremlin over the last two decades.

It argues that since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2024, while the propaganda narratives have gotten more direct and militaristic, many Russians have found creative ways to confront them. Because severe restrictions on free speech make protesting in public and en masse impossible, some people have expressed their opposition to the Ukrainian war and Putin's rule by employing images and quotes from George Orwell. Not only has his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* become the most sold-out book in Russia in recent years, but Russian literature, too, has provided a source of optimism and hope. Lessons from previous periods of oppression in Russian history – described by Soviet classics such as those authored by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Eugenia Ginsburg – suggest that dictatorships invariably fail and that the Putin rule will be no exception.

The last chapter in this section, "Media and Propaganda in Africa: Cracks, Crevices and Continuities" by Admire Mare, delves into the complex relationship between media and propaganda in Africa. Drawing on case studies from select African countries, Mare traces the development of the media as a civilizing and evangelizing force and shows how propaganda was implicated in processes of modernization and colonization. Foregrounding what he calls the cracks, crevices, and continuities associated with the deployment of propaganda in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa, he argues that some post-colonial African governments have appropriated state-owned media for propaganda purposes in ways that reproduce and reincarnate colonial logics. The chapter highlights how the human being has been implicated as a social infrastructure in propagandistic logics and ultimately argues that the increasing platformization, datafication, and digitization of African societies have contributed to the sustenance of new modes of propaganda production, distribution, consumption, and measurement.

Challenges for Thinking About Media and Propaganda

Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation wraps up with a glimpse of some of the most serious challenges facing media and propaganda today. Drawing across sexual violence, the consequences of exposure to disinformation, and the moral panic driving book bans, it demonstrates how contemporary propaganda is connected to nationalistic discourses, pre-existing attitudes, and misogyny. These new forms in a hyperconnected world amplify the voices of those who promote hate and fear. The section also discusses the limits of what we know about propaganda's impact on different populations.

The first chapter of this section, "'Destroy this Mad Brute': Propaganda and Sexual Violence" by Sarah Banet-Weiser, explores a specific subset of

propaganda that uses sexual violence as a key logic in the transmission of its message. Although sexual violence can take many forms, this chapter examines how the *threat* of sexual violence is used as a propaganda tool. Employed as an instrument of propaganda to create one actor as a victim and another as an enemy, sexual violence is strategically positioned to promote particular ideologies and identity constructions, those that are typically white, masculine, and nationalist. Banet-Weiser discusses the way that sexual violence is exploited during times of war, whether in on-the-ground military combat or as part of a digital cultural war, to justify continued violence. Through multiple forms of media, including digital social media, sexual violence propaganda depends on a doubling down on binary understandings of gender that are fueled by other elements of the war context, including authoritarianism and a nostalgic melancholy manifest in nationalism and patriarchy.

The second chapter in this section, "From Fake News to False Memories: Tracing the Consequences of Exposure to Misinformation" by Ciara Greene, argues that while much ink has been spilled on the topic of "fake news" over the last decade with oft-expressed concerns about the impacts of online misinformation, there has been comparatively little empirical assessment of its effects. This chapter considers the consequences of misinformation exposure for cognition and behavior. It discusses research showing how people easily come to believe in, and even form false memories for, false information, especially if it aligns with their political beliefs or social identity. It also describes a series of experiments that have tried to measure the behavioral effects of fake news exposure, specifically the effects of vaccine misinformation on vaccination behaviors and intentions. The chapter argues that even though propaganda, usually presented under the names of misinformation or disinformation, has an impact on how individuals perceive reality, our beliefs and actions are heavily influenced by pre-existing attitudes and social norms. This makes it urgent to develop an in-depth understanding of how pre-existing conditions can be used to limit the impact of propaganda that spreads falsehoods and hate.

In the final chapter of this section and the book, "Beyond the Shelves: Investigating Propaganda in the Library" by Miranda Clinton, Ellen Perleberg, and Francesca B. Tripodi examines book bans as an example of political propaganda – a systematic and deliberate attempt to disseminate information designed to unify people around a common idea, brand, or agenda. Historically, book challenges in the United States were rare, involving decisions by individual parents. Recent trends suggest a more collective effort, with a particular focus on BIPOC and LGBTQ+ content and authors. The chapter explores how contemporary book challenges are not isolated acts of concern but part of a broader movement tied to "parental

rights politics." Drawing on three data sources – the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom database, BookLooks' rating guides, and Moms for Liberty's "Book of Books" – the authors analyze the delicate balance between protecting children and preserving the right to access diverse ideas and perspectives.

* * * *

Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation aims to make clear how the intersection of media and propaganda is far more complex than we credit it with being. If we return to the thought exercise of the first few paragraphs of this chapter, it should be obvious that we need to reconsider the different valences we lend media and propaganda. It's time to imagine a world where media and propaganda are treated as equally dependent and equally necessary variables that combine in good and bad ways to force change in opinions, sentiments, beliefs, and norms. Without recognizing their mutual interactions and reliance, our ability to engage critically with information disorder is severely compromised.

This book arrives at a moment that is engulfed with anxiety, indecision, fear, and uncertainty about the future in most places across the globe. We no longer have the liberty of neglecting to clarify propaganda's fullest parameters, as it works most decisively through the media when attention is turned elsewhere. The book aims to help us pivot toward a fuller understanding of what the intersection of media and propaganda looks like in all its evolving forms.

Notes

1 This volume draws from keynotes delivered at the convening of the 3rd Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication, which took place on 4–7 January 2022. A joint venture between the Universidade Católica Portuguesa and the Center for Media at Risk at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, the Winter School brings together noted experts and early career scholars to discuss topics of evolving public importance. See https://www.lisbonwinterschool.com and https://www.ascmediarisk.org/.
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2

IS PROPAGANDA BY ANY OTHER NAME STILL PROPAGANDA?

Barbie Zelizer

Is propaganda by any other name still propaganda? This chapter lays out the setting for considering the global entrenchment of propagandistic logics and practices in today's information environments. It addresses why entrenchment is happening without the critical attention it deserves, particularly at a time when practices of obfuscation like disinformation, misinformation, fakery, and lying riddle the so-called post-truth environments where information resides. Specifically, it considers why there hasn't been more linkage between misinformation, disinformation, and traditional notions of propaganda and queries what it would take to understand propaganda more fully in its current guises.

Etymology Matters

The verb "to propagate" is commonly understood as the act of spreading an idea or a belief widely. Like many notions in the field of communication, the term comes from horticulture, where it references the natural process of species reproduction. In the context of information, propagation rests at the heart of the shared knowledge that is considered so central to democratic societies. Called dissemination far more frequently than propagation, this act of sharing, we are repeatedly told, is instrumental for sustaining the democratic project.

Yet there are slight differences between the acts of propagation and dissemination that have bearing on the relationship between propaganda and contemporary terms for information disorder. While propagation tends to imply a spread of information conceived by those who circulate

it, dissemination usually references ideas and beliefs crafted by others and then adopted to be spread. Propagation presumes a relatively passive acquiescence to what is being circulated, while dissemination often accommodates the input of those it targets. Some see propagation as more strategic or intentional than dissemination; others believe that dissemination can add complexity in the multi-layered environments where it unfolds. Propagation has been heralded in multiple knowledge-based settings, including education and evidence-based teaching, physics, technology, and medicine, while dissemination tends to be discussed in various arenas involving a medium of some sort, such as cartoons, pamphlets, posters, or the news.

It is telling that semantics offers the clearest distinction between the two activities. The negative valences that often accompany propagation are not typically associated with dissemination, which tends to be invoked in a value-free fashion. Negative connotations affect both the sustained meaning of propagation – as in the intentional spread of false ideas or beliefs – and its material form of propaganda. Seen most often as the strategic and deliberate circulation of intentionally erroneous, biased, or misleading information rather than the spread of uncontestable, impartial, or unprejudiced knowledge, the term "propagating" has now given way to "propagandizing," where it refers to the activity of individuals, organizations, and institutions operating in top-down, instrumentalized, and often autocratic settings. Though that has decidedly changed over time, often making propaganda less totalizing, unidirectional, and impactful than originally assumed, the negative impression nonetheless lingers as a description of its contours.

This negativity is not new. While its development is intimated both in Plato's writings on rhetoric and the art of persuasion and in the invention of the printing press and its mass printing of primarily religious treatises, the Catholic Church invoked the term "propaganda" in the 1600s to describe the enlightening spread of Catholic doctrine among non-believers. But as propaganda was applied increasingly to secular environments, where it was seen as an act of reason rather than faith, negative valences began to surface. Most theorists say the world wars gave the term its negativity when "pejorative assumptions" surfaced from "the convergence of modern warfare and modern media."[1] That convergence made propaganda into a catch-all descriptor for the mediated relays of early and mid-20th-century conflicts.

The French political philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul called these conflicts each "a step in the development of modern propaganda," pointing to World War I, the 1917 Russian Revolution, Hitler's ascent in 1933, World War II, revolutionary wars in China, Indochina, and Algeria, and the Cold War as growth points. He wrote that "with each of these

events, propaganda developed further, increased in depth, discovered new methods," its entrenchment in mediated information flows across compliant war-torn populations facilitating the creation of powerful and strategic constructions of reality.[2] By the time of the Cold War, propaganda's negative qualities had become a natural part of its meaning. Cold War logic produced for its protagonists a sharp binary, separating the media of autocratic nations like the Soviet Union from democratic ones like the United States. Contrasting good with bad, moral with immoral, and free with constrained, the binary made it easy to sustain a distinction between wartime relays that were to be applauded and those to be eschewed.

It thus makes sense that not every nation's propaganda has been recognized as such. This was the case in the United States as early as World War I, when George Creel launched the US Committee on Public Information, designed as a platform to influence public opinion on the war. "In no degree," he later recalled, "was the Committee an agency of censorship, a machinery of concealment or repression. Its emphasis throughout was on the open and the positive." He continued to describe it as "a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising." No less important was Creel's strategic contrast of propaganda – a "word, in German hands, [that] had come to be associated with deceit and corruption" – and information, "the simple straightforward presentation of facts" by the Allied governments.[3]

Though his distinction would hold up over time, it was never as clear-cut as Creel hoped. The CPI's many news accounts, speeches, posters, radio, and film clips included so much fakery – incorrect reports of sinking German ships or fake pictures of American planes joining the war effort – that the *New York Times* renamed Creel's group the "Committee on Public Misinformation."[4] From the 1920s until the start of World War II, propaganda "suggested not just lying, but betrayal."[5] When the Institute for Propaganda Analysis was set up in 1937 in the United States to provide ongoing public guidance on how to recognize propagandistic content, it flailed as the deepening threat of World War II necessitated clarifying the difference between Allied "information" and Axis "propaganda." It folded by 1942.

Two characteristics are evident across propaganda's earliest wartime invocations. The first is the instrumental nature of its mediated delivery. Without the mass media, wrote Ellul, "[T]here can be no modern propaganda."[6] Not only did the media make it possible for large groups of people unknown to each other to receive an identical message, but also the contents of a propagandistic message could be modified easily to accommodate both the medium at hand and the function it was expected to serve. The second is that appraising propaganda as either negative or

positive took shape in conjunction with different kinds of political regimes. This meant that what the US journalist and essayist Walter Lippmann had labeled "the manufacture of consent"[7] – a descriptor for the specialized production and dissemination of views that could steer the public toward "democratic" decisions – was already fostering its own partial and self-congratulatory history. There, propaganda would be invoked in association with autocratic nations more frequently than with democracies. While propaganda was seen as a mass phenomenon inherently tied to the media, it was rarely used by those living in democracies to describe their own mediated environments.

   Etymology matters. The mass media were the clinching point that sharpened the edges of the negativity associated with propagandizing and propaganda. The seemingly contained semantic differentiation that they then adopted continues to complicate the linking of propaganda to current terms for information disorder, particularly in democracies.

Definitional Capaciousness

It should not be surprising that there are many definitions for propaganda. They show traits in common but differ by scholarly discipline, the contexts to which they're applied, the period when they're invoked, and the geographic locations where they're studied. For those in the United States, the two world wars and their aftermaths created a distinct need for a word that could describe false but instrumental information in support of the war's objectives. War's impact on definitions of propaganda is hard to overestimate.

   One of the earliest US definitions came from the political scientist and communications scholar Harold Lasswell, who broadly defined propaganda as "the war of ideas on ideas," an enterprise involving the "direct manipulation of social suggestion" that produces "the control of opinion by significant symbols . . . stories, rumors, reports, pictures and other forms of social communication." In his view, "all governments are engaged to some extent in propaganda as part of their ordinary peacetime functions," where propaganda – "no more moral or immoral than a pump handle"[8] – is critical to managing public sentiment. For that reason, he wrote, the propagandist "is here to stay in modern society. A democratic philosophy which has no sanction for his activities will probably lose out to one which has."[9]

   Around the same time, Lippmann charted a similar definition of propaganda as an integral feature of all political regimes, arguing that "the effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another," is necessary to accommodate individual limitations

in forming a "competent opinion about all public affairs."[10] Even the so-called father of American public relations, Edward Bernays, maintained that "modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group." Proclaiming in *Propaganda*'s final sentence that regardless of regime type, propaganda "will never die out," he insisted that "intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos."[11] In his view, this would occur across a range of fields that pivoted toward the public good, including public relations, business, the arts, education, and social services.

Across the board, these early discussions of propaganda shared a capaciousness that did not yet close ranks around the term's negative valences. Most thinkers then insisted on the inevitability of propaganda's relevance to all sorts of political regimes. Even writing some 40 years later and adding the experiences of World War II and the Cold War to that of World War I, Ellul spent most of his career expanding propaganda's definition. He held fast to the notion that propaganda surfaced in every kind of political regime. "We must not say," he wrote in 1965, "this is done by tyrannical, autocratic, totalitarian governments. In fact, it is the result of propaganda *itself*. Propaganda carries within itself . . . the power to take over everything that can serve it." Maintaining that it is impossible to distinguish between propaganda and information, he noted that "propaganda reveals . . . one of the most dangerous flaws of democracies, [where] nothing is worse in times of danger than to live in a dream world," and "a modern State, even if it be liberal, democratic and humanist, finds itself objectively and sociologically in a situation in which it must use propaganda as a means of governing. It cannot do otherwise." Though Ellul's definition of propaganda was wordy and repetitive – "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization" – it was accompanied by a robust and granular treatment of what propaganda could and would look like. Ellul developed multiple juxtapositions to explain propaganda's spread: pre- or sub-propaganda versus active propaganda, propaganda of agitation versus propaganda of integration, vertical versus horizontal propaganda, rational versus irrational propaganda, black versus white propaganda, and covert versus overt propaganda.[12]

In sum, these early thinkers, with the addition of Ellul, were generous in their conceptualization of what propaganda was and could be. None of them focused on distinctions between the term's positive and negative valences. It thus perhaps makes sense that none appear to have been

concerned with whether propaganda would grow more effectively in democratic or non-democratic regimes.

Enter the Cold War

The Cold War changed all that, whittling away at the early capaciousness of propaganda's conceptualization. As the Cold War developed, propaganda came to be seen increasingly as intrusive and threatening for democracies, a special danger because it undermined the very essence of a polity brought together by truth and a reverence for fact. No surprise, then, that with time, propaganda came to be invoked primarily in discussions of authoritarian regimes, where it described top-down autocratic attempts to subvert public opinion with falsehoods and lies.

It is telling that this was not the case during the early Cold War years. At first, propaganda was called by name across both parties to the conflict. Seen initially as a tool that could pit the United States and the Soviet Union against each other in a war without a physical battlefield or direct casualties among its protagonists, propagandizing helped both sides set a primarily symbolic conflict in motion. News headlines, which obsessively charted the direction and intensity of the conflict, widely referenced propaganda wars, as when the *Los Angeles Times* explained "Why We Lose the Propaganda War."[13] The *New York Times* legitimated the freedom radios by counseling readers that "propaganda does not have to be false."[14] But as the war dragged on, propaganda no longer fit America's sense of self. It was then that American information efforts took on the costume of value-free information, a costume that hid America's strategic interests in propagandizing.

The dichotomy between autocracies and democracies that this implied drew strength from the centrality of enmity in Cold War logic and the widespread belief that media outreach would help win the war.[15] The idea of Us versus Them – keeping the main protagonists more distinct from each other than could ever be the case – meant that if the term "propaganda" were to be understood in conjunction with the Soviet Union, then "information" would be the term claimed by the United States. At the same time, the ability to control and shape information resonated with the deep US investment in the delivery of information to the other side, seen as a critical act of positive influence regardless of how truthful it was. All the United States needed to do was send out relays about the American way of life, and it was widely believed that those under Communism would respond enthusiastically. Promises of "freedom bells," "truth dollars," or "the crusade for freedom" accompanied outright calls to join the US propaganda effort under the guise of information. In one official view of the time, information is "an instrument in the direction of foreign relations on behalf

of the American society. . . . It provides the basis for free judgement and decision."[16]

Almost nowhere was there space for appraising information as malevolent. Statements like this legitimated propaganda's positioning primarily as a project of autocratic governments or impulses, and as the Cold War developed and supposedly ended in 1989, they increased in both number and intensity. At its side was the illusion that liberal democracies were and would always be free of propaganda. As one observer later characterized NATO more generally, "that liberal democracies could not engage in propaganda is often itself part of the propaganda."[17] Even today, the notion continues to prevail in central democratic institutions, where propaganda is still seen as antithetical to democratic functioning.

The uneven positioning of propaganda required two interrelated discursive rules: its externalization in autocracies and invisibilization in democracies. Externalization and invisibilization began in earnest with the onset of the Cold War. Already in 1948, a state department official aired the need to rid the US context of propaganda. His article in *Public Opinion Quarterly* defined propaganda as "thought control as *it is* practiced in dictator States." Part of "a two-part process," in which "people are forbidden to think or speak in certain ways, and they are bidden to think and speak in certain other ways," he argued that propaganda "betrays the democratic principle" and has "no essential preoccupation with truth."[18]

Because propaganda's externalization to autocracies was mutually dependent on its invisibilization in democracies, it became necessary to bury propaganda under an information rubric. This was accomplished by turning information into an official US objective, realized by the Smith-Mundt Act legitimizing official US propagandizing abroad. The US media applauded its enactment into law. In one scholar's view, despite assurances that the program would prohibit propagandizing on the domestic front, many journalists "willingly and unwittingly served as another branch of America's propaganda program in the 1940s and 1950s."[19] They maintained the position that information's spread was neutral and had no agency, implying that persuasion was not subversive or nefarious when connected to US aims. Such a position made it easier to garner support from the American public. Said that same US official, "[M]ore Americans approve of the use of the atom bomb in defensive warfare than approve the use of propaganda to forestall war."[20] And yet it intensified as a key part of America's image-making strategies.

Thus, Cold War logic was critical to situating propaganda as a tool of authoritarians. It offered a useful context for seeing the information efforts of the other side as necessarily ill-intentioned. Its insistence on an either-or setting obstructed generative thinking across most divides and made it easy

to first divide democracies from autocracies and then to situate propaganda primarily in the latter. Cold War logic lionized the character of information efforts in autocracies and interpreted them as intentional parts of a plan to obstruct the democratic ethos. It also – conveniently – hid what propaganda looked like in systems like democracies that demonized it elsewhere but did not do enough to admit its existence at home. In other words, the Cold War set in place clear parameters as to whose information would be deemed propagandistic and whose information would wrest free of that label.

But Cold War logic depended too on an even less obvious accomplishment. Aligning propaganda with autocracies made it easy to characterize similar ideas that were awash in democracies as necessarily positive in valence. Tellingly, when the official information agencies were set in place in the late 1940s – Voice of America or the freedom radios – the ideal was not propaganda but advertising. As US Senator Homer E. Capehart later declared in hearings to confirm journalist Edward R. Murrow as head of the US Information Agency, its mission was "to sell the United States to the world, just as a sales manager's job is to sell a Buick or a Cadillac."[21] Ideas like persuasion, public opinion, publicity, promotional discourse, or public relations, and over time, public diplomacy, spin, or image management came to be seen as positive or value-free practices that posed little threat. Though some contemporary scholars argue that the sharp division between positive and negative valences did not get entrenched until later,[22] the distinction increasingly became part of the picture during the early Cold War years. When a steady stream of radio, TV, newspapers, and even billboards during the later Cold War created this supposedly value-free environment where propaganda could continue unnamed, it was clear that the alternative names given to propaganda in democracies laid the groundwork for making it invisible. With time, a semantic firewall separated propaganda from neighboring terms that carried an aura of positivity.

What all this did was separate, colonize, and demonize the discussion of American propaganda. As Ellul later noted, "[T]he democracies have not yet learned that the Cold War is no longer an exception state . . . but is becoming a permanent and endemic state. There are many reasons for that. I will name only one: propaganda."[23] The dictum "autocracies propagandize, democracies persuade" would thus be firmly etched in the American mind and in those countries of the West that followed its lead.

Ellipses to Nowhere

While this chapter began by thinking about definitions, it may be that definitions are not the best vehicle for figuring out what can make propaganda

relevant to autocracies and presumably nonexistent in democracies. Instead, it may be that ellipses, or the assumptions that are not said outright, are better situated for shedding light on how we have learned to think about the contexts in which propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation reside. Which ellipses tend to recur? What isn't getting said? And how do they counteract our ability to understand the similarities and differences between early and current types of information disorder?

The logic of externalization and invisibilization has stayed strong over time, in part by supporting the ellipses that shape our grasp of how propaganda works. This is not surprising, for as Ellul noted, "the tools of propaganda . . . must be used in a concerted fashion to reach the greatest possible number of individuals."[24] Expectations of simplicity, harm, and ephemerality systematically impact our understanding of propaganda through elliptical acts. Each seems to hide more than it clarifies, fostering a division that sustains propaganda's invocation in non-democratic regimes more often than in democracies. All work at externalizing propaganda to autocratic regimes and invisibilizing it in democracies. They are worth discussing one by one.

Simplicity

We have long been told propaganda involves messages that can be easily understood. Otherwise, we assume that it cannot deliver on its objectives. Simplicity helps us recognize propaganda by its most fundamental contours.

The power to propagandize via simple and accessible messages has been tied into notions of propaganda from the beginning. Simplicity infantilizes the public by insisting that most people can only grasp a message if it is clear and unambiguous. As Bernays noted early on, propaganda produces a "compact, vivid simplification of complex issues," where "the important thing for the statesman of our age is not so much to know how to please the public, but to know how to sway the public."[25] Ellul agreed 40-odd years later, observing that "propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins." Expecting it to "short-circuit all thought and decision," he celebrated its ability to provide "a simple and clear explanation of the world."[26]

Although propaganda's simplicity has launched some of its most fervent critiques – consider the uniformly harsh response to German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's portrayals of Jews as mice or vermin during the Third Reich or to China's campaign to destroy "The Olds" during its Cultural Revolution[27] – its impact has long been seen as intertwined with state intervention. Much attention has thus been paid to autocratic states, whether fascist, communist, totalitarian, or other forms of absolute control.

But this focus may be blinding us to what happens to simplicity when it is in situations that are not state-controlled. Privatized enterprises for information spread are the obvious contrast case, where the substitution of privatization for state control is equally relevant to today's information environments and, not accidentally, its information disorders. The failure to address what simplicity looks like in the relays of private enterprises may be part of the reason that we continue to separate propaganda from disinformation and misinformation.

This is curious, for we have come more generally to expect degrees of sophistication from privatized firms, where digital tools of data mining, AI, bots, opinion surveys, and the like make them capable of producing relays that are directly tailored to the attributes of different populations. We also understand enough about propaganda's reception to amend expectations of simplicity to what it might look like in privatized environments. We know that people don't engage with messages in the same way and that how a message lands depends on more than just understanding. We know that trustworthiness and propaganda are not binaries, that the division between them is not clear-cut, and that propaganda is not monolithic. This helps explain why openings for propaganda typically surround contested issues – such as religious expression, climate change, or forced migration.

So why have we not let go of the assumption that propaganda is simplistic? Is an insistence on simplicity making us miss the connection of current developments to earlier forms of propaganda?

Harm

Central to nearly all discussions of propaganda is the notion that it causes harm in some fundamental fashion. Because propaganda is presumed to draw from uneven power dynamics that manifest in top-down relays, it is understood to reflect a lack of autonomy or independent thought in those it targets.

Though multiple early thinkers argued for attaching broad semantic valences to the idea of propaganda, they also articulated that its top-down activity often harms those it targets. This has been a sustained theme over time. Propaganda's harmful nature depends on the top-down activation of a slew of malevolent tools and activities, like distortion, falsehoods, black-and-white thinking, or stereotypy. Propaganda "creeps up on your blind side saying one thing and meaning another; clothed in friendliness and good intentions like a bad fairy, it seduces you into taking a bite from the beautiful poisoned apple," offered one observer.[28] Thus, Orwell famously observed that "all propaganda is lies, even when one is telling the truth,"[29] while even Ellul, who believed fervently in propaganda's value, conceded that it "is usually regarded as an evil."[30]

Yet, the emphasis on harm as a top-down phenomenon may obscure its emergence in situations that are controlled in alternative ways. Today's information disorder suggests that harm is activated in many directions. Specifically, the lateral and multi-directional dangers associated with polarization need to be considered alongside harm that is implemented top-down. The harms caused when divisiveness and separation create separate realities make propaganda into a podium for tribalist views, which then get carried out simultaneously across fragmented populations vying for some part of definitional control.

At the same time, focusing on harm fails to recognize that propaganda can also be positive. By assuming from the onset that propaganda is necessarily bad for those whom it targets, we jettison from the picture its more pro-social uses – the kind implicated in public service, education, or part of acculturation or socialization. Here too are situations with uneven power dynamics that instill knowledge, values, attitudes, and standards in a top-down fashion: think parenting, teaching, dog training, managing elderly relatives. By not adopting a broader understanding of propaganda, good and bad, we unthinkingly foreclose our understanding of its workings.

Linking propaganda to necessarily harmful activity that is organized from above, however, is strategically useful. By focusing on the harm of hierarchical control rather than lateral or multi-directional polarization, we sustain the binary between democracies and autocracies. The centering of top-down harm upholds the information control historically associated with propaganda in autocratic systems rather than the potentially more complex information environments associated with democracies. Harm, then, helps keep propaganda an enterprise crucial to autocracy and unrecognizable in democracy.

Ephemerality

Another long-standing ellipsis that mischaracterizes propaganda is the idea that it is ephemeral. As Ellul wrote, the propagandist can "always be sure that a particular propaganda theme, statement, or event will be forgotten within a few weeks."[31] Bernays agreed, arguing that "the relative value of the various instruments of propaganda, and their relation to the masses, are constantly changing."[32]

Ephemerality, or the expectation that an object is at best transitory, drives the idea that propaganda can be hard to capture. While this supports the characterization of propaganda as "the guerrilla warfare of communication,"[33] it also points to the media's instrumental role in propagandizing. The sense that whatever circulates today may or will be gone tomorrow

has long been attached to legacy media – where archiving has always come second to circulation – and is sustained by digitization, where ephemerality has become key. It also helps foster the recognition that the public is more vulnerable to fake information today than ever before.

But this focus may hide what happens to ephemerality when it is celebrated as an integral part of the digital environment. Specifically, it may overemphasize how ephemeral propaganda is. While its attentiveness to duration and continuity, activation of different channels, and reliance on a complex organizational structure make the media necessary for propaganda to function (Ellul, 1965, 20), digitization offers an unstable context. Its tendency to release messages only to make them disappear or to highlight objects for brief contemplation seems to suggest that expectations of propaganda's ephemerality may be seeing their limit.

For there is much about propaganda that is indelible and evergreen, even in a digital age. We know that the tools used to circulate propaganda are long-standing. Lasswell argued that propaganda latches onto what he called the "predispositional patterns" of any political arena.[34] Because propaganda builds on established, familiar, and recognizable themes, tropes, and myths, it can readily project its messages – of enemy formation or racial violence, for instance – because they endure. This makes mechanisms like black-and-white thinking or big lies into familiar tools for entrenching its messages. And because digitization is characterized by ephemerality, it easily can obscure the longevity associated with propaganda.

Ellul spoke to this already in 1965. Propaganda, he wrote, "cannot create something out of nothing." It "must be continuous and lasting," building on the existing suppositions and sentiments that drive information, "for without them nobody would listen." As it is "susceptible of only one interpretation, unique and one-sided," its goal is not to change opinions as much as intensify existent trends of thought. One "no longer has to transform an opinion but to arouse an active and mythical belief."[35]

Thus, while ephemerality may seem to fit the digital environment particularly well, it hides the long-standing nature of propagandistic tools. This makes propaganda a slippery target for analysis, more imagined than real, and harder to locate. It is thus easy to let propaganda settle in different times – World War II or the Cold War rather than now. Ephemerality, then, helps us sustain the illusion that propaganda is a thing of the past. This undercuts its recognition, naturalizes its occurrence, and dulls its understanding.

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These three ellipses take us nowhere generative, but they complicate our understanding and experience of propaganda in current times. They

obscure propaganda's fuller qualities in ways that externalize it to autocracies and invisibilize it in democracies. Simplicity blinds us to the fact that control still exists in privatization. Harm hides the dangers of polarization inside a well-bred contempt in democracies for top-down control. Ephemerality consigns propaganda to the past, celebrating digital technology in ways that eclipse the evergreen nature of propagandistic material. All hide the complex nature of the similarities and differences between autocracies and democracies. All ask us not to call current information disorder propaganda, despite the fact that in form and content that is exactly what it is.

Propaganda, Misinformation, and Disinformation

Today's information environments are buckling in every continent on the globe as challenges to their status, authority, and function take on the guises of disinformation, misinformation, fakery, and lying. These practices of obfuscation are so prevalent that it is difficult to imagine information steering clear of their impact. But this makes understanding their connection to propaganda critical. Not only does it reveal what we privilege and leave out in their discussion but also how we imagine getting past the roadblocks they impose.

Given the conceptual entrenchment of propaganda in autocratic regimes, it should not be surprising that discussions linking them take on predictable contours: practices of obfuscation in autocratic settings are easily tied to more traditional and long-standing notions of information disorder, where we have readily accepted autocracy's information control as befitting a long history of top-down communiques from nefarious or subversive governments. But when we discuss information disorder in democracies, many of our discussions lose their nuance. Practices are often framed as spontaneously originating in contemporary conditions, as they relate to privatization, polarization, and digitization. Lost or buried are many of the assumptions about information control that grounded the original understanding of propaganda – where truth and lies did not exist as binary opposites but were expertly blended together in all kinds of generative, persuasive, and seductive ways that were not necessarily sinister.

This problem is critical because much recent work on propaganda in democracies tends to focus on it in isolation from other kinds of regimes. In keeping with entrenched but nonetheless evergreen Cold War ideals, propaganda is often described as a negative enterprise that poses a danger to democracy's broad slate of presumably shared characteristics. The philosopher Jason Stanley, for instance, defines propaganda as "the employment of a political ideal against itself," with little complication of how different kinds of regimes use it. Instead, his discussion focuses mostly on

how propaganda obstructs democratic ideals.[36] Similarly, in their edited collection, Henderson and Braun use the lens of rhetoric to examine propagandistic projects in US democracy, including its universities, news organizations, and legal system.[37] Even the classic work on network propaganda by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts doubles down on the US context, offering granular data about what's there, but other than tracking Russian attempts to undermine American political communication relays, there is little orientation to propaganda elsewhere.[38] Though focusing on propaganda in one democratic setting has undoubtedly advanced our knowledge and understanding, it nonetheless positions propaganda by default as driven by autocratic tendencies to democracy's deficit, with little attention to either propaganda's less nefarious uses or the specifics within and across different kinds of governments.

Even when scholars pivot toward propaganda across different kinds of regimes, their work often focuses on the theme that propaganda is endangering democracy. Consider, for instance, Woolley and Howard's recent edited volume on computational propaganda. Defining it as "the use of algorithms, automation and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks," they emphasize that it is "being used against democratic actors and institutions worldwide."[39] The book provides a fruitful comparative analysis of the threat of propaganda across different types of government. But its country-by-country survey begins with the already-familiar Other of Russia, where one author traces the country's role in shaping the "origins of digital misinformation," and ends with another's discussion of the second familiar Other of China, whose "alternative model of governance and control of online information . . . is growing ever stronger and more influential" and whose success in controlling online information "would run counter to democratic principles" in the West.[40] The book's conclusion poses a question: "Can Democracy Survive Computational Propaganda?" – and a response: "It is time for social media firms to design for democracies . . [for] computational propaganda is now one of the most powerful tools against democracy." In its view, "platforms need to significantly redesign themselves if democracy is going to survive social media."[41]

Setting aside the strong impact this book and others have had, it is worth addressing the consequences of defining propaganda as primarily a constraint on democracy. Even though the contours by which we understand propaganda may become simpler, the exercise also limits how much we are able to understand. By undercutting the recognition that propaganda is already part of the democratic project, even as it undermines democratic ideals, propaganda becomes a tool to be controlled for democracy's protection rather than an illustration of gaps in democracy's armor.[42]

What this means is that positioning autocracy's information disorder as the most genuine form of propaganda provides at best a partial prism for its under-standing: a long history of government control, top-down communiques, and subversive aims. By contrast, when democracy's information disorder is iden-tified as disinformation or misinformation, parameters come into view that may not be alarming in the same way: privatization, political polarization, and digital technology. What gets lost is that both enterprises are different sides of the same coin, though only the former is called by its rightful name. In other words, the idea that "autocracies propagandize, democracies persuade" still gets invoked even when we recognize its shortcomings.

The ensuing picture, then, is mostly one of autocracies and their satellites jettisoning propagandistic efforts toward democracies of the West, whose main response tends to be seen as pushback and resistance. Less attention is paid to the ways in which propaganda infiltrates democracies, puncturing the neat conceptual pictures that segregate types of political regimes from each other. A myriad of complications passes under the radar: democratic actors and agencies engaging in their own propaganda; entities that not only aspire to be democratic but are also malicious; projects that not only align with autocracies but are also well-meaning; activities masquerading as more public-oriented than evidence suggests; or hybrid motivations that combine positive and negative valences of propaganda.

When Privatization, Polarization, and Digitization Hide Propaganda

The tendency to obscure the historical lifeline of propaganda in democracies is concerning. Today's emphasis on privatization without highlighting it as a source of simplicity, on polarization without considering it a source of harm, and on digitization without noting its role in ephemerality obscures fuller recognition of the many features that spread and entrench today's informa-tion disorder. Each makes it difficult to recognize the presence of propaganda and how it thrives on conditions supposedly no longer relevant to current information environments. While misinformation and disinformation are regularly discussed in association with undermining political stability, finan-cial safety, and mental and physical health, we have cut short our ability to assess their connection with the long legacy of propaganda.

Substituting Privatization for State Activity

In many democracies but particularly the United States, information dis-order draws heavily from privatized firms – from social media platforms to heavily partisan news outlets – that can easily work half-truths and lies into information delivery. Crucially, the entrenched nature of information

disorder means that half-truths and lies for some are nonetheless believ-able to others. For example, what is often critiqued as "freakonomics" has become a training guide to the main driver of economic self-interest in democracies. In that light, Chaput treats neoliberalism as propaganda by showing how it hides its propagandistic nature beneath an emphasis on conditions that appear ahistorical, asocial, amaterial, and apolitical. In turn, such an emphasis naturalizes capitalism and stunts its critique.[43]

The point here is that when privatized enterprises are seen as wrestling with disinformation and misinformation, democracies remain troubled but largely intact. Consonant with what Chomsky long ago identified as the privatization of propaganda,[44] privatized information environments fold codes of behavior and terms of appropriateness into information delivery that encourages the alignment with elites and elite interests. What ruffles democracies is when propaganda comes from the state, which the emphasis on private firms usefully skips over. Privatization gets positioned, then, as a concern of less magnitude.

Substituting Polarization for Top-Down Control

The idea of polarization suggests enclaving public sentiments in largely voluntary ways that sequesters them from others with different ideas. This means that individuals actively participate in propaganda's spread and mutation, where polarization fosters lateral and multi-directional informa-tion control distinct from the kind of control imposed from above.

Henderson and Braun frame this aptly, calling propaganda a "typical discursive practice of managed democracy . . . [that] hinders or closes down discussion, response, inquiry, education, information and delibera-tion."[45] Today's polarization, which they contextualize as the fruit of what Ellul called "sociological propaganda," or the "penetration of an ideol-ogy by means of its sociological context,"[46] makes that possible. It leaves people unable to discern what is propaganda and what is not. The ensuing uncertainty, according to Orwell, is why propaganda is designed to "make lies sound truthful and murder respectable."[47] What needs more focus is what happens when the control of information turns out to be more lateral and multi-directional than assumed. Polarization facilitates the assent to power through conditions that may escape scrutiny for the very reason that control is not being activated in familiar ways.

Substituting Digitization for Legacy Media

Regardless of how much we believe that the democratization accompany-ing digitization can remove bad actors from platforms, it is the platforms

that nonetheless push information disorder. Certain content, topics, and perspectives are constantly being pushed at the expense of others. At the same time, the stress on digital enterprises like social media or AI has steered us away from legacy media, which are still part of the picture controlling information. This means information disorder circulates not only under the umbrella of techno-optimism but also under the guise of news, both circumstances facilitated by digitization.

The frequency of information campaigns run by bots and fake social media accounts should make it easier to see misinformation and disinformation as a downside of the dashed belief in the link between digitization and democratization. But we need to be more aware of how a focus on digital technology surreptitiously furthers the gap between current information disorder and propaganda. Fallon, for instance, argues that we have moved from studying messages to studying the control of information movement.[48] Even the so-called digital propaganda gap separating Russia and China from the democracies of the West employs the term, but without complicating it backwards in time. In both cases, we see adjustments in what we think warrants study, but primarily in terms that continue to accommodate the foundational binary between autocracy and democracy. We need to be asking if digital analytic tools like digital data points, mining tweets, and visual mapping are the methods worth pursuing if they sidestep the larger question of what propaganda does across regimes.

And yet, were we to think critically of what disinformation and misinformation signal in democracies, we might see them as more worthy of a historical lineage. With communiques from the state now the activity of private firms, top-down control now replaced by lateral and multi-directional polarization, and legacy media now dominated by digital technology, these traits help push propaganda out of the picture and welcome disinformation and misinformation in its stead.

So why is it so hard to see propaganda in democracies? It may be because identifying it as such risks impairing the very foundation on which democracy rests. This should alarm us, for it allows propaganda to persevere without censure. If there is anything to learn from propaganda's externalization to autocracies and invisibilization in democracies, it may be that it provides a model that prompts us to look harder for what seems not to be there.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the basic terms with which we approach current information disorder have severed understanding from its historical legacies. Today's media environments are far more networked, less unidirectional, less state-controlled or monopolized, more involved with

intimacy and emotion, and capable of more turns than the media of earlier times. Today's media environments also have origins that are more blurred, agency that is less clear, and activities that obscure the earlier nodal points of production and consumption.

This makes misinformation and disinformation relevant as propaganda's offspring in unexpected ways. Both types of information disorder fit many of the characteristics that were initially laid out in conjunction with propaganda during the 20th century, anticipating its evolution over time in ways that early forms of propaganda missed. When Ellul noted that the "propagandist is always separated from the propagandee, he remains a stranger to him,"[49] he might have been talking about today's information environment.

So where does all this leave us? It tells us we are correct in assuming that current conditions complicate earlier notions of propaganda. But we need to remember that earlier notions continue to complicate current conditions. How, for instance, do mechanisms like big lies or deep fakes necessarily exist alongside techniques of understatement, erasure, euphemism, and gaslighting?

Despite attempts to claim otherwise, propaganda is very much part of democracies, where it lurks in the activity by which we process information, the technologies that foster and divide the public, the content moderation that selects information in and out, and the social relations by which we see ourselves in others. We need to be bolder in naming its harms wherever they occur, more thoughtful about the power dynamics that control information, and more attuned to the complexity of the technological tools that create and maintain information disorder.

For history repeats itself, especially when we do not pay it heed. We need to be asking ourselves whether we have embraced the terms disinformation and misinformation to keep "our" own houses clean. We need to reconsider how far we will go in creating a reserve for the term "propaganda" as integral to nefarious and autocratic regimes of the past. Not doing so creates and sustains an undeserved moral high ground for current democratic societies, playing to the Us versus Them that the Cold War taught us so well. It cuts short our ability to wipe away the moral ranking that forecloses our critical faculties. Now and then, good and bad, democracy and autocracy, disinformation and misinformation all need to come under scrutiny, and they can do so most fruitfully when they are considered parts of the shared project of propaganda.

If we don't position misinformation and disinformation as current permutations of propaganda, we may lose the chance to recognize it. Given the state of today's information disorder, it is clear we are running out of time.

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3

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Propaganda and Stereotypes of the "Other" From World War I to the Present

David Welch

Perhaps the most outstanding stylistic device in propaganda is the use of contrasts. Not only do strong contrasts contain a greater emotional intensity than the more subtle nuances, but they also guide the audience's sympathies with more certainty. This aspect of propaganda is full of confrontations between good and evil, beauty and the beast, order and chaos; in each case the contrast serves to force the individual into the desired and firmly established commitment. In this ultimate purpose, propaganda is aided by the individual's psychological need for value judgments in simple black-and-white terms. This is particularly so if a country is in a state of crisis or war, when there is an increasing need for a simplification of the issues. In such a situation, the other side becomes totally malevolent, one's own cause indisputably just, and everyone gathers around the symbols of unity.

Political propaganda is at its most effective in times of uncertainty, and hatred is generally its most fruitful aid. In any society, a person cannot be kept too long at the highest level of sacrifice and conviction. Even in regimes that demanded a relentless fanaticism, such as the Third Reich or the Soviet Union, some form of diversion was needed. Hatred of the enemy was manipulated to fulfill this need as it tends to be the most spontaneous of all reactions; in order to succeed, it need only be addressed to the most simple and violent of emotions and through the most elementary means. It consists of attributing one's own misfortunes to an outsider. A frustrated person needs to hate because hatred, when shared with others, is the most potent of all unifying emotions. Heine wrote, "What Christian love cannot

achieve is affected by a common hatred."[1] Whether the object of hatred is the Bolshevik, the Jew, the Muslim, or the Anglo-Saxon, such propaganda has its best chance of success when it clearly designates a target as the source of all misery or suffering, providing the target it chooses is not *too* powerful. The aim of propaganda is to provide the object of this hatred in order to solidify the feelings of hatred. In this essay, I will show a number of examples of how different regimes depicted images of the enemy during the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, using a variety of propaganda devices.

One of the most striking means by which the media have influenced social attitudes – changing or reinforcing opinions – has been the use of stereotypes. By this, I mean conventional figures that have come to be regarded as representative of particular classes, races, and so on. The American social scientist Walter Lippmann developed the term "stereotype" to describe the knowledge men thought they possessed, particularly knowledge based on myths or dreams. Lippmann believed in the power of the myth or stereotype to arouse popular enthusiasm. He argued that abstract ideas and concepts like national pride are more real to the masses than actual realities.[2] The French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul developed the concept further in the 1960s: "Each individual harbours a large number of stereotypes and established tendencies; from this arsenal the propagandist must select those easiest to mobilize, those which will give the greatest strength to the action he wants to precipitate."[3]

In this context, propaganda gives individuals the stereotype, which they no longer take the trouble to work out for themselves; it furnishes them in the form of slogans or labels. A recent example of this might be the manner in which asylum seekers/migrant workers have been depicted in sections of the British press. The recognition of stereotypes is an important part of understanding the use of anti-symbols and the portrayal of the enemy in propaganda. The enemy is of great importance in propaganda, for not only does it provide a target that can be attacked, but it also offers a scapegoat, the easiest means of diverting public attention from genuine social and political problems at home.

Stereotypes invariably come ready-made, having evolved, whether consciously or subconsciously, over a considerable period of time. They frequently attach themselves to myths associated with other nations, races, or groups. One only needs to think about anti-Jewish motifs in Nazi propaganda or anti-Bolshevik/Soviet motifs in American propaganda during the Cold War to illustrate the point. There are two kinds of images of the enemy that emerge: (1) the enemy from "within" and (2) the enemy from "without." Propaganda is normally concerned with the latter, particularly

in times of war. However, I include both in this discussion to show how the two can occasionally conflate.

Atrocity stories are a time-honored technique of propagandists, particularly during wartime. Once guilt for the war is pinned on the enemy, the next step is to make the enemy appear savage, barbaric, and inhumane. During World War I, atrocity propaganda was employed on a global scale. Unlike previous wars, the Great War was the first total war in which whole nations and not just professional armies were locked in mortal combat. This and subsequent modern wars required propaganda to (1) mobilize hatred against the enemy; (2) convince the population of the justness of one's own cause; (3) enlist the active support and cooperation of neutral countries; and (4) strengthen the support of one's allies. Having sought to pin war guilt on the enemy, the next step is to make the enemy appear savage, barbaric, and inhumane. All the belligerents in World War I employed atrocity propaganda associated with the enemy, and as a result stereotypes emerged that had been largely developed in the period leading up to the outbreak of the war.

Anti-German Images: The Hun (The Prussian Bully)

Given the social tensions that existed in Britain in the years leading up to 1914, one of the first tasks of the British government after the declaration of war against Germany on 4 August was to justify to an apparently divided nation the efficacy of the government's war aims. The German invasion of neutral Belgium was the pretext for an anti-German campaign that rapidly mobilized widespread support among all sections of the population. The invasion of Belgium changed the demeanor of the British and gave this war a purpose.

In Britain, the government could rely upon official and commercial filmmakers to depict Germany in unflattering terms. Germany proved to be the "perfect enemy," and whenever enthusiasm for the war began to flag there was an endless stream of (alleged) German atrocities to strengthen national resolve.[4] German *Kultur* was pitted against Christian civilization and morality, which created an interpretative framework for subsequent events. The war was justified as a simple dichotomy between good and evil, or rather, civilization and barbarism. London buses were covered in posters with extracts from Pericles' "Funeral Oration" from the *Peloponnesian War*. The message was clear: Britain stood for the cultured, democratic Athenian Empire, while Germany represented the despotic, militaristic Sparta.[5] Belgium was depicted as a vulnerable and inoffensive country, often as either a defenseless child or a woman ravaged by brutal "Prussian militarism."[6]

British propaganda disseminated many tales of brutalized Belgian refugees, violated nuns, babies with hands cut off, boiled corpses to make soap, priests used as clappers in church bells, etc. Edmund Sullivan's horrific cartoons were in a similar style to those of the Dutch cartoonist Louis Raemaekers, which proved so popular in Britain during the war. Sullivan's wartime images caricatured Germans as bloated, half-human militaristic monsters and dramatized their alleged atrocities. "The Prussian Butcher" became an apelike figure.

During the 1914–1918 conflict, we witness governments taking their first tentative initiatives at using film propaganda to depict their enemies. The Tsar had famously dismissed cinema as "complete rubbish," but when war came, others took a different view and seized on the opportunities that this new propaganda medium offered.[7]

The cinema was also used to make the enemy as villainous as possible. The theme of the Prussian Bully was taken up by Lancelot Speed, and his animated cartoons, known as "lightning sketches," sought to ridicule the Kaiser and German military might. They proved to be a great success with British audiences. Speed's cinematic cartoons contained many topical references. In *The Bully Boy* (1915), the audience was shown the German shelling of Rheims cathedral, thought at the time to be the height of German barbarism. Speed, who can be seen in the film, draws a picture of Rheims cathedral and across the sketch writes, "The World's Greatest Gothic Work." He then draws a large artillery weapon similar to Big Bertha that destroys the cathedral with the title "The Work of the World's greatest GOTH!" The Kaiser appears with a devil emerging from his Prussian helmet to exclaim: "Do I hear any Cheers?" In an interview in 1914, Speed revealed that an exaggerated drawing of then-Minister of War Lord Kitchener's drooping moustache had provided the inspiration behind the image of the British bulldog, who would remain the implacable guardian of the British Empire. The bulldog could always be relied upon to eat the German bratwurst seen in the film and often depicted dangling from the pocket of the Prussian bully in numerous British cartoons. The bratwurst became, in British propaganda, shorthand for German barbarism.[8]

Film propaganda continued to identify German atrocities in "The Clutches of the Hun" and "Under German Yoke." Similarly, in September 1914, *The War Illustrated* took up this theme by printing graphically how "Belgian Miners Formed a Living Shield for Germans" – noting, "This may be Teutonic cunning, but who can imagine the Allies adopting such barbarous methods?"[9] It also featured a drawing of the "Latest German Invention – The Red Cross Machine Gun," revealing the Kaiser as the driver of the vehicle. In depicting the enemy's brutality and barbarism, many themes appeared repeatedly, including virginal women, innocent

FIGURE 3.1 Edmund Sullivan, *The Prussian Butcher* (1915). Mercy on the chopping block: about to be dismembered by the bestial Hun, signified by the traditional spiked helmet, the *Pickelhaube*. German atrocities in Belgium, both real and imagined, helped to fuel lurid depictions of Germans as subhuman beasts (British Library 1235.1.28).

children, and defenseless old people being violated and tortured. "There are only two divisions in the world today," Rudyard Kipling wrote, "human beings and Germans."[10] The British excelled themselves in portraying the "Hun." Accusations of German atrocities were reinforced by the publication of the Bryce Commission, which looked into these claims following the German invasion of Belgium and concluded in its report of May 1915 that many were true.[11]

The execution of British nurse Edith Cavell, the sinking of the Lusitania, the declaration of unrestricted U-Boat warfare, Zeppelin raids, and the use of gas in the trenches all seemed to confirm for the British (and the Allies) the fundamental depravity of the German character. Both the British stereotype of the Hun and the French image of the Boche provided a platform for Allied propaganda to launch a moral offensive against a society founded upon militaristic values, thereby bringing home to its own populations the unimaginable consequences of defeat. The French referred to Kaiser Wilhelm as *chef des barbares*, or "chief of the barbarians." Atrocity propaganda therefore played a major role in the wave of patriotism that enveloped Europe in the early stages of World War I. Britain, however, is justifiably regarded as deploying atrocity propaganda with more intensity and more skill than most. The receptiveness of the British public to atrocity stories and rumor deprived wartime society of much of its perceptiveness. It became capable of believing almost anything. It is quite extraordinary that the majority of the British people ended the war as they had begun it – their determination to defeat "the Hun" possibly more passionate, even more implacable than it had been in August 1914.

The Greedy Kulaks and Bolshevik Propaganda

If "the Hun" provided a good example of denunciation of an enemy without, the derogatory Russian term "kulak" denoted a very distinct type of enemy *within*, engaged in "wrecking" the Marxist-Leninist project. Kulaks were former peasants who owned medium-sized farms as a result of the reforms introduced by the tsarist prime minister, Peter Stolypin, in 1906. But Soviet propaganda painted these farmers as greedy and standing in the way of "utopian" collectivization because it would take away their land, livestock, and produce. The Bolsheviks declared them "enemies of the people," and kulaks were left homeless and without a single possession as everything was taken from them, including their pots and pans. It was also forbidden by law for anyone to aid dispossessed kulak families.[12]

During the so-called War Communism period (1918–1921), the Soviet government undermined the kulaks' position by organizing committees of poor peasants to administer the villages and to supervise the requisitioning

of grain from the richer peasants. But the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921 favored the kulaks. Although the Soviet government considered the kulaks to be capitalists and, therefore, enemies of socialism, it adopted various incentives to encourage peasants to increase agricultural production and enrich themselves. The most successful peasants, less than 4%, became kulaks and assumed traditional roles in the village social structure, often rivaling the authority of the new Soviet officials in village affairs.

In 1927, the Soviet government began to shift its peasant policy by increasing the kulaks' taxes and restricting their right to lease land; in 1929, it began a drive for the rapid collectivization of agriculture. The kulaks vigorously opposed the efforts to force the peasants to give up their small privately owned farms and join large cooperative agricultural establishments. At the end of 1929, a campaign to "liquidate the kulaks as a class" – called "dekulakization" – was launched by the government.[13] By 1934, when approximately 75% of the farms in the Soviet Union had been collectivized, most kulaks – as well as millions of other peasants who had opposed collectivization – had been deported to remote regions of the Soviet Union or arrested and their land and property confiscated.

The rationale behind forced collectivization was that peasant smallholdings should merge to form large collective farms, or *kolkhoz*. Lenin had envisaged collectivization as a gradual and relatively non-coercive process; from mid-1929 Stalin transformed it into a brutally violent campaign. To achieve this, Stalin believed he had to obliterate the kulak class, some of whom responded to the changes by destroying crops, livestock, and property rather than allow the state to take them. In order to liquidate the kulaks, Stalin sought the support of the poorer peasants. He embarked on a concerted propaganda campaign that targeted the kulaks and blackened them as bourgeois small capitalists who should be eliminated to allow the collectivization of agriculture. Kulaks as a class were depicted as the enemy within, together with other traditional "counter-revolutionaries," such as capitalists and priests. It has been estimated that 15 million kulaks and their families were deported by 1937; during the deportation, many people died, but the full number is not known.[14]

The propaganda demonized kulaks by portraying them as hostile to the workers' movement. A famous slogan of 1930 proclaimed, "We will keep out kulaks from the Collective Farms." Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein idealized the village cooperative and, by association, vilified the kulaks in his film *The Old and the New* (1929). He had begun making the film about agriculture, with the working title *The General Line*, when he was called upon to make *October* (1927) for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. By the time he returned to the original project,

the "general line" of the Party had changed. Parts of the film had to be amended, and the title changed to *The Old and the New*. Eisenstein now embarked upon a contemporary film by identifying a scapegoat for the ills afflicting Soviet society. The kulaks fitted Soviet negative stereotypes. Some, like the priest – witness Eisenstein's depiction of the cunning priest in his film *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925 – or the bourgeois, were perceived to be inherently hostile to the Revolution for ideological reasons. Others such as the kulak were seen as emerging only as a threat after the Revolution. But all were collectively denounced as "enemies of the people."[15]

These negative stereotypes had certain common characteristics, be they kulak, priest, or spy. In Soviet films, as in Soviet posters, they lived off the

FIGURE 3.2   An anti-kulak poster from the 1929 campaign (instigated by Stalin) to liquidate the kulaks as a class. A fat, greedy, and selfish kulak is forced from the collective farm in this unambiguously hostile poster from the Soviet campaign against kulaks, who are portrayed as class enemies of the USSR. The text reads: "Down with the kulaks; kick the kulaks out of the kolkhoz [collective farm]." To the right of the large fist is a quotation attributed to Lenin: "The kulaks are most bestial, brutal and savage exploiters, who in the history of other countries have time and again restored the power of the land-lords, tsars, priests and capitalists" (Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science COLL. MISC/0660/2/1).

fat of the land and off the honest toil of the workers, peasants, and soldiers. Alexander Dovzhenko's film *Earth* (1930) focused on the hostility of the kulaks to collectivization, while Alexander Medvedkin's *Happiness* (1934) showed how a lazy peasant is eventually shown the way to happiness by his wife, who embraces the life of the farm by mastering the machines and techniques necessary to make the system work. These stereotypes were represented as fat, heartless, cold, and cruel, and – in contrast to the heroes of the Revolution – they lived a parasitic existence.

A new wave of persecution against "ex-kulaks" began in 1937. It was part of the Great Purge, conducted by Nikolai Yezhov and the NKVD (secret police). Those deemed to be former kulaks were either executed or sent to labor camps. With few rich or middle-class peasants left to arrest, the NKVD, in order to satisfy the conviction quotas demanded by Stalin and Yezhov, terrorized the rest of the peasantry to induce more denunciations. In the wave of round-ups that followed, the term "kulak" lost its previous distinction and became a general accusation, which could be leveled at anyone whom the regime wished to convict. During the Great Purge, hundreds of thousands of peasants were falsely accused of being ex-kulaks and sent to the Gulag labor camps or executed on the basis of circumstantial evidence, forged evidence, or even none at all.

World War II: British Anti-Nazi Propaganda and the Use of Humor

The outbreak of a new global war in 1939 saw the belligerent states employ propaganda on a scale that dwarfed all previous conflicts, including World War I. World War II was a battle between two new types of regimes struggling for supremacy with one another in a battle for the future. Modern democracy and totalitarian dictatorship had both emerged from World War I, and the outbreak of hostilities in 1939 was a testimony to their mutual incompatibility. There followed a struggle between mass societies, a war of political ideologies in which, once again, propaganda was a significant weapon. World War II was different from World War I. It was a less static trench war, more truly a world war, more a "People's War" and more a "Total War," presenting an ideological and even a racial conflict. It was also arguably, from the Allied point of view, a morally justified war, thus invalidating humanitarian protest literature and art. Nevertheless, accusations detailing Nazi atrocities and human rights violations formed the staple content of the Ministry of Information (MOI) posters, leaflets, and pamphlets.[16] Although Lancelot Speed's "lightning sketches" had contained rare examples of humor in British propaganda during World War I, which tended to be dominated by stories

of German atrocities, this was to change in World War II, when the British frequently used humor to deflate the power of Hitler and Nazism.

The commercial cinema was especially adept at using humor to get across messages on behalf of the government. The MOI sensibly recognized this, albeit after repeated promptings by the surveys of Mass-Observation, which showed that humor was an important weapon in the propagandist's armory in waging total war. Accordingly, cinema stars such as Tommy Trinder comically savored the delights of British restaurants in *Eating Out with Tommy Trinder* (1941), little Arthur Askey warned of the number of working days lost through spreading "coughs and sneezes" in *The Nose Has It* (1942), and Will Hay hilariously demonstrated the right and wrong ways to deal with incendiary bombs in *Go to Blazes* (1942). Humor was also employed to deflate the enemy. In 1941, filmmaker Charles Ridley cleverly re-edited for the MOI real footage of goose-stepping Nazi soldiers at Nuremberg (taken from Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress, *Triumph of the Will*) to the popular tune of "The Lambeth Walk." At the beginning of the film, which was entitled *Germany Calling* (and also shown as a newsreel), the narrator exclaims,

> I'm going to show you a showman that we all hate . . . and it's going to be in the form of a ballet – a Panzer ballet. It's entitled 'Retreat from Moscow' and it's going to be done to the Lambeth Walk.

Ridley chose this music because members of the Nazi Party had called the tune "Jewish mischief and animalistic hopping." By speeding up the film, the incipient threat of the SS was diluted, and its formations – directed by a preposterous-looking Hitler – were rendered comical in a silent-film tradition. The reduction of a frightening enemy to the level of visibility and ridicule, as in this lampooning of Hitler and his forces, is, in psychological terms, a means of achieving power over him. The intention was to lampoon Hitler and his forces; its effect was hilarious and ridiculous, but fear of the enemy and its military might was real. The British used a similar technique to undermine and humiliate Mussolini; for example, Alberto Cavalcanti's 1940 documentary film *Yellow Caesar* was a highly effective piece of propaganda, which reinforced the impression of Mussolini as a clown.

Nazi Propaganda and the "Perfidious Albion"

Anti-Jewish and anti-Bolshevik motifs were central to the Nazi *Weltanschauung,* or worldview. The Nazi movement had developed and finally emerged from a struggle in which communists together with the Jews formed the main target of Nazi violence and invective. Indeed, by claiming a

Marxist-inspired Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy, Nazi propaganda was able, at times, to fuse these two enemies into one. However, for a brief period following the defeat of France in 1940, German propagandists switched to targeting the British. Once Britain had declared war on Germany in September 1939, it became a distinctive enemy and object of hatred in Nazi propaganda. Throughout the early part of summer in 1940, as the struggle for control of the skies above Britain took place, anti-British propaganda reached a new crescendo, claiming that it was only a matter of time before Britain's fate was sealed. Propaganda emphasized British hypocrisy and plutocracy – the Perfidious Albion.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was specifically targeted and mercilessly lampooned. One famous poster in Nazi Germany depicted him as an American-style gangster brandishing a Thomson sub-machine gun, alongside the text *Heckenschützen*, or The Sniper. Goebbels used the same image for leaflets dropped over the United Kingdom during the Battle of Britain with the text in English "WANTED" and at the bottom, "for incitement to MURDER." The reverse of the leaflet was all text; it referred to Churchill as a "gangster" responsible for the hardships suffered by ordinary citizens during the bombing of British cities. The SD Reports of the
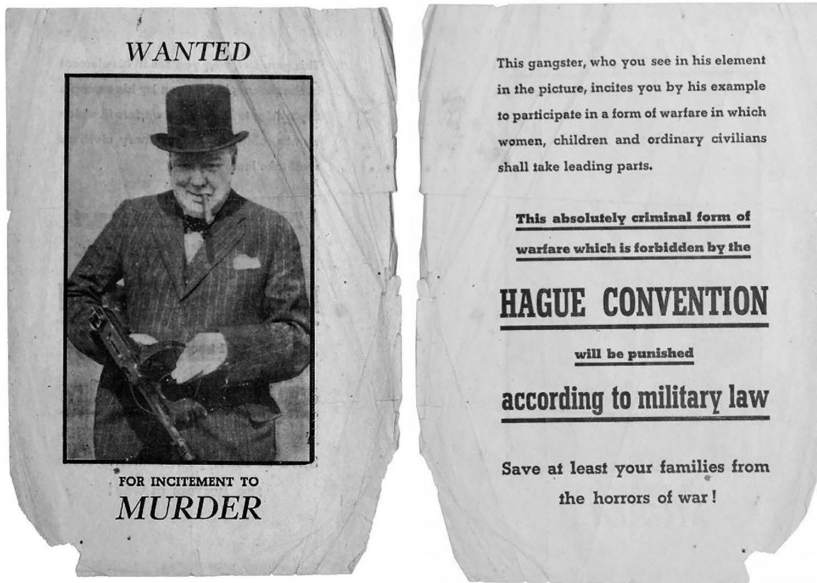
FIGURE 3.3   Leaflets dropped by the Nazis over the United Kingdom showing Churchill as a Chicago-like gangster with a Tommy gun (Imperial War Museum, K AERIAL 3/3591).

Sicherheitsdienst, or secret police, suggested that German hatred of Britain, incited by incessant propaganda, was now widespread.[17]

The Eternal Jew – The Enemy From Within

While the British represented a clear enemy without – one whom the Germans were fighting in a conventional war – Nazi ideology had simultaneously identified Jews as the enemy *within*. Anti-Semitism was not only the core of Nazi ideology, but the Jewish stereotype that developed from it also provided the focal point for the feelings of aggression inherent in the ideology. Before 1939, anti-Semitism was propagated chiefly through the German educational system and the press. Three major campaigns were waged: the boycott of Jewish shops in 1933, the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and the destruction of Jewish-owned property in the *Reichskristallnacht* of 1938.

An important function of Nazi propaganda was therefore to disseminate Nazi racial ideology. Press directives had ensured that racial issues would figure prominently in the daily newspapers. Goebbels had even suggested that not one week should pass without a discussion of racial-political questions. Emphasis would often be placed on Jewish aspects of "criminality" against German interests. Before the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws, for example, a "public enlightenment" program had been instigated to demonstrate the history of Jewish "crimes" and "conspiracies." A similar campaign followed the *Kristallnacht* (1938), when synagogues were torched and vandalized. Nothing illustrates the campaign more clearly than the Nazi use of film. In coordination with propaganda campaigns in other media, a number of films were prepared in an attempt to make the German people aware of the "dangers" posed by Jewry and also to rationalize any measures that were, or might be, taken by the regime, either publicly or in secret.

In 1940, three major anti-Semitic films were released: *Die Rothschilds* (The Rothschilds), *Jud Süss* (Jew Süss), and *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal – or Wandering – Jew). All were part of an attempt to justify Nazi measures and convince the people that a "Jewish Question" did exist, which needed to be "solved."[18] The most notorious and virulent of all anti-Semitic films is *Der ewige Jude*, which ran the gamut of Nazi allegations against Jews and was intended to prepare the German people for the genocide of the Final Solution. The film begins with scenes from the Warsaw Ghetto, designed to show the reluctance of Jews to undertake creative labor, and continues by depicting the migration of Jews and their attempts to assimilate with European peoples. Animated maps show how the Jews, starting from Palestine, described as "the spiritual centre for international Jewry," diffused across

the world; furthermore, the 19th century "with its vague ideas of human equality and freedom, gave the Jew a powerful impetus." This diffusion is illustrated as a dense network over the map, resembling festering sores. The film then cuts to a sequence of rats devouring grain and scurrying in packs, filling the screen, in an analogy between rats and Jews that Hitler had first used in *Mein Kampf*. The commentary continues:

> Comparable with the Jewish wanderings through history are the mass migrations of an equally restless animal, the rat. . . . Wherever rats appear they bring ruin, they ravage human property and foodstuffs. In this way they spread disease: plague, leprosy, typhoid, cholera, dysentery, etc. They are cunning, cowardly, and cruel and are found mostly in packs. In the animal world they represent the element of craftiness and subterranean destruction – no different from the Jews among mankind!

By contrasting Jewish individualism and "self-seeking," reminiscent of the kulaks in Soviet propaganda, with the National Socialist ideal of a "people's community" or *Volksgemeinschaft*, and by showing that Jews were only motivated by money, it was possible to demonstrate that Judaism was the total antithesis of the cherished values of the German cultural tradition as interpreted by Nazi ideology. But more importantly, the constant analogy made with rats and parasites suggested that the Jew differed from the Aryan not only in body but also, more significantly, in soul, for the Jew had no soul. The implication was that here was a menace that had to be "resisted." Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from watching such films was that the killing of Jews was not a crime but a necessity: Jews, after all, were not human beings but pests, which had to be exterminated. *Der ewige Jude* represents a form of National Socialist "realism," depicting not so much what was but what ought to have been, in accordance with the pre-conceived notion of Nazi racial ideology. Having previewed the film before its release, Goebbels recorded in his diary the "scenes so horrific and brutal in their explicitness that one's blood runs cold. One shudders at such barbarism. This Jewry must be eliminated."[19]

Despite such attempts at whipping up anti-Semitism, the regime encountered problems. At precisely the time that Jewish persecution was being intensified and final details of the Final Solution were falling into place, during the summer and autumn of 1941, the SD Reports were noting either boredom with, or massive indifference to, the "Jewish Question" among the population. Ironically, such indifference proved fatal for the Jews. Interest in the fate of Jews had, in fact, rapidly evaporated after the *Reichskristallnacht*. Historian Ian Kershaw has written that the "road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference."[20] It was no

longer necessary after 1941 to publicize the "threats" posed by Jews, and as a result, the Jewish Question became of no more than marginal importance in the formation of popular opinion within the Third Reich. Propaganda had helped to create such apathy and indifference by persuading people that they could retreat into the safety of their private lives and leave the solutions to such "problems" to others. Tragically, the moral ambiguity that characterized the public's response to the well-publicized plans to exterminate Jews and other "inferior" races encouraged the regime to "realize the unthinkable."[21]

According to George Mosse, "a myth is the strongest belief held by the group, and its adherents feel themselves to be an army of truth fighting an army of evil."[22] Joseph Goebbels maintained that the purpose of propaganda was to persuade the audience to believe in the viewpoint expressed by the propagandist. But if propaganda is to be effective, it must, in a sense, always preach to those who are already partially converted. Aldous Huxley once stated:

> Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The Propagandist is a man who canalises an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain.[23]

The Nazi attitude toward the Jews is an excellent example of this facet of propaganda. It cannot be argued rationally that anti-Semitism was the result of National Socialism or that Goebbels' propaganda made Germans anti-Semitic, but the fact remains that the Third Reich was responsible for an attempt at genocide of unparalleled scope and brutality. This situation may be attributed partly to the effects of propaganda itself and partly also to the closed political environment where propaganda was necessarily working. Thus, when Hitler came to power, he needed the Jews as a permanent scapegoat for those in the movement to work off their resentment; the Jew was manipulated to fulfill a psychological need. Nazi propaganda used the historical predisposition of the audience toward an anti-Semitic explanation for Germany's cultural, economic, and political grievances.

"The Yellow Peril": US Anti-Japanese Propaganda

Following the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor, the Office of War Information that was responsible for official US propaganda commissioned Frank Capra to direct seven documentary films in the *Why We Fight* (1942–1945) series, with the aim of justifying America's entry into the war and providing soldiers and civilians with a cause. They were

FIGURE 3.4   Poster for the *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal/Wandering Jew, 1940). Racial stereotypes abound in the poster's depictions of Jewish physiognomy that is referred to in the poster as "a documentary film about world Jewry" (Imperial War Museum, Art. IWM PST 8327).

supplemented by the *Know Your Ally* and *Know Your Enemy* series, and later shown to the US public too, to persuade them to support American involvement in the war.

In *Prelude to War* (1942), the first in the series, it is claimed that "this is a fight between a Free World and a Slave World," a theme that would endure during the Cold War. *Prelude to War* pointed to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 as the start of World War II: "Remember that date: September 18, 1931, a date you should remember as well as December 7, 1941. For on that date in 1931 the war we are now fighting began." The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor provided the rallying cry for war, even more than the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 had crystallized anti-German attitudes. Whereas the enemy in Europe was depicted by the United States as an evil regime, in Asia the enemy was depicted as an entire race. In Europe, the United States fought to defend its allies against a Nazi expansionist regime motivated by a racist utopian ideology.

In the Pacific War, Japanese expansion was also accompanied by a belief in racial superiority, but American propaganda was itself driven by hatred of the "sub-human Jap." The Australian government's Department of Information launched a similar "Know Your Enemy" campaign, which was characterized by highly emotional appeals and crude racial stereotypes that demonized the Japanese. Such feelings seemed to stem from much more than simply vengeance for Pearl Harbor. They often reflected pre-existing racism, which had been reinforced by the Japanese attack. The animosity was demonstrated in the unconstitutional deportation of Japanese Americans from their homes on the Pacific Coast to internment camps, which demonstrated that the Japanese were viewed as an enemy within and without.

Interestingly, the Office of War Information (OWI) generally sought to restrain, rather than generate, the more extreme attitudes, partly because it was concerned about the negative effects of racially based propaganda on African-American support for the war and also because it feared, with good reason, that such blatant evidence of white racism would be exploited by Japanese propaganda. Nevertheless, "yellow" terminology was the branding of choice when referring to the Japanese, along with depictions of them as animals and labels of the "yellow peril" and "yellow monkeys." US war-bond posters variously pictured the Japanese as rat-like or simian monsters, and snakes also figured. But the most common animal was the monkey. Films and cartoons took up the theme without official prompting, with the result that the fanatical Japanese soldier became a familiar and enduring stereotype. In several posters and editorial cartoons, notably Arthur Szyk's savage portrayal of the Japanese as inhuman beasts, the Japanese were drawn as monkeys hanging from trees or lumbering around

FIGURE 3.5   "The Tokio Kid Say – Broke up Tools Was Waste for Scrap Just
Like Bullets Make for Jap!" (1943) (National Archives).

like big gorillas. The image of a subhuman primate was key to devaluing
the humanity of the enemy.

As part of the effort by the US Douglas Aircraft Company to improve
its workers' efficiency and avoid waste, the shortsighted and bucktoothed
Tokio Kid fronted a poster campaign. The grotesque racial stereotype
combined the comic-book absurd with a sense of threat and danger, vis-
ible here in the bloodstained dagger. In this particular poster, designed by
American artist Jack Campbell, the message is about conserving resources
to help the war effort. Created as part of the company's drive to reduce
tool breakage and waste, the Tokio Kid (allegedly based on Prime Min-
ister Hideki Tojo) appeared on posters mocking American workers for
allowing broken drills, cracked cogwheels, mixed-up rivets, and piles of
scrap. The message here and in the campaign in general is that workers
who rush to finish their shifts or encourage sloppy work practices are,
implicitly, a boon to the enemy. These posters were later used by the

government to encourage workers in other companies that were involved in essential war production.

Hollywood also produced a series of films that dramatized the "yellow peril": *Wake Island* (1942), *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), *Bataan* (1943), *Corregidor* (1943), and *Destination Tokyo* (1943). Bugs Bunny featured in an episode of Warner Brothers' *Merrie Melodies* entitled "Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips," where the enemies were referred to as "monkey face," "slant eyes," and "bowlegs." Accessories and paraphernalia with a propaganda theme abounded: patriotic buttons carried slogans such as "Slap that Jap. Fight for Four Freedoms"; Superman Comic reinforced the same message specifically to children: "Superman says YOU can slap a Jap"; ashtrays were sold with pictures of a Japanese soldier in a rat's body and the slogan "Jam your cigarette butts on this Rat"; matchbox labels urged "Hang One – on Nippon'" showing a US Marine beating a Japanese soldier; and in 1945 a number of "atomic bomb games" were even produced, the object being to tilt the game in order to simultaneously maneuver the bomb into two holes labeled Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Throughout the war, Japan used historical accounts of the United States' racist past to cite the many racial injustices of the country, which were juxtaposed against their own innate belief in Japan's spiritual and racial superiority. Thus, both sides indulged in race-based propaganda, helping fuel a war of mutual extermination on the bitterly fought-over island battlefields of the Pacific. Arguably, the vehemence of such propaganda laid the foundation for the US use of the atomic bomb against the Japanese in August 1945.

The extraordinary levels of propaganda during World War II were sustained after 1945 during the long period of the Cold War and the ideological divide between communism and capitalism, a contest characterized in 1950 by US President Harry S. Truman as a "struggle above all else for the minds of men." Stereotypes of the enemy were employed by all belligerents, and fear of the other side grew to such an extent that in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the world came close to a nuclear conflict. It was during this period that the newly established communist state of China identified very different types of enemies from *within* and launched an extraordinary propaganda campaign to eradicate them.

China and the "Four Pests" Campaign (1956–1962)

When Mao Zedong (Mau Tse Tung) and the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, China was ridden with disabling infectious diseases. Tuberculosis, plague, cholera, polio, malaria, smallpox, and hookworm were endemic throughout much of the country. Roughly 10.5 million people were infected with the water-borne liver parasite schistosomiasis

and cholera epidemics raged through the population freely, while infant mortality was as high as 300 per 1,000 live births. The government began initiating massive vaccination campaigns against the plague and smallpox, vaccinating nearly 300 million people. Sanitation infrastructures for clean drinking water and waste disposal were implemented, and the government directed medical and public health stewards to venture into the rural areas and treat diseases as best as they could with the limited resources available.

So began the initiation of the Great Leap Forward with a monumental patriotic health campaign that would target "four pests" – rats, mosquitos, flies, and sparrows – that according to the regime spread disease and destroyed crops. Encouraged by a pervasive poster and film propaganda campaign, the Chinese took up the cause with merciless efficiency and embarked upon an incredible slaughter of wildlife. The elimination of the "four pests" was conveyed as a patriotic duty to be undertaken by everyone from young children to the elderly. Citizens were encouraged to use anything that could prove effective, including fly swatters, traps, guns, drums, and gongs. The "Four Pests" campaign proved inordinately successful in achieving its primary goal of vermin eradication. It is estimated that 1.5 billion rats, 1 billion sparrows, 220 million flies, and over 24 million mosquitoes were destroyed. But in terms of establishing a goal and clearly achieving it, one of the most successful public health campaigns in history came at an extraordinarily grave cost for the Chinese, ecologically and demographically.

No longer threatened by predatory sparrows, locusts devoured fields of grain. Chairman Mao finally ended the sparrow campaign and replaced it in the list with bed bugs. However, the damage had already been done. By 1958, crop production had declined by 15%; in the following year that rate jumped to over 70%, causing a great famine in China. When the famine ended, between 15 and 36 million people had died of starvation. The Great Leap Forward campaign ended in 1962, and with it so did the "Four Pests" campaign.[24]

The campaign called citizens to act together to rid China of these pests, encouraged by the government giving out accolades in schools, workgroups, and government agencies to the members with the highest number of kills. While some infectious diseases were eradicated and their scope diminished, the sparrow's intrinsic role in the ecological balance was not recognized and resulted in an unmitigated environmental disaster.

Rwandan Genocide and Tutsi Traitors

Genocide or attempted genocide is a product of intense hatred, invariably fueled by propaganda about a perceived enemy. In 1994, genocidal mass

FIGURE 3.6 Poster "The Four Pests." The highly stylized Chinese propaganda poster was one of many used to launch the "Four Pests" campaign, as described here: "From 1956 onwards, mice, sparrows, flies and mosquitoes should absolutely be eliminated in all possible places within twelve years. Killing sparrows serves to protect crops. Sparrows in cities and forest areas do not necessarily have to be eliminated" (International Institute of Social History).

slaughter took place in the East African state of Rwanda. It was the culmination of long-standing ethnic tensions between minority Tutsis who had exercised long-standing control of power and the majority Hutu peoples who had come to power relatively recently in the rebellion of 1962. In 1990, Tutsi refugees calling themselves the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded northern Rwanda to defeat the Hutu-led government, thus triggering a bitter civil war in which the Hutus clearly identified the Tutsis as the threatening enemy from "within."

The genocide had been planned by members of the Hutu power group known as the *Akuza*, many of whom occupied positions at top levels of the national government. The genocide was supported and coordinated by the national government as well as by local military and civil officials and mass media. Indeed, the news media played a crucial role in the genocide; local print and radio media fueled the killings while the international media either ignored or seriously misconstrued events on the ground. A campaign of hate was launched first by the print media and later taken up and intensified by radio stations. Due to high rates of illiteracy at the time of the genocide, radio was an important way for the government to deliver messages to the public. Two radio stations key to inciting violence before and during the genocide were *Radio Rwanda* and *Radio Télévision Libre Mille Collines* (RTLM). From October 1993, the RTLM repeatedly broadcast themes that had been disseminated by the press and in leaflets suggesting the inherent differences between Hutu and Tutsi, the foreign origin of Tutsi, the disproportionate share of Tutsi wealth and power, and the horrors of past Tutsi rule. These broadcasts also claimed that all Tutsi were supporters of the RPF force fighting against the elected government. Women in particular were targets of the anti-Tutsi propaganda. For example, the "Hutu Ten Commandments," which had been published in 1990 in *Kangura*, or "Wake-Up," the anti-Tutsi language newspaper, included four commandments that portrayed Tutsi women as tools of the Tutsi people and as sexual weapons to weaken and ultimately destroy the Hutu men. Gender-based propaganda also included cartoons printed in newspapers depicting Tutsi women as sex objects. Examples of gender-based hate propaganda used to incite war rape included statements by perpetrators, such as "You Tutsi women think that you are too good for us" and "Let us see what a Tutsi woman tastes like."

The use of propaganda played an important role in both genocide and associated gender-specific violence. The Hutu propaganda depicted Tutsi women as "a sexually seductive 'fifth column' in league with the Hutus' enemies." The exceptional brutality of the sexual violence, as well as the complicity of Hutu women in the attacks, suggests that the use of

QUE SE PASSE-T-IL ?

ON A TUÉ HABYARIMANA.

... NOUS DEMANDONS À TOUS NOS VALEUREUX FRÈRES HUTU DE NE PAS LAISSER CE CRIME IMPUNI. LEVEZ-VOUS, NOS FRÈRES! LEVEZ-VOUS ET ALLEZ AU TRAVAIL! AFFÛTEZ VOS OUTILS, SOULEVEZ VOS GOURDINS! IL FAUT ÉRADIQUER CETTE RACE DE CANCRELATS! CHERCHEZ-LES DANS TOUS LES TROUS...

FIGURE 3.7   Cartoon showing two Hutu men listening to the radio, which is broadcasting the news of the assassination in 1994 of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, which derailed his peace negotiations with Tutsi rebels and contributed to calls for the genocide against Tutsi and moderate Hutu (Cartoon by A. Noh, 1 April 2010. Amber Bean EDSS Historical Project. Rwanda Genocide).

propaganda had been effective in the exploitation of gendered needs, which had mobilized both females and males to participate.[25] The absence of alternative media sources in Rwanda contributed to the pervading narrative of "them" against "us" – a familiar scenario in propaganda directed at perceived enemies. In the case of Rwanda, propaganda played an active role in transforming existing hatred of the "other" into genocide.

The Rwandan genocide was a systematic campaign by the Hutu ethnic majority aimed at eradicating the minority Tutsi group. During 100 days of slaughter, fueled by a frenzied propaganda campaign of hatred, the Hutu-controlled government and allied militias slaughtered between 800,000 and one million Tutsis before a Tutsi rebel group overthrew them. Over 100,000 Hutus were also killed, including both moderate Hutus killed by Hutu extremists and those killed by Tutsis in so-called revenge killings.[26]

"What Does It Say?" "Someone's Killed Habyarimana"

Radio: "We demand that our Hutu brothers do not let these crimes go unpunished. Raise yourselves, our brothers. Raise yourselves and work!

Sharpen your tools and raise your clubs! It's time to eradicate the cancer race. Look for them everywhere."[27]

* * * *

The changing nature of international crises from the Cold War to a post-Cold War context, together with rapidly changing technology, has transformed both the nature of warfare and its reportage. At the end of the 1980s, as the Cold War was coming to an end, the term "information warfare" started to gain currency. In subsequent limited and asymmetric wars and in the so-called war on terror, discussion has shifted to the importance of soft power such as information operations, PSYOPS or psychological operations, public diplomacy, and the appropriation by the military of public relations and strategic communications approaches. What has remained constant in such periods of uncertainty has been the continuing desire by propagandists to fuel hatred by exploiting real or perceived images of the enemy.

Moreover, the growth of the Internet and social media has allowed such propaganda to be disseminated instantaneously across the globe. At the time of writing, the war in the Middle East between Israel and Hamas in Palestine has elicited deep-rooted stereotypes of "the other" that have polarized world opinion into anti-Semitic and anti-Islamist rhetoric, each side accusing the other of committing atrocities and war crimes. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was justified by Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "limited military operation" intended to prevent a neo-fascist regime from conducting pogroms against Russian speakers. Effectively challenging Ukraine's right to exist, Putin claimed that Ukrainian government leaders were neo-Nazis and that NATO was building up military infrastructure in Ukraine that threatened Russia.[28]

Ukrainian government officials responded to the Russian accusations by inverting the propaganda message and identifying Putin as the real enemy from without. On the day of the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian government's official Twitter account sent a message to the world. It posted a political cartoon of an oversized Adolf Hitler staring lovingly into Putin's eyes, his hand touching the Russian president's face, like a father congratulating his son. The cartoon was uncredited, but its meaning was clear.

Conclusion

Images of the enemy come in many shapes and forms. Some are humorous, often designed to deflate the enemy's presumed power. Some are brutal, usually to elicit feelings of hatred. Different techniques are used by the propagandist to construct an identikit picture that corresponds

FIGURE 3.8   Following the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, Ukrainian officials posted this cartoon on Twitter without any text, with only the words "official website" stamped on it. Both Putin and Hitler are looking at each other affectionately, with the Nazi leader's hand tenderly on the Russian president's cheek[29] (https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/this-is-not-a-meme-ukraine-tweets-hitler-putin-carto on-amid-war-2787108).

to stereotypes and myths that have often developed over a considerable period of time. The propaganda image of the enemy must, however, remain stylized in simplicity. The message must be expressed in a way that does not invite discussion. Its appeal is intrinsically emotional and excludes all alternatives. Such propaganda also reinforces one's own sense of national or racial/ethnic identity and strengthens commonly held symbols of unity.

It is important to remember that the images of the enemy that I have discussed were not constructed in isolation. The film, the poster, the leaflet, the cartoon, the radio or television broadcast, and now the Internet and social media, would not have been viewed in a vacuum; they each formed only one aspect of a wider and concerted propaganda drive, in which all the available means of communication were generally employed. The case studies discussed here are historical, and, for the most part, the stereotypes are of their time and have since withered, if not necessarily died. Today, many people may wonder how audiences in the past could be so gullible in accepting and acting on such propaganda.

But the principle that propaganda works on is timeless, and the construction of enemies, both real and imagined, is perennial. Many of its incarnations

have been employed on both sides in what, since 2001, the West has called the "war on terror" and currently are widely disseminated in Hybrid Information Warfare and the battle in the information space in Ukraine and elsewhere. A human tendency to think of them and us is always liable to be exploited by those with the means and the power to do so.

Notes

1 Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1835).
2 W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1945).
3 J. Ellul, *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 35.
4 J.M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914–1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 210. Atrocity stories committed by the Hun were also exploited to strengthen the fighting spirit of soldiers and to rouse the necessary "blood-lust." For two revealing examples written from the first-hand experiences of British generals, see Sir Ian Hamilton, *The Friends of England* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923) and F.P. Crozier, *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).
5 G. Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 4.
6 For a detailed analysis of anti-German propaganda disseminated by the British during World War I, see D. Welch, "Images of the Hun: The Portrayal of the German Enemy in British Propaganda in World War I," in *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion. From World War I to WikiLeaks*, ed. D. Welch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 37–64.
7 Quoted in R. Taylor, *Film Propaganda. Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 35.
8 For two interesting analyses of the use made of animated cartoons for propaganda purposes, see P. Wood, "Distribution and Trade Press Strategies of British Animated Propaganda Cartoons of the First World War Era," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, no. 2 (June 2005): 189–201 and D. Huxley, "Kidding the Kaiser. British Propaganda Animation 1914–1919," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (2006): 307–20.
9 *War Illustrated*, 12 September 1914, vol. 1, no. 4, 74.
10 *Morning Post*, June 22, 1915, cited in P. Knightley, *The First Casualty. From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 84; Horatio Bottomley, the colorful editor of *John Bull* ("the soldier's friend"), invariably attacked the Kaiser and his subjects as "Germhuns" and called for the internment of all Germans living in Britain. J. Symons, *Horatio Bottomley* (London: Cresset Press, 1955), 166–67.
11 During the interwar years, the Bryce Report was subject to much skepticism, and a revisionism emerged that associated the report itself with propaganda. However, in recent years, new historiography has suggested that the report in some ways underestimated the extent of atrocities committed by German troops. See, for example, J. Horne and A. Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
12 For a first-hand account of the manner in which collectivization was carried out and its traumatic effect on the kulaks, see V. Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (London: Robert Hale, 1947).

13 Cf. Stalin's speech ("Problems of Agrarian Policy in the USSR") of 27 December 1929: "It means that we have passed from the policy of *restricting* the exploitive tendencies of the kulaks to the policy of *liquidating* the kulaks as a class. . . . It is ridiculous and foolish to go on about the expropriation of the kulaks. You do not lament the loss of hair of one who has been beheaded." The full speech is quoted in R. Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917–1991* (London: Routledge, 1999), 179–80.

14 Cf. S. Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: W&N, 2014), 84: "By 1937, 18.5 million were collectivized but there were now only 19.9 million households: 5.7 million households, perhaps 15 million persons, had been deported, many of them dead."

15 For a discussion of Soviet film propaganda, see R. Taylor, *Film Propaganda. Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

16 For a discussion of British propaganda strategy toward Nazi Germany and particularly the use of humor, see D. Welch, *Persuading the People. British Propaganda in World War II* (London: British Library, 2016), 87–120.

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19 F. Taylor, ed., *The Goebbels Diaries 1939–41* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 23, entry for October 17, 1939.

20 I. Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 277.

21 The phrase was first used by Hans Mommsen in his outstanding essay, "The Realization of the Unthinkable: The Final Solution of the Jewish Question," in *The Policies of Genocide*, ed. G. Hirschfeld (London: Allan and Unwin, 1986), 97–144.

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25 For a discussion of the sexual violence fueled by hate propaganda, see A. Jones, "Genocide and Mass Violence," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, ed. L. J. Shepherd (London: Routledge, 2010), 127–47. For a brief discussion of the conflict from a propaganda perspective, see M. Lower and T. Hauschildt, "The Media as a Tool of War: Propaganda in the Rwandan Genocide," *Human Security Centre, Human Rights and Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 1 (2014).

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27 Cartoon by A. Noh, 1 April 2010. Amber Bean EDSS Historical Project, *Rwanda Genocide*, accessed March 18, 2024, https://rwandangenocideamberbean.weebly.com/cartoons.html.

28 The full text of Putin's "declaration of war on Ukraine" was published in *The Spectator*, February 24, 2022, accessed March 19, 2024, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-putin-s-declaration-of-war-on-ukraine.

29 Accessed March 19, 2024, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/this-is-not-a-meme-ukraine-tweets-hitler-putin-cartoon-amid-war-2787108.

4

MANUFACTURING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Big Lies, Alternative Facts, and Controlled Language

Nelson Ribeiro

While propaganda has been a part of human societies since ancient times, World War I is usually presented as the first military conflict in which propaganda was used in a mass and systematic way by belligerents. The aim was to boost troop morale but also to conquer the "hearts and minds" of the populations that, while suffering the consequences of the conflict, took on an important role in the war effort by contributing to a wide range of industries that ensured the production of war supplies. As noted by David Welch, "public opinion could no longer be ignored as a determining factor in the formulation of government policies,"[1] which led to significant investments in propaganda on both domestic and foreign fronts.

After the outbreak of the war in 1914, the Allies became particularly active on the communication front, mostly through the dissemination of stories that exaggerated the brutality of the Germans in what became known as atrocity propaganda. Stories about the mutilation of nuns and the massacre of innocent people in Belgium became particularly widespread, and despite many being unsupported by evidence, they became very powerful narratives in fueling public opinion against the Germans, who were depicted as barbarians capable of the most atrocious acts.[2]

The centrality of mass propaganda in World War I rendered it a phenomenon studied by different disciplines, which were determined in the interwar period to understand how propaganda operates, how it permeates people's minds, and how it influences their perceptions of the world. Early scholarship on propaganda not only described its practice but also discussed its use as a theoretical construct to shed light on how political actors use different strategies to influence people's perceptions and behaviors. At

the time, the word "propaganda" was already drifting from its original meaning and acquiring a negative connotation that would become even more evident after 1945. In many countries, mostly in the West, it became associated with communicative actions aimed at molding and manipulating public opinion. Harold Lasswell, for example, described propaganda as "the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations."[3] Like most scholars throughout the 20th century, Lasswell was especially concerned with political propaganda and how those in power had access to resources that allowed them to "manage" information and manipulate people's perceptions of reality.

Today, more than a century after the concept started to receive significant attention from academia, we are still far from a consensus about what exactly propaganda designates. In the West, it is used to label communicative actions aimed at manipulating the receivers, while in several countries of the Global South, it is frequently used to describe messages that aim to persuade the receivers, namely those produced with commercial intent.

Among the authors invested in defining propaganda, Jacques Ellul stands out for the comprehensiveness of his work, which distinguished between different types and categories of propaganda practices. For the French sociologist, propaganda is not the product of communication techniques used to persuade others but instead a complex sociological phenomenon that can be used for many different purposes, including to motivate people to participate in elections, memorials, national celebrations, and other collective events that create a sense of community and nationhood.[4] Following this line of thought, propaganda can be used to either misguide or foster a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, while Ellul is more positive than most scholars when describing propaganda,[5] he also acknowledged that its practice did not follow any kind of ethical constraints and would instead resort to truths, half-truths, and lies to achieve its aims.

While Ellul focused on distinguishing different types and categories of propaganda, George Orwell experienced its effects on the ground, namely during the Spanish Civil War. His essays and novels demonstrate how pervasive and perverse the practice of propaganda can be, focusing especially on the deception perpetrated by those in power and how they use language as a tool to deceive and manipulate. Along with discussing such ideas in the essay "Politics and the English Language," in the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell illustrates how language can be used to limit people's ability to think outside the framework imposed by the propagandist, thus diminishing the possibility of rebellion.[6]

Several concepts and ideas developed by Ellul and Orwell can help shed light on the propaganda landscapes that characterize contemporary societies. This chapter focuses on the works of these two authors, who were

deeply concerned about political polarization and about how information could be "managed" to limit people's ability to engage in rational discussions or steer hatred toward those who think differently. I point out some of the most notorious propaganda techniques described by Orwell and Ellul and discuss how these are part of everyday life in contemporary societies. This demonstrates how discussions around propaganda that were at the forefront of academic debates during the mid-20th century can help explain how propaganda is being used today, even when it is not labeled as such and is instead presented under the names of disinformation, fake news, or the like.

Big Lies and Atrocity Propaganda

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the main character is an employee at the Ministry of Truth (known as Minitrue in Newspeak) who is responsible for a fundamental task: to ensure that documents containing references to the past are kept in accordance with the official History as defined by the Party at a specific moment, regardless of their connection to truth. All different accounts of the past that don't fit the Party's narrative are changed, and memories that are not in line with those created by the regime are quickly annihilated. By dictating and managing the narratives of the past, the Party not only takes control of History but also, more importantly, controls the imaginative realm of both the present and the future.

In dystopian Oceania, History is rewritten whenever needed to ensure compliance with the rules and official narrative of the Party. Similarly, throughout history and in contemporary times, there are a plethora of examples of political leaders operating in autocratic but also democratic countries who have not resisted the temptation to fabricate the Past. They use their fabrications to validate actions and decisions made in the Present, including those that justify wars and promote the exclusion and persecution of ethnic, religious, and gender minorities.

Mussolini justified many of his actions with the need to revive the glories of the Roman Empire,[7] while the Nazis rewrote history, presenting Germany as a victim that had lost the Great War due to the actions of the "International Jewry," said to hold power behind the scenes in Britain, Russia, and the United States.[8] This narrative became known as the "big lie," an expression Hitler himself coined in his infamous 1925 book *Mein Kampf*. In the dictator's own words, a "big lie" is perceived as credible by some because "the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily."[9] In what Hitler called the primitive simplicity of people's minds, "they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since

they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods."[10] In other words, for the Nazis, the big lie had the advantage of being such a gross distortion that most people could not conceive that it might be fabricated and therefore were led to think that it must be true.

While the Nazis used this technique to turn long-standing anti-Semitism in Europe into genocide by presenting Germany as a besieged nation striking back at "International Jewry,"[11] Hitler's description of the big lie technique is worth considering as it may help understand why, in different historical periods, people have fallen into the trap of conspiracy theories, especially those that seem to fit their previous beliefs.[12] In liberal democracies, big lies are perceived as being part of propaganda, a ruse employed by dictatorships but incompatible with democratic principles. Even so, examples of its usage to mold public opinion abound. In the early 1990s, during the Gulf War, one of the news stories that played a central role in stirring the public's support for a western military intervention in Kuwait was created by a PR company based in New York. Resorting to atrocity propaganda, the story detailed how Iraqi troops in Kuwait had removed hundreds of babies from their incubators, leaving them to die on hospital floors.

This horrendous account made headlines around the world in late 1990. The source was a 15-year-old girl who had supposedly witnessed the atrocity before fleeing Kuwait to the United States. She testified before the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus, which increased the credibility of her testimony. Two years later, it was revealed that she was in fact the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador in Washington and that the story had been fabricated to ensure the support of American public opinion for the military operation that led to the liberation of Kuwait.[13] Several media outlets were then forced to retract stories that mentioned confirmation of Nayirah's testimony by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.[14] Hence, not only did this story end up deceiving the public, but it also misled democratic institutions and the media, who received a blow to their credibility.

By presenting the Iraqi soldiers as barbarians, capable of killing innocent babies, this "big lie" made use of a propaganda technique prevalent throughout history: presenting the enemy as immoral and able to take pleasure in killing, in what has become known as atrocity propaganda, which was widely used by the Allies during the Great War to represent the Germans. The press then published stories of war correspondents who "exaggerated real situations that had high propaganda value and glossed over those aspects deemed to be more negative in regard to their respective cause."[15] A wide variety of images was also produced in which the German enemy was portrayed as the "Hun." Associated with the original Huns,

Mongols traveling from Central Asia to Europe in the 4th century, the concept became popularly associated with barbarian acts, a connotation that British propaganda aimed to assign to the Germans. To accomplish this, a multimedia operation was put in motion that included newspapers but also film and cartoons, including Edmund Sullivan's "The Prussian Butcher" from 1915, which presents an ape-like figure with a spiked helmet (representing the Germans) about to dismember a female figure that represents mercy.

Several propaganda techniques developed during World War I to depict the enemy and foster hate against it would be widely used later during the 20th century and continue to be used today. Used particularly, but not exclusively, as a tool of warfare, atrocity propaganda plays an important role in Vladimir Putin's propaganda strategy, which in addition to presenting the West as a threat to Russia and the Russian diaspora has portrayed the Ukrainian government and soldiers as Nazis, capable of unspeakable acts. Presenting the "other" as immoral beings who must be stopped for ethical reasons is part of the classic propaganda playbook. It has been used by Russia since the 2010s to present Europe and the West as decadent societies in which pedophilia is said to be a widespread phenomenon as a consequence of the decline of traditional values and endorsement of the liberal agenda.[16]

In addition to the two world wars, the Cold War was also fertile ground for the development of new propaganda strategies and techniques,[17] with both blocs resorting to propaganda to showcase how the enemy was amoral and capable of the most horrendous acts. The Soviet KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* or Committee for State Security) established its department of *Dezinformatsiya* dedicated to the production of disinformation[18] designed to instigate hate against the West. One of its most notorious campaigns was Operation Infektion, which in the early 1980s circulated the story that the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) was created in an American laboratory with the objective of annihilating people in poor countries. The false story was published in the Soviet newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, which was later cited by a pro-Soviet publication in India, which in turn became the main source quoted worldwide.[19]

Planting false news items in foreign media is indeed a well-known propaganda strategy used to hide the real source behind the story, thus increasing its credibility. In the online informational environment, examples of such practices abound, with states and other political and economic actors investing in the dissemination of narratives as if they were created by other sources. This seems to be an updated version of so-called black broadcasting, which reached its apex during World War II. At the time, the Nazis established a whole department named Concordia that was put in charge of

managing all clandestine stations designed to deceive British and American listeners by portraying themselves as being produced by British citizens.

The most prominent of these stations was the New British Broadcasting Station (NBBS), which operated daily from February 1940 until 9 April 1945[20] and whose most famous announcer was William Joyce (1906–1946). Known for presenting pro-German comments, he readily mixed information and disinformation about the war and the social situation in Britain.[21] Despite claiming the station was managed by British individuals who disagreed with the policy of the London government, the NBBS was actually run by the Nazis. It reached both the United Kingdom and the United States via medium and short-wave radio. Other clandestine stations operated by the Third Reich were Radio Caledonia (1940–1942), which pretended to be part of the Scottish independence movement, and the Workers' Challenge (1940–1944), which purported to represent the East London working class.

The practice of operating stations under assumed identities was not exclusive to the Nazis. The British Political Warfare Executive, for example, established several stations that targeted the German population under disguised origins. This was the case of Gustav Siegfried Eins (GS1), which purported to be a clandestine German station aiming to create a divide between the Nazi party and the German armed forces by convincing the latter that while the military were fighting the war, corrupt "party villains were ruining the country behind its back."[22] The station was known for offering good music and good sports coverage, which the PWE deemed essential to attract a significant audience.

Even though it is impossible to measure the success of Operation Infektion or the clandestine broadcasters that operated during World War II, these examples illustrate how using assumed identities to deceive public opinion has a long tradition. It is thus no surprise that over the most recent decades different states have invested in digital propaganda that circulates under false identities, especially on social media. In many cases, the sources are presented as legitimate media outlets, when in fact the content is taken from sham news sites with names that resemble credible media, thus disguising the actual (fake) source. An example of this is the network of fake accounts and phony news websites named "Doppelganger" that was identified by the EU DisinfoLab in 2022. The network made use of multiple clones of authentic media and fake social media accounts to target users with false articles, videos, and polls on different topics, including the war in Ukraine.[23] Doppelganger also created content posing as NATO, several European governments, and police forces in order to deceive audiences in the West not only about the war but also about elections and the Paris Olympics. Concerning the latter, false stories emerged in fake French-language

news sites that made claims of rampant corruption and budding violence. As noted by the Microsoft Threat Analysis Center, propaganda activities are characterized by "old tactics blending with artificial intelligence (AI) in malign activity."[24] A deep fake of actor Tom Cruise's voice narrating a phony Netflix documentary denouncing corruption by the International Olympics Committee is one of many audiovisual items produced by this type of campaign, which relies on false sources to misinform foreign audiences that have a long history of being targeted by propaganda.

Fabricating Events and Alternative Realities

Following his participation as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War in 1937, where he served with the Republicans and against the Nationalists led by Francisco Franco, George Orwell became very pessimistic about the extent to which historiography would be able to distance itself from propaganda due to the powerful forces that aimed to use it to their advantage. In the 1943 essay "Looking Back on the Spanish War," Orwell lamented that humanity was entering what he described as a new stage where facts no longer mattered since they were presented as always open to interpretation:

> What is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history could be truthfully written. In the past people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously colored what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that 'the facts' existed and were more or less discoverable.[25]

From this excerpt, it is clear that Orwell is not only considering historiography but that he is also writing about what was being reported in the press, broadcast on the radio, and screened in movie theaters. Both history and journalism aim to record and interpret events, which leads historians and journalists to face similar challenges when trying to produce narratives based on facts. Moreover, with its impact in the present, journalism functions also as an important source for historiography,[26] which renders the two fields even more closely connected. This means that by manipulating the news, autocratic leaders and other agents are also manipulating what becomes history.

For Orwell, the media and journalism in particular could enthusiastically participate in the propaganda effort by lending visibility to false events fabricated to create an incorrect perception of reality. He recalled "great battles" being reported "where there had been no fighting" and a complete silence about battles "where hundreds of men had been killed."

Still building on his first-hand experience during the Spanish Civil War, Orwell also wrote about the cases in which he saw "troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot hailed as the heroes of imaginary victories." This led him to conclude that he had witnessed "history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines'."[27]

When reading "Looking Back on the Spanish War," one must take into consideration that what Orwell describes and critiques is a scenario in which newspapers were highly politicized, assuming the defense of either the Nationalists or the Republicans as their own mission. The press was then perceived by belligerents as performing a crucial mission: to convince the readers of the rightness of their cause. To achieve this, an "Us" versus "Them" language was adopted, which is part of the propaganda playbook used to show audiences that there is no middle ground and they must pick one side and condemn the other. This does not feel far removed from how the role of journalism has been perceived in more recent conflicts. The Cold War is an obvious example of a period during which journalists were expected to perform a patriotic role by picking sides and reporting the news from the perspective of one of the blocs. If under communism the media were allowed no freedom and thus functioned as mouthpieces for official policy, in the United States journalism was deeply influenced by the ideological divide between East and West and was expected to promote democratic values and the American way of life while exposing the nastiness of communism.

As demonstrated by Barbie Zelizer, by adopting a patriotic tone, prioritizing national security, and using simplifying narratives based on the dichotomy of good versus evil, the lines between journalism and propaganda became blurred.[28] This is not very different from the role assigned to journalism in conflicts of the 21st century, namely during the so-called war against terror, in which Western journalists were expected to expose the inequity of Al-Qaeda but also of the Iraqi regime, reinforcing a binary worldview that did not help the public develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of what was at stake.

Although the effectiveness of propaganda is always difficult to measure, Orwell was particularly distressed by what he believed to be the reduced capacity of individuals to resist its influence. This preoccupation that permeates his work was the result not only of what he witnessed during the Spanish Civil War but equally of how the manipulation of public opinion also became part of the war effort after 1939. One idea that terrified Orwell was the relativization of truth, which he considered to be as dangerous as bombs. If facts were no longer the basis of rational discussions, the

way would be opened to "the truth of the party" becoming the only one that mattered. Orwell gives the example of Nazi theory that "specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists." Consequently, "there is, for instance, no such thing as 'science.' There is only 'German science,' 'Jewish science' etc." The result of

> this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but *the past*. If the Leader says of such and such an event, "It never happened" – well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five – well, two and two are five.[29]

The idea that propaganda can be used to create an "alternative truth" was later explored by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the main character is tasked with ensuring that all records of the past are set in accordance with what is defined as the truth at a specific moment. The point here is that the alternative realities created by the Leader, despite being false, become true in the minds of his followers, thus being transformed into powerful weapons – "munitions of the mind," in the words of Philip Taylor.[30] These "weapons" are capable of leading people to act against their own interests since they become incapable of understanding reality detached from the worldview promoted by the Leader.

One of the most notorious examples of an alternative reality was that created by Hitler and Goebbels to create support for the national-socialist project. By making people believe that Germany was under threat, the Nazis stirred up support for their idealized Aryan race and imperialist project while demonizing Jews and other minorities. Another example is Stalin's propaganda, which, along with a cult of personality around himself, rewrote historical events to ensure that these would fit the party's official history.[31]

The creation of alternative realities continues to flourish today. In the early 2020s, Vladimir Putin's propaganda machine led many to believe the urgency of putting an end to the Ukrainian threat, while in Brazil many refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19 due to Jair Bolsonaro's comments about the side effects of the vaccine. Similarly, in the United States, a few thousand people invaded the Capitol following Donald Trump's claim that the presidential election he lost to Joe Biden had been rigged. These last two examples are good illustrations of what Orwell feared the most: people acting based on a Leader's "truth" that is perceived as real, not because it is grounded in evidence but because it is pronounced by the Leader who avers it is true. Thus, eight decades after Orwell's first texts expressing concern about how people were being deceived by propaganda, his words seem to encapsulate much of what is happening today, with

innocent people being labeled as Nazis, others dying because they refuse to get vaccinated, and many others killed in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, and elsewhere being reduced to invisibility because their existence as victims does not fit the official narratives.

Controlling Language and Setting the Stage for Propaganda

The control of language is one of the most pronounced characteristics of propaganda. Words are strategically selected to produce specific meanings that are intended to lead the receivers to perceive reality as presented by the propagandist, regardless of its connection or lack thereof to the reality on the ground. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Oceania's leaders control individuals by promoting hatred against traitors and enemies and by enforcing a new language, *Newspeak*, composed of words whose meaning is restricted to that intended by the authoritarian government. This allows the Party to reduce the range of thought among its citizens, curtailing their capacity to think critically.

In "Politics and the English Language," published in 1946, Orwell demonstrates how language is used, for propaganda purposes, in both political and commercial contexts. He warns not only against the perverse use of metaphors but also against pretentious words that serve to "dress up simple statements and give an air of scientific impartiality to biassed judgements."[32] In the context of war, expressions such as "neutralize" or "eliminate" (instead of killing), "collateral damage" (instead of dead), or "debriefings" (instead of interrogations) have been extensively used. Likewise, in February 2022, Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation" to avoid labeling the invasion of Ukraine as war. The objective is obvious: to strip words of negative meanings and replace them with apparently neutral ones, aiming to increase citizens' support for war. Many other words and concepts are created and adopted to avoid using terms whose meaning may not help the cause of the propagandist. A contemporary example is "alternative facts," an expression that gained international recognition after it was used by Kellyanne Conway in January 2017 in an interview in which she justified the false claims made by the White House Press Office regarding the number of people who attended Donald Trump's inauguration. Instead of conceding that the White House had lied or made a mistake, she insisted that the claims were based on "alternative facts."

In other cases, deceit requires using words with a negative meaning to attach a damaging label to the enemy. Contemporary examples can be easily found: from Donald Trump's "crooked Hillary" to Bolsonaro's "gangster" to refer to his political opponent, Lula da Silva, and Putin's references to "Ukrainian Nazis." More recently, mainstream media have

been criticized for the coverage of the war in Gaza, namely for using words such as "slaughter," "massacre," and "horrific" to describe almost exclusively the Israelis who were killed by Hamas and avoiding such terms when reporting on Israeli military operations in Gaza.[33] On the other hand, following Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023, TikTok "was flooded with pro-Palestinian viewpoints," showing "solidarity for the Palestinian cause despite the violent attacks."[34] Many of these videos, including those published after the Hamas attacks, avoided mentioning the Israeli victims or using the words "killed" or "kidnapped" to describe what had happened to them.

The word "propaganda" itself is a good example of the usage of a negative concept to damage someone's reputation. It is used by governments and political leaders to describe actions performed or information disseminated by enemies or political opponents. The same actors who are quick to label the practices of others as propagandistic are the same who refuse to have their own actions described as propaganda. The reason is obvious: to avoid associating themselves with the negative connotation of the word, now distant from its original meaning. Originally, in Latin, *propagare* described the act of promoting or disseminating. It acquired a special meaning in the 17th century after Pope Gregory XIII established the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, whose purpose was to propagate the Christian faith. The word thus began to be used to describe the promotion of the gospel and was later applied to the dissemination of political ideas. It first acquired a negative connotation after World War I, when the media were being systematically used to boost the morale of both the military and civilians.

The high amount of false information published during the Great War is partially responsible for the development of Communication Studies as a field of academic inquiry. It was this phenomenon that led authors such as Harold Lasswell,[35] Walter Lippmann,[36] and Edward Bernays[37] to invest in the study of what they called propaganda or the management of public opinion. In several countries, departments of propaganda ceased to exist after 1918, as governments aimed to avoid being associated with a practice that had acquired a negative connotation. Propaganda obviously did not disappear but was instead renamed, and thus Departments and Ministries of Information emerged in many countries. In others, including Nazi Germany, the term propaganda continued to be used to describe a wide range of activities designed to manipulate perceptions.[38] Goebbels' ministry, for example, was named the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, which would contribute significantly to the concept becoming an even dirtier word in the West, synonymous with manipulation, distortion, and brainwashing.

This negative connotation is, however, far from universal. Jacques Ellul, for example, considers propaganda "a necessary instrument of the State"[39] essential for it to perform its function as a citizen aggregator. For Ellul, this implies resorting to mechanisms of mass persuasion that he also called propaganda and considered particularly relevant when the government is "obliged to defend its own actions or the life of the nation against private enterprise."[40] Historian David Welch similarly considers that propaganda can be used not only to steer hate against others but also to help keep people safe during air raids, health crises, and other accidents.[41] The COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s demonstrated how important it was to persuade individuals to adopt behaviors that would keep them safe. Even though messages that promoted social distancing and vaccination fit the definition of propaganda as "the dissemination of ideas intended to convince people to think and act in a particular way and for a particular persuasive purpose,"[42] in most countries such messages were presented as health communication campaigns. Labeling the relays by health authorities' propaganda was only enacted by those who aimed to attack the authorities and promote conspiracy theories. This clearly demonstrates that in the West the term is mostly used to vilify others and is far from being interpreted as a neutral or positive concept.

As a cultural construct, meaning varies in time and space. In the case of propaganda, not only did the term have different meanings in different historical contexts, but also there is still no consensus about what the word describes. In many countries of the Global South, it is used to designate what Jacques Ellul labeled "commercial propaganda," which he believed played a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and reinforcing capitalist culture. In addition to serving the purpose of selling goods and services, Ellul advertising helped integrate individuals into the consumer society, creating the needs and desires that persuade people to align with the values of consumerism in what can be defined as "sociological propaganda," a subtle form of influence that operates through culture and slowly impregnates the social fabric with myths and stereotypes to be activated in support of specific ideas and actions.[43] Unlike overt political propaganda, which is explicit and direct in its attempts to persuade, sociological propaganda is embedded in society and often goes unnoticed as it conditions people to accept certain norms and values. It is all the more perverse in that it aims to shape people's own values and beliefs in the long run.

Another concept proposed by Ellul that can help shed light on how political actors devise and implement long-term strategies to manipulate public opinion is pre-propaganda, the stage at which the propagandist lays the foundations to condition how people will respond to propaganda messages in the future. In other words, it "prepares for a specific action" in the

future and ensures that citizens are "sensitive to some influence."[44] Hitler's fueling of the anti-Semitic sentiments that existed in German society long before he decided to exterminate the Jewish people is the most atrocious example of how pre-propaganda works and how it can activate prejudices to gain support over time for a specific idea or action.

Pre-propaganda can also be used to open the way for atrocity propaganda that conveys a sense of threat and produces fear, an emotion that can "trigger people's willingness to accept extreme measures or behaviors otherwise considered inadmissible, thus molding one's perception of reality."[45] In times of war, fear is often promoted by political leaders aiming to increase support for military operations. If the enemy is perceived to be a serious threat, then citizens will more easily support war and public expenditure in military operations and equipment. A recent example is, once again, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite several Western media outlets quickly dismissing Vladimir Putin's propaganda strategy as ineffective for resorting mostly to classic forms of information control, it may well have produced results among significant segments of the Russian population, since many of the messages disseminated to domestic audiences have been consistent over time, creating the perception that Russia "is being besieged on all sides by enemies." As Timothy Snyder wrote in 2018, this long-lasting narrative makes it easier for Putin's government to ask for support for acts of aggression against the supposed enemies that aim to destroy the Russian nation.[46] Elsewhere in this volume, Nina Khrushcheva analyzes how Putin has focused on hard propaganda since the outbreak of the war, but it is clear that this comes after years of pre-propaganda aimed to inculcate ideas about the Ukrainians that were activated after February 2022.

Audiences and Agency

When analyzing the possible effects of propaganda, one important variable is the level of control exercised over the media ecosystem and how it may disable the circulation of conflicting narratives. In different historical contexts, including the present, dictators and autocratic leaders consider total control of the media landscape as required to ensure the effectiveness of their propaganda efforts. Goebbels believed that if one aimed to deceive and lead the people to believe in "alternative realities," the same lie ought to be insistently repeated and reinforced by all media.[47] This implied absolute control over the media landscape to ensure that no contradictory or conflicting narratives would be allowed to exist. Although this total control over the information ecosystem is somewhat difficult to achieve in democratic settings, over the last decades several populist leaders have

been successful in capturing media outlets, such as Viktor Orbán,[48] while others have been effective in playing with journalists' inability to resist reporting on outrageous comments and ideas in what has been labeled "shameless politics."[49] By failing to recognize contemporary populism as a form of authoritarianism, journalism has allowed populist leaders to take over the media agenda and the media discourse in many important and crucial occasions,[50] which is a precondition for propaganda to achieve its goals.

Despite the importance of understanding how different political actors take control of the media ecosystem and the media discourse, this does not guarantee *per se* that propaganda will succeed in influencing overall society. On the contrary, one must take into consideration that people's agency and their willingness to access information other than that being disseminated by official sources can limit the effectiveness of propaganda.

While countries such as Russia, China, and many others seriously limit their citizens' ability to get information from foreign sources, the 20th century has shown us that even in the most stringent dictatorships, there are some willing to risk their lives to get access to news presenting a different version of events than that being promoted by the regime's official propaganda. The willingness to resist the dictatorship of the mind, despite the draconian penalties attached, is well illustrated by the publication of underground newspapers in German-occupied Europe and by those who, whether in Nazi Germany or in the Soviet Union, risked death sentences for listening to international broadcasts.[51]

The idea that the media are a crucial battleground in times of war[52] and that audiences can resist the propaganda being promoted by national governments led to significant investments in international broadcasting during World War II, but also during the Cold War.[53] This belief also explains recent investments by Radio Free Europe and the BBC in their Internet and radio operations in Russia. In March 2022, the British Broadcasting Corporation revived its shortwave Russian transmissions, just a year after budget cuts had led the World Service to eliminate transmissions in five languages, Russian included.[54]

The BBC broadcasts to Nazi Germany and the transmissions of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty to the Soviet Union and its satellite countries are the most well-known examples of the use of media to counter authoritarian propaganda in the 20th century. However, examples abound in countries living under dictatorships. One under-researched example is Portugal's Estado Novo (New State), established by Oliveira Salazar in 1933. A fascistic-like regime, the Estado Novo was profoundly nationalistic and built on the imagery that Portugal was the center of a large empire greater than Europe. Salazar, who had previously occupied the post

of Finance Minister, was presented as a re-founder of the country whose mission was to make Portugal great again. According to the official narrative, his task was to restore the aura of greatness the country had once enjoyed during the period of the discoveries in the 16th and 17th centuries, when it ruled the seas along with Spain.[55]

The Estado Novo's Secretariat for National Propaganda, led by intellectual António Ferro, invested in a wide variety of activities to promote the regime and ensure it would be praised by the largest possible number of people. Its activities ranged from press and radio, kept under a short leash, to art exhibitions, literature, and events that exalted Portuguese folk music and dance.[56] The Secretariat also played an active role in devising what would become the regime's most important propaganda event: the Centennial Celebrations. Organized in 1940, this event celebrated 800 years of the foundation of Portugal and 300 years of the restoration of independence after a 60-year period of occupation by the Spanish. The most important event of the Centennial Celebrations was the Exhibition of the Portuguese World inaugurated on 23 June 1940, the day after the capitulation of France in World War II with the signature of the Armistice imposed by Germany. On that day, not surprisingly, the main story on the front pages of the Portuguese newspapers was not the fall of France but the inauguration of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World that would take place later that day.[57] This illustrates how newspapers were forced to prioritize: promote the regime first, report the news second.

Due to Portugal's neutral status and the regime's ideological connections to fascism, during World War II censorship curtailed all news stories critical of the Nazis. After Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, no news was allowed that portrayed the Soviets in a favorable light as, according to the regime, nothing good could come from a communist country. Overall, the need to not openly criticize the Nazis, while also not annoying the Allies due to Portugal's dependence on its alliance with Britain, forced newspapers to report on the war using vague language when describing the different forces at play. As Orwell described it, vague language occurs either when writers cannot express a specific meaning or when they are "almost indifferent as to whether [their] words mean anything or not."[58] In the case of the Portuguese press during World War II, vagueness was the only language admissible.

The control Salazar's regime exercised over the media, not only the press but also radio and film, precluded the public from having access to factual news, which limited their ability to form an opinion about what was at stake in the war. This led many to search for news from international sources, particularly the BBC Portuguese Service, which became particularly popular throughout the country during the war. Notwithstanding the

regime's ban on collective listening, reports from the political police and the British Embassy in Lisbon mention that crowds of people would gather in shops, cafes, and private homes where a radio set would be tuned in to the BBC. While the official narrative presented Portugal as an oasis in Europe, almost unaffected by the war, electricity restrictions were in place in many villages and towns and sometimes lasted for several days. In some remote places, where there normally was no electricity, the existing radio sets were run on generators, but recharging the batteries was frequently a problem due to the lack of petrol. Therefore, sacrifices had to be made in order to listen to the BBC. Some saved electricity on lighting and heating, while others walked or rode for miles in order to listen to the news from London.[59] Dozens of listeners who wrote to the BBC mentioned how listening to the broadcasts from London was the only way they could circumvent the regime's official narrative on the war, in which German losses were always vaguely mentioned. This led many to seek information elsewhere, namely in foreign media.[60] Thus, even though in wartime propaganda officials often try to downplay the impact of war on people's daily lives, the case of Portugal during World War II demonstrates that military conflicts create a sense of fear, which is an important impetus for citizens to look for news from alternative sources.

Despite research concluding that foreign propaganda is rarely more effective than domestic propaganda,[61] wars are traumatic events that lead specific segments of society to become audiences eager for news that counter official narratives. This creates some room for hope regarding the ability of citizens to search for news outside official communication channels, which may lead them to develop their own perceptions of reality as opposed to the narrative being fed by those who control propaganda channels in times of war.

Conclusion

There is much to be learned about contemporary propaganda by looking into how different persuasion techniques were used in the past to mold public opinion. Even though propaganda messages circulate today in a wide range of media, including digital platforms that did not all exist just a decade ago, big lies, conspiracy theories, alternative facts, the remaking of history, and the controlled language that characterized the 20th century continue to occupy a central place today in the playbook of those who aim to deceive. The different propaganda techniques discussed by Jacques Ellul and George Orwell continue to play a central role in contemporary information ecosystems, especially in autocratic and populist politics that uses deception to gain and keep hold of power.

At a time when fictions are presented as facts and the leaders' opinions are labeled as the truth, it is important to focus not only on propaganda messages but also on their targets, understanding what makes citizens vulnerable or capable of resisting such messages. Although the history of propaganda tends to present grand narratives of how particular communication operations were successful in winning the hearts and minds of the people, the story of propaganda is more nuanced and comprises also failures, moments in which the propagandists, despite having access to significant resources, were unable to manipulate the perceptions of the many. Throughout history, there are numerous examples of individuals and groups of people who managed – at least to some extent – to avoid the impact of propaganda because of their eagerness to access alternative news sources, even in situations that meant risking their lives.

Whether digital surveillance and AI will alter the resilience against propaganda that many have shown in the past is a question that remains unanswered. However, what the last century has taught us is that while propaganda is very quick to adapt to new technologies, the emotions it engages with to impact people's attention and perceptions haven't changed at the same speed. Therefore, it may well be that by making people more aware about how propaganda works today, we may help reduce the impact of new forms of propaganda that will continue to develop. To achieve this, it seems crucial to stop avoiding the word and to instead promote its understanding from a diachronic perspective.

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5

CHINESE JOURNALISM AND STATE PROPAGANDA

Changes and Continuities From
the 1990s to the 2020s

Francis L.F. Lee

Propaganda is often seen as playing an important role in sustaining author-
itarian rule. By generating regime support from the people or signaling
the strength of the powerholders, successful propaganda minimizes societal
grievances and the chance of people taking collective actions to oppose the
government.[1] The news media, typically under tight political control in
authoritarian regimes, constitute a core part of the systems' propaganda
machine. A significant aspect of research on political communication in
authoritarian systems thus resides in the propaganda role of the press.[2]

Nonetheless, the relationship between journalism and state propaganda
in a country can change over time. In addition to maintaining power,
authoritarian states also have to devise ways to ensure proper governance
and facilitate social and economic developments. Depending on current
social, economic, and political conditions, the state may not always put
the same degree of emphasis on ideological propaganda and media con-
trol to the same extent. The relationship between journalism and state
propaganda is therefore not static. The news media may contribute to or
undermine state legitimacy in different ways under varying circumstances.
Meanwhile, by continually reconfiguring the environment within which the
news media operate, technological developments also shape how the news
media in authoritarian states may play or deviate from its propaganda role.

China is a case in point. Historically, the Communist regime saw the
news media as the mouthpiece of the Party. Press ownership was national-
ized from the beginning of the People's Republic of China (PRC).[3] Studies
of Chinese journalism regularly evoked the term propaganda. However, the
degree of emphasis placed on ideological propaganda by national leaders

fluctuated over time, ostensibly in response to factors such as, among others, the happening of significant political events, the state's perceptions of its own security, the government's capability to deliver the goods in the economic realm, and China's position in the international community. At the same time, state policies on the commercialization of the media sector and digitalization of the media landscape substantially influenced the role played by the Chinese media in state propaganda.

A substantial body of literature on Chinese journalism in the past two decades has addressed issues such as the emergence of commercial media since the 1990s, the media's capability to influence public opinion, the emergence and decline of investigative reporting, the production of digitalized soft propaganda, China's external communication efforts, etc. This chapter aims to review the different strands of literature and offer an integrated account of the changing relationship between Chinese journalism and state propaganda from the 1990s to the 2020s. We will see that the journalism-propaganda relationship did not develop in a linear fashion, and there were both continuities and changes in the process.

The chapter begins by further discussing the notion of propaganda and the journalism-propaganda nexus in authoritarian systems. It then discusses the case of China in four sections: (1) the continuities and changes of the journalism-propaganda relationship under media marketization; (2) the implications of bounded critical reporting on governmental legitimacy; (3) changes in the 2010s and the rise of digitalized soft propaganda; and (4) the international dimension of media propaganda. The concluding section highlights the theoretical lessons derivable from the case.

Journalism and Propaganda Under Authoritarianism

The term propaganda was used by practitioners in various industries in the early 20th century as a neutral term for systematic attempts of persuasion.[4] The word took up its contemporary negative valence mainly due to how it was employed in the two world wars. Indeed, some academic definitions of propaganda would seem to be value-neutral. Peter Kenez, for instance, defined propaganda as "the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions and behavior."[5] Nevertheless, in contemporary academic and non-academic usage, it is typical for propaganda to be seen as the normatively problematic act of intentional manipulation of public opinion.[6]

Bakir and colleagues offered an elaborate account of how different forms of organized persuasive communication can be differentiated from each other.[7] They maintained a distinction between consensual and non-consensual persuasion. The former refers to a process aiming

at influencing the opinions and actions of people who are informed and free. The ideal form of persuasive communication can be found in Habermas' theorization of the ideal speech situation, where informed individuals engage in a dialogue as equal partners. In contrast, non-consensual persuasion aims at influencing the opinions and actions of people who are not informed and/or not free. It is a manipulative process involving techniques of deception, incentivization, and/or coercion. Deception can include not only the propagation of false information but also the omission or the misleading presentation of key information. Incentivization and coercion refer to how messages are accompanied by undue enticements or threats, which compel people to undertake actions against their will.

Consensual and non-consensual persuasion can be considered as forming a continuum. Some might even argue that persuasive communication can never be ideal, and actually existing persuasion attempts are often manipulative to some degree. When a government attempts to shape public views on certain policies, it might decide to withhold a larger or smaller amount of information, and it might or might not engage in the propagation of outright misinformation. Although persuasion and propaganda should not be equated with each other, the boundary between the two is blurred.

Conceptually distinguishing journalism from propaganda would seem to be easier. Normatively speaking, journalists are expected to provide a service to the public through a mix of activities, such as reporting on issues important to the public, helping the public to surveille the environment, raising awareness of social problems, reflecting the opinions of the people, and monitoring the power holders. The significance of different journalistic roles and functions can vary across contexts. Journalism in non-democracies, for instance, puts less emphasis on the watchdog role.[8] But journalists in non-democracies still hold certain normative ideas about how they should serve the people.[9]

In contrast, journalism can be considered as taking up the character of propaganda when it is captured by organized interests and takes up a persuasive role, often involving the employment of manipulative strategies, on behalf of the powerholders who had influence over it. In this sense, critical scholars could see the news media in democracies as being propagandistic.[10] However, it is certainly more common to envision the news media in authoritarian systems as engaging in propaganda for the state.

Nonetheless, not all authoritarian systems rely to the same extent on manipulating public opinion for sustaining their rule. Take Singapore as an example. As Cherian George explicated, the Singaporean government understands the importance of controlling the media, but the Singaporean leaders also understood the value of an apparently independent media sector for effective government communication. Press ownership is therefore

not nationalized, and the exercise of coercion is calibrated. The government ensures that the media understand the bottom lines that cannot be crossed, yet it also allows the media to have a degree of relative autonomy so that journalists can engage in the kind of professional reporting that could help the media organizations to gain credibility and readership. The resulting equilibrium is one that simultaneously allows news organizations to be profitable, journalists to retain a sense of professional purpose, citizens to be reasonably informed, and the government to maintain ultimate control of the information environment.[11] The news media are subservient but not outright propagandistic.

Certainly, the feasibility of calibrated coercion is arguably grounded on several conditions. Singapore is a small city-state highly reliant on its connections with the international economy for its development. Unscrupulous suppression of information may not be in the interests of the state. Over the years, Singapore indeed succeeded in becoming a developed economy where social and economic inequality is kept within reasonable bounds. Singapore also successfully established an authoritarian rule of law[12] where legal proceedings in the civil and commercial arenas are seen as highly reliable. People do not have serious grievances in an "air-conditioned society."[13] There is a much lesser need for ideological indoctrination when performance legitimacy is consistently high.

It is beyond the aim of this chapter to offer a systematic theorization of the conditions that influence the significance of media propaganda in authoritarian states. Singapore serves as a concrete example for the point that the news media in an authoritarian system may be effectively controlled, yet without playing a prominent propagandistic role. Besides, under certain conditions, giving the news media a degree of relative autonomy may not be detrimental to the interests of the state. As will be shown later, there was arguably a movement toward calibrated coercion in China in the 2000s, and the emergence of the marketized press in that era did not, in the final analysis, damage governmental legitimacy. However, subsequent social and political developments drove the Chinese government to reemphasize ideological propaganda and the media's role in it.

Continuities and Changes in Media Propaganda Under Commercialization

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has its own normative vision of the press. The press is expected to serve as the mouthpiece of the government. It should help the government to promote its policies and directives to the people. But at the same time, the press is expected to report on the concerns of ordinary people and help the government to grasp social reality.

Journalists are expected to enlighten the mass and help people understand where their interests reside.[14] Not unlike the Soviet Union,[15] there were Chinese journalists who tried their best to serve the people even under a restrictive system. But overall speaking, between the 1950s and 1970s, the press in actual practice closely followed the "Party Line" and leaned disproportionately toward the mouthpiece role.

The conception of the press' role started to shift in the 1980s when the Chinese leaders, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, placed less emphasis on ideological indoctrination and more emphasis on a pragmatic approach to achieve economic and social development. Budgetary changes in the 1980s led to the reduction of press subsidies, creating the initial need for the media to marketize. Marketization intensified when, three years after the Tiananmen crackdown, Deng Xiaoping reconfirmed the economic reform policy. Marketization did not entail the substantial loosening of media control,[16] but it did require news outlets to consider ways to better respond to the needs and desires of the public. Aided by the rapid growth of the advertising market in the 1990s, by the turn of the century, many news outlets had become highly profitable operations.[17]

In the newspaper industry in particular, a distinction between commercial and party newspapers emerged. But to ensure the survival of the party press and driven by the perceived need to create big media players to face possible foreign competition after China's entrance into the World Trade Organization, the Chinese government pushed forward a process of media conglomeration through administrative fiat in the late 1990s.[18] A typical press conglomerate in China at the time included newspapers serving mainly as party organs and retaining their propagandistic approach to journalism, as well as market-oriented newspapers catering to the preferences of the readers and aiming at generating profits.

For some researchers, the trend of media commercialization has reduced the overall availability of propagandistic materials, not only because the commercialized news outlets did not stick closely to official agenda and rhetoric, but also because marketization affected the performance of the party papers. Qin and colleagues examined the extent to which newspapers in China between 1981 and 2011 would report on government officials, ordinary people's concerns such as accidents and corruption, and entertainment topics. They found that lower-level governments were more likely to establish commercial papers earlier, and once commercial newspapers emerged, the agenda of the party papers also shifted away from the traditional of Party Line.[19]

Certainly, it does not mean that the Chinese media no longer had a propaganda role. In her book-length account of Chinese state propaganda up to around 2010, Anne-Marie Brady emphasized the continuity of the

system even under marketization.[20] For instance, the Chinese government could mobilize the media to engage in propaganda campaigns associated with significant events. An exemplary case was the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In the period before the Games, the right to report on the Olympics was tightly controlled. The media were instructed to report only positive stories and avoid controversial issues such as unemployment, corruption, and environmental pollution. The result was a campaign of mass distraction, which directly contributed to the cover-up of the Sanlu milk powder scandal.[21]

More importantly, the state still attempted to promote certain ideologies to justify its rule and major policies, though the ideologies to be promoted have changed. Since the early 1990s, nationalism – especially a form that emphasizes historical victimization of China – has replaced communism as the main source of ideological legitimacy.[22] Analysis of the World Values Surveys in 2001 and 2007 found that news consumption by Chinese citizens was positively related to national pride.[23] Besides, the pursuit of economic growth through engaging with global neoliberalism requires the promotion of developmentalism.

Meanwhile, the Chinese state had modernized its propaganda by taking up the techniques of public relations in the Western world.[24] When the news media are concerned, part of the commercial press could be seen as playing its propaganda role in a marketized way. For example, Zhou He treated the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* as exemplary of the emergence of what he called Party Publicity Inc., which was "oriented toward political publicity – promoting the image of the Party and justifying its legitimacy – than toward ideological brainwashing and conversion."[25] Wang and colleagues examined the *China Youth Daily* and found that the paper's contents featured both elements of party and popular journalism: the paper was interventionist and played the loyal-facilitator role to a certain extent, yet it also featured a significant amount of infotainment and even some watchdog journalism.[26] Zhou He's analysis was aimed at making sense of the character of a prototypical commercial newspaper, whereas Wang and colleagues focused on a party organ, which nonetheless exhibited features of market-oriented journalism. Yet both studies illustrate the point that the demands of market popularity are not necessarily incompatible with the news media's propaganda role.

In sum, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Chinese journalism had, overall speaking, retained its propaganda role under marketization, though the messages to be propagated had changed. In addition to the continual presence of the party organs, the marketized media could play its propaganda role through softened and subtler means. Chinese citizens were not only exposed to hardcore media propaganda to a lesser extent, but they were also exposed to new forms of media propaganda.

Bounded Critical Reporting and Governmental Legitimacy

Although the Chinese press did not shed its propaganda role, marketization in the 1990s and 2000s did provide the soil for the emergence of critical reporting and watchdog journalism seemingly inspired by the Western liberal ideal. Many journalists also took the opportunity to re-articulate their normative self-understanding by borrowing the notion of journalistic professionalism.[27] The rise of investigative journalism was widely examined by scholars. Journalists developed various tactics to circumvent media censorship; for example, since media outlets are under the control of the government of their localities, journalists from different localities might share sensitive information with each other so that a media outlet from one locality can report on scandals happening in other localities.[28] When a breaking news event occurred, journalists also had to race against time and publicize as much information as possible before the official reporting ban arrived. There were indeed cases of investigative journalism leading to the publicization of government wrongdoings and resulting in the downfall of local officials.[29]

Meanwhile, investigative and critical reporting thrived alongside other developments, including the development of social media into a space for networked public expression.[30] Ya-Wen Lei argued that, in the 2000s and early 2010s, the practices of critical news reporting and cause lawyering, the popularization of digital technologies, and the growth of civil society organizations contributed to the formation of a contentious public sphere in China.[31]

Nevertheless, the growth of critical reporting did not entail the emergence of an adversarial press. The growth of critical reporting was partly facilitated by the state's rhetoric of *yulun jiandu* ("supervision through public opinion").[32] That is, it was promoted as something aligned with the state's agenda. Unsurprisingly, numerous scholars have noted the limitations of investigative journalism and critical reporting as a challenge to state power. The persistence of political control means that investigative reports mainly targeted local governments instead of the central authorities; that is, they swatted the flies without beating the tigers.[33] Hence critical reporting can be seen as a means for the central government to monitor the performance of local governments.[34]

Besides, the development of professionalism in Chinese journalism in the period does not involve a wholesale adoption of the liberal model. On the one hand, many Chinese journalists were adamant about differentiating themselves from mere propagandists.[35] But on the other hand, an ability to understand and work within the boundaries of acceptability was seen as a feature of one's professional expertise.[36] It remained rare for Chinese

journalists to see themselves as the adversary of the state. Instead, Jonathan Hassid had pointed toward the presence of "advocate professionals" who tried to influence opinion and policy within the boundary acceptable to the state and "workaday journalists" who simply lacked a commitment to public service.[37]

Certainly, despite the limitations, critical reporting by the marketized press in China in the 2000s did deviate substantially from propagandistic journalism. The critical reports did not follow the directives of state organs. Journalists independently looked for stories that needed to be reported and often tried to push the boundary of acceptable public discourses, sometimes through "playing the edge-ball," that is, employing subtle means such as puns, homonyms, or other forms of wordplay to express highly sensitive information or opinions. There were occasions when individual media outlets or stories crossed the state's line of acceptability and were punished.

However, given the ultimately bounded character of critical reporting, the overall impact of commercial newspapers on governmental legitimacy was complicated. Daniela Stockmann offered a systematic account of the impact of media commercialization on governmental legitimacy. Through ostensibly deviating from the Party Line and responding to audience taste and opinions, the commercial papers enjoyed particularly high levels of credibility. But the ideological distance between the party and commercial papers was actually small. There were topics that even the commercial newspapers could not touch. On issues and events treated as highly important by the state, the commercial newspapers would have to fall in line. As a result, the commercial press could become a particularly effective tool for promoting major state policies.[38] They were offering to the state, in Chinese parlance, *xiaoma da bangmang* ("criticisms on small matters and help on big matters").

Putting it into the broader context of Chinese politics at the time, the complex role played by the commercial press in shaping public opinion was illustrative of the logic of responsive authoritarianism. As numerous scholars noted, the persistence of authoritarian rule in China was dependent on the development of a range of input institutions[39] that allowed public preferences and grievances to be transmitted to the government. The input institutions helped resolve the dictator's dilemma and improve governance. At the same time, the government performed its responsiveness to public opinion through appropriate policy decisions and reactions to exposed scandals and/or popular protests.[40] Nonetheless, the input institutions could not play their role properly without a minimal degree of autonomy. A distinctive body of literature about China in the 2000s and early 2010s thus pointed toward how the state's calibrated tolerance of

critical media, civil society, and social protests can be understood as an attempt to achieve a balance between control and openness that is, in the final analysis, beneficial to regime legitimacy.[41]

The Resurgence of Media Propaganda in the 2010s

Paradoxically, just when scholars were trying to make sense of the efficacy of China's calibrated tolerance of critical media and civil society, the state would change course once again. In retrospect, the Hu Jintao era was also a period of weak central leadership. Factional struggles emerged, opening up the space for social and economic actors to exploit.[42] Corruption became more rampant, and social and economic inequality intensified. The continual growth of social protests constituted a worrying trend for the state. An influential study about online censorship in the early 1990s concluded that the Chinese government allowed public expressions of grievances but would clamp down on online dissent if the grievances might be turned into collective actions.[43]

Put generally, a combination of an increasing number of "mass incidents" and protests, an increasingly vocal group of dissidents, and an emerging civil society could be perceived by the regime as threatening.[44] In the last few years of his tenure, Hu Jintao had put stability preservation at the top of the government agenda. In 2010, the state's budget for stability preservation surpassed that for the military.[45] Xi Jinping exacerbated the trend after coming into office. He saw that only reinvigorating Party leadership can prevent regime collapse. He thus engaged in an anti-corruption campaign, established means to strengthen party discipline, reinserted Party control over the state apparatus, and put forward a renewed emphasis on ideological work.

The retightening of control was aided by changes in the international environment. China's influence and institutional self-confidence grew after the 2008 financial tsunami disrupted the previous global economic order. The hegemony of "Western liberal democracy" was challenged by the trend of democratic backsliding and the persistence or growth in power of autocratic leaders such as Putin in Russia and Erdogan in Turkey. China became more assertive internationally, signified by the one-belt-one-road initiative.[46] "Making China great again" became a key ideological message propagated by the state.

Regarding the news media, in December 2019, the CCP issued an internal report in which promotion of the ideas of Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, Western concepts of journalism, and a revisionist view of the CCP's history were condemned.[47] In a national conference in August 2013, Xi Jinping urged the media to

focus on positive stories and minimize negativity. In February 2016, after a publicized visit to key party media organizations such as the Chinese Central Television and Xinhua News Agency, Xi delivered the message that the media have to adopt the Party as its surname. In the meantime, the CCP cracked down on independent voices on social media and imposed restrictions on the use of virtual private networks, hitherto widely used by Chinese people to access materials banned in the mainland.[48]

One direct result of the development was the decline of critical reporting in the Chinese media. The trend was best signified by the demise and transformation of investigative journalism. A national survey conducted in 2010 found that 73 media organizations in China were practicing some forms of investigative journalism. The authors were able to identify 334 investigative journalists and obtained responses from 259 of them.[49] In a follow-up survey in 2016, the researchers located a total of only 175 investigative journalists from traditional news media, digital outlets, and the "self-media" established by individual journalists.[50]

Certainly, the 2016 survey still found some "investigative journalists" at work, but other scholars have demonstrated the changed quality of the work of these journalists. One study examined the case of the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, widely regarded as one of the most liberal-oriented news outlets in China during the Hu era. It found that the newspaper still tried to maintain the practice of "investigative journalism" in the 2010s. However, in response to the much more restrictive environment, investigation no longer focused on uncovering official wrongdoing; instead, the most frequently addressed topics were social problems that were already on the government's agenda or social issues that were likely to be addressed by the government in some ways. While the paper still tried to hold power to account, their reports targeted mainly social and economic power rather than political power. Moreover, the reports often highlighted not only the existing problems but also possible solutions. Overall, antagonism against government officials was minimized. The "constructive" investigative reporting was compatible with a loyal-facilitator role of the press.[51]

Nonetheless, it does not mean that the Chinese media had reverted to its old form and style of hard propaganda. The Chinese media had to ensure that their work could be effective in the digitalized environment. The state was active in funding and encouraging new digital journalism projects, with *Pengpai*, launched in July 2014 in Shanghai, being the most famous example.[52] With the support of ample state funding at the beginning, the outlet combined soft propaganda and critical reporting in terms of content, featured attractive design functions and aesthetics, and adopted a deliberate branding strategy emphasizing its distinctiveness from "traditional"

news organizations. It quickly gained not only a huge online audience but also the attention of officials and journalists from all over the country.

Pengpai remained a rare case not widely copied across the nation. Other studies have illustrated the more common ways through which media propaganda adapted to the digital and political environment in the 2010s. One study found three main strategies party newspapers adopted to make their work relevant in the digital era. The first is the technical strategy of having a mobile-first workflow. The second is the content strategy of digitalizing authoritative and localized information. More emphasis is paid to making the content more interesting to readers and integrating ideological messages into stories about everyday lives in local communities. The third is the service strategy of diversified outsourcing, through which party newspapers use their expertise to provide services to government departments, such as helping them to establish their online platforms, in order to obtain additional income and forge closer connections with official units.[53]

Similarly, Sheng Zou examined a party news organization's employment of digital technologies to produce soft propaganda. He noted that the state media outlet produces a vast amount of digital content that packages propaganda in entertaining formats.[54] Yet another study focused on the practice at the official WeChat account of a party newspaper and found that, while propaganda content predominates, the newspaper incorporates elements of commercialism during the editing process (e.g., ensuring the readability of texts and the attractiveness of article titles). The WeChat account also occasionally criticizes local government bureaus but with an emphasis on the technical issues involved in policy implementation, thus leaving the policies unquestioned.[55]

Zhu and Fu provided evidence for the effectiveness of the soft and infotainment strategy of Chinese online propaganda. They examined more than 5,000 Weibo posts from 103 newspapers and differentiated the contents into soft news, hard news, and propaganda news. The first two types of news were operationalized by referring to topics of coverage, whereas propaganda news was operationalized as news stories focusing on Xi Jinping. The analysis shows that soft news was more popular than hard news, which was in turn more popular than propaganda news. However, the popularity generated by soft news could spill over onto the two other types of news and enhance the latter's reach.[56]

The International Dimension

While the previous sections have discussed the changing journalism-propaganda relationship in China by focusing on the relationships among the state, the national media, and the national public, state propaganda has

an international dimension that should not be ignored. The international dimension has three aspects. First, the Chinese government had put efforts into developing its global media outposts. By the 2010s, major internationally oriented Chinese media outlets include the *Global Times*, China Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua News Agency, and China Radio International. All have the mission of "telling the China story well." These outlets are aware of the need to appeal to the international audience. CGTN, for instance, mimics CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera in terms of program outlook and presentational styles.[57] The outlets also actively employ social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube to propagate their messages.[58]

Second and more pertinent to this chapter's focus, international news on Chinese media has long been a part of state propaganda. In support of China's foreign policies, the portrayal of a foreign country is driven by the relationship between the country and China. A recent study about state media's social media posts published during COVID-19, for instance, showed that countries more distant from China in terms of international policy preferences were portrayed more negatively.[59] More fundamentally, the Chinese media tended to portray foreign countries in general in negative light in order to create a contrast between an orderly and harmonious China versus a chaotic world.[60] In fact, an analysis of Xinhua News Agency's Chinese language articles published between 2015 and 2020 found that the overall tones toward all foreign countries were negative.[61] Moreover, Chinese media strategically cover specific types of foreign events. Chinese media might play up violent protests in liberal democracies so as to highlight the democratic system's problematic character,[62] but when dealing with anti-authoritarian protests, the media might either ignore or distort them. When anti-authoritarian protests occurred in Hong Kong in 2019, for instance, the state media prominently covered the event, emphasized the protests' impact and violence, and perpetrated the idea of foreign intervention. The goal is to rally the Chinese public to oppose the Hong Kong protests in order to prevent the diffusion of pro-democracy protests into the mainland.[63]

Third, in addition to media coverage directed toward or about foreign countries, the changing character of China's diplomatic communications should not be ignored. The late 2010s witnessed the emergence of what is often called "wolf warrior diplomacy," referring to the assertive or even aggressive rhetoric adopted by Chinese diplomats.[64] Xiaolin Duan offered three plausible explanations of the phenomenon. An individualist explanation links the phenomenon to the incentive structure in which the Chinese diplomats are located; for example, taking an aggressive stance may bring career rewards given the current political atmosphere. An institutional

explanation links the phenomenon to the changing goals and practices of external propaganda since Xi Jinping took office, that is, a more proactive approach aiming at promoting the superiority of China's political system and acquiring "discursive power" in the international arena. A strategic explanation links the phenomenon to the worsening social and economic conditions in China and sees the assertive approach as a diversionary tactic. It consolidates the image of an outside world that is not only dangerous but also hostile, and it leads Chinese citizens to rally around the flag in spite of domestic troubles.[65]

What is noteworthy here is that, following the strategic explanation, the target audience of the seemingly externally oriented communication of the Chinese diplomats is the domestic public. The goal remains the consolidation of public support for the Chinese government. The Chinese media could help distribute the propagandistic messages simply by faithfully reporting on the Chinese diplomats' discourses. Individual media outlets might also proactively join the chorus to criticize foreign biases toward China.[66]

The above development can be considered paradoxical: in the past two decades, Chinese citizens have increasingly had the chance to go abroad, but they also seemed to increasingly see the world as hostile to China. Public opinion studies have demonstrated that the Chinese public in the 2010s was more hawkish than dovish on matters of international relations.[67] The youngest generation is particularly nationalistic. Although they can be "Westernized" in terms of preferred lifestyle, they also exhibit relatively weak support for the value of liberal democracy.[68] This attitudinal profile can be taken as a sign of the "success" of propagandistic political socialization. It means that the portrayal of the world as dangerous and hostile can be effective because it rhymes with people's predispositions. Media propaganda serves to reinforce many Chinese people's orientation toward the world. The effectiveness of reinforcement is further enhanced by how digital technologies have helped Chinese people around the world to stay inside a huge filter bubble if they wish.

The presence of a receptive public (or at least a sector of the public), coupled with the affordances offered by social media, means that contemporary Chinese media propaganda could also obtain vocal support from the netizens. Astroturfing has long been a strategy employed by authoritarian states to manipulate online public opinion.[69] Political discussion in the Chinese cyberspace has long featured the participation of the "50 cents party" – netizens paid by the state to write pro-regime comments. By the early 2010s, Chinese netizens started talking about "self-employed 50 cents," referring to people who voluntarily publish pro-regime comments online. After the mid-2010s, "Little Pink" became the most prominent

category of pro-regime netizens.[70] Originally carrying certain gendered connotations, the label was later used to refer to young Chinese nationalists in general.[71] The presence of vocal regime supporters online arguably made media propaganda, especially when issues of international relations and/or "foreign powers" are involved, a participatory affair. It also meant that media organizations had a market reason to perpetuate nationalistic propaganda online – such contents do tend to attract online readership and engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the changes in the relationship between journalism and state propaganda in China since the 1990s. Media marketization, emphasis on a more pragmatic approach to economic development, the advance of the Internet as a decentralized information infrastructure, and a "low profile" approach to international relations led China onto the path of limited liberalization since the early 1990s, resulting in the overall decline and softening of media propaganda as well as the rise of a relatively autonomous public sphere in which non-propagandistic journalism had room for development. But since around 2010, and especially after Xi Jinping took office, perceived threats to national security, a more assertive approach in international relations, and a renewed emphasis on ideological control led to the resurgence of the news media's propagandistic role.

Nevertheless, underlying the changes, media propaganda in China can be regarded as illustrating continuity in two senses. First, even during the 2000s, the Chinese state had never relinquished its control of the press. One might argue that the fundamentals of the Party-state system had never been altered, and the changes from the 1990s to the 2020s represent a cyclical loosening and tightening of political control that is typical of PRC history. This prompts one expert on Chinese propaganda to claim that China under Xi is a case of "the more things change, the more things remain the same."[72]

Second and perhaps more important, the Chinese case suggests that "continuity" in the journalism-propaganda relationship can be understood in terms of how earlier developments can condition the efficacy of subsequent choices. The techniques and approaches adopted by the state in the 2010s and 2020s were grounded in developments in the earlier period. The turn to and proliferation of digitalized soft propaganda was conditioned by the development of and experimentation by the commercialized press since the 1990s. The efficacy of wolf warrior diplomacy as internally oriented propaganda and the construction of a hostile world were grounded partly

in the cultivation of a nationalistic young generation that is less supportive of the Western model of liberal democracy.

Another theoretical lesson the China case can offer is the role of the market in shaping journalism-propaganda relations. Marketization did lead part of the news media sector and some journalists to distance themselves from the propaganda role. However, as long as critical reporting remained bounded, the commercialized press constituted a key part of the media system that worked to strengthen the state's legitimacy. More fundamentally, the main impact of marketization on the news media is to compel the media to respond to audience tastes and opinions. If the market favors critical reporting that challenges the validity of government policies or even regime legitimacy, market forces could be considered as pulling the news media toward an oppositional role. But there is no guarantee that consumers would prefer critical content. When the news consumers prefer non-political infotainment, it would make economic sense for the news media to offer soft and entertainment propaganda. When the news consumers' political outlook is aligned with state ideologies, market forces and political imperatives can work together to incentivize the media to play its propaganda role.

This discussion might seem to imply the authoritarian leaders' capability of learning and adapting to ever-changing environments by continually adjusting their approach and drawing upon prior experiences. In fact, no matter whether the research object is the marketized press of the early 2000s or the wolf warrior diplomacy of recent years, researchers often tend to focus on why and how the phenomenon may "work" and contribute to authoritarian resilience. However, it does not mean that there is no "crack" in the system and no limitation to the power of propaganda. Ultimately, ideological propaganda is unlikely to completely cover up concrete social and economic problems. No matter how seemingly nationalistic and/or regime-supporting the young generation in China is, this generation also carried out the "white paper protest" in late 2022 given the grievances against severe pandemic control measures.

The pandemic is, indeed, a good case illustrating not only the impotence of propaganda in face of the public's concrete suffering but also the possibility that ideological propaganda could get in the way of proper decision-making so that it could indirectly contribute to people's suffering in the first place. After the original Wuhan outbreak, China's initial response to the pandemic was very successful in keeping the number of infections and deaths low, but the country did not react flexibly enough to subsequent developments. It became one of the last countries in the world to abandon what was ultimately an unsustainable pandemic control strategy, and one might argue that the state's ideologization of the

pandemic – using it as an occasion to showcase the superiority of the Chinese system – had gotten in the way of more pragmatic, scientific, and knowledge-based decision-making.

In fact, when Chinese national leaders in the 1980s played down the role of ideological propaganda, the concern was that ideological propaganda could disrupt pragmatic decision-making and, as a consequence, actual social and economic development. As Rosenfeld and Wallace put it, the operation of a propaganda apparatus can lead to systematic lying by local officials and economic falsification.[73] Ideological propaganda may also aggravate the problem of the dictator's dilemma and weaken the state's capability to respond to public concerns. Therefore, whether ideological propaganda can guarantee the stability of an authoritarian regime in the long run remains an open question. China will continue to be a test case of the power and limitation of the power of propaganda.

Notes

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2 See, for instance, Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Nina Schneider, *Brazilian Propaganda: Legitimizing an Authoritarian State* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2014).
3 Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Markets and Democracy in China* (IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
4 Florian Zollmann, "Bringing Propaganda Back into News Media Studies," *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2018): 329–45.
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6

PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Living in George Orwell

Nina Khrushcheva

Vladimir Putin is not unique. Like his global peers past and present, Putin uses the tools of propaganda and their power of persuasion to exert control and manipulate public opinion. Yet, while propaganda may be universal, the form it takes reveals a lot about the machinations and intentions of its perpetrator. In 2000, at the beginning of his presidency, Putin practiced a softer form of propaganda with rather discerning messaging. It emphasized both Russia's equality with the West and the symbols and instances of victories in the nation's czarist and Soviet past. As the reach of the Kremlin's power became more autocratic, Putin's earlier politics of public relations (PR) was inevitably replaced by *hard propaganda*. This was heightened when Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine began in February 2022. Russian citizens found themselves under the top-down weight of a de facto martial law not announced formally but inescapable nevertheless, with patriotic war messages blaring from TV screens, billboard posters, online ads, and the Kremlin's own statements. At the same time, the pro-war, Orwellian simulacra that the Russian president has sought to impose on society has contradicted the significant anti-war and anti-Putin sentiment and actual reality on the ground.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), radical reforms brought Russia a chaotic free-market economy and a somewhat democratic political system. When Putin succeeded Yeltsin in the Kremlin, his early approach was akin to a metaphorical porridge – a *kasha* – picking and choosing from a host of different ingredients: some Western, some Russian. Capitalism was the nation's economic order, but it was modified as *state capitalism,* where the government

could own and control enterprise and production. Moreover, Russia called itself a "sovereign democracy" with some democratic features, though much more controlling than Western models. The Kremlin reasoned that Russia needed to strengthen the state to reconcile its own interests with the messy early capitalism and withstand the hegemonic power of the West.

In the first decade of this century, Putin's hodge-podge *kasha* worked. Russia increased its economic and political powers. The government appeared to reasonably manage assets. Before the financial crisis of 2008, high oil prices with "over US$130 a barrel" helped to build immense wealth.[1]

Despite huge corruption, Russia's standard of living was on the rise for a large swath of the population, and you heard more and more among its citizenry that "we had risen from our knees." This rhetoric worked because people got a product they wanted: a "normal," comfortable life, and the appearance of Russian strength that people felt allowed them to leave behind the chaos of the post-Soviet 1990s.

According to *Propaganda and the Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965) by French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912–1994), democracies or less autocratic polities such as post-Soviet Russia engage in "soft" propaganda, also known as political PR. When Putin assumed power as a completely unknown former KGB colonel, he immediately began to align himself with recognizable popular narratives and readily consumable symbols that fit the political moment. He offered citizens a vision of the country that seemed real and generated societal support by positioning himself as the "Great Unifier" who made Russia the diplomatic equal of Western neoliberal elites. Wearing nicely tailored dark suits and leveraging his clandestine operative background to visually reference the cosmopolitan cult of James Bond, Putin made nice with Western leaders like Great Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush, who famously "looked the man in the eye . . .[and] was able to get a sense of his soul, a man deeply committed to . . . the best interests of his country."[2]

Already then, Putin established himself as the master of the photo op. The Kremlin released photographs of him performing now-infamous shirtless acts of might for the cameras, putting his "hard body" to work undertaking über-masculine physical feats like fishing, shooting, and riding horses on par with "great" and "hard" leaders of the present and past. There are, for example, numerous photographs of Italian fascist ruler Benito Mussolini posing in a saddle and Putin's North Korean contemporary Kim Jong Un appearing on a white horse. Putin, as jack of all trades, even "rescued" heavy classical amphorae from the watery obscurity of ancient Russian history. All of this "activity" – often in military fatigues – was set against the dramatic backdrop of Russia's great natural landscape, much
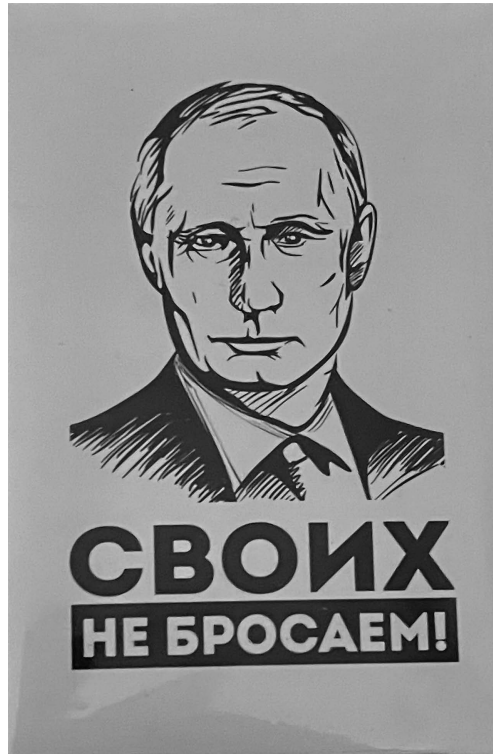
FIGURE 6.1   Vladimir Putin's Portrait on a Chocolate Bar

like the familiar images of America's Marlboro Man cowboy. Anything the West did, Putin not-so-subtly implied that he could do better. These images of embodied Russian strength seemed deceptively neutral and even comical on the surface but were prescient shows of Russian power.

The Party slogan of George Orwell's fictitious authoritarian regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reads, "Who controls the past . . . controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."[3] Putin's superficially westernized Kremlin aligned itself with this Orwellian truism by promoting anew the immemorial symbols of Russia's imperial history. He developed a close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church and then-Patriarch Alexy II (1929–2008), a rumored fellow former KGB agent, through a series of photo ops as well as in more meaningful ways that translated conservative religious values into government policy, including criminalizing its LGBTQ citizens. As befit his "Great Unifier" persona, statues of Russian grand luminaries of the imperial past were built and restored around the country, including those of Catherine II the Great in the city of Krasnodar (created

in 1907; demolished in 1920; reproduced in 2006) and Ivan IV the Terrible (1530–1584) in Oryol in 2016.

Putin also reached much further into the annals of history to resurrect the cult of Ivan III, or "Ivan the Great" (1440–1505). As the first true czar (before they were called princes), Ivan III laid the foundation of a centralized Russian state and expanded its territory. Through his marriage to Byzantine Princess Sophia Palaiologina (1449–1503), he acquired the Byzantine double-headed eagle coat of arms for his and Russia's insignia, announcing Russian czars as successors to the august rulers of Byzantium, the Caesars, whose lineage stretched back to the Roman Empire itself. A monument of Ivan the Great "was put on display in 2017 on the lands of the Vladimirsky monastery at the St. Tikhon hermitage," part of a complex on the Oka River 150 miles southwest of Moscow that also includes an Orthodox cathedral and memorial cross.[4]

Perhaps most significantly, a statue of Vladimir Putin's namesake, Vladimir the Great (ca. 958–1015), was erected directly in front of Moscow's Kremlin in 2015. This prince was the first Christian leader of Kievan Rus, a medieval state from the 9th to 13th centuries comprised of territory in Eastern and Northern Europe that included present-day Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet territories. Kyiv, in present-day Ukraine, was the original city of Rus and one of the very important centers of the Russian Empire, where Czar Nicholas I erected a statue of Prince Vladimir in 1853. It was meant to set up a direct line from the old czars to the new, a gesture so potent that Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), the Soviet firm-hand ruler from 1924 to 1953, shortly before his death, ordered to renovate the great Vladimir as a symbol of glory for Russian leadership. After 2014, however, when Putin annexed Crimea from Ukraine and the government there severed its relationship with Russia, the old Vladimir stayed in the now unfriendly city of Kyiv. The Kremlin had to get its own great prince.

In more heavy-handed PR messaging, Putin tried to repair or erase the 20th-century fissures in the long arc of Russian history by celebrating Stalin, the most czar-like Soviet, under whose leadership millions of Russians were killed and imprisoned. During Stalin's reign, the Soviet Army was instrumental in defeating Nazi Germany in 1945 and brought about the end of World War II (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War). That was the defining 20th-century event of national glory that all people agreed upon. To commemorate this image of a triumphant Russia, Putin reinstated the Victory Day parade on 9 May of each year. In addition to other Stalin monuments erected in recent years, in 2017, his bust was added to the newly created Alley of Rulers in Moscow, which features classically inspired bronze busts of Russian leaders from over a thousand years of history. Through this monument-creating propaganda, Putin established

himself as the natural heir to the Kremlin rule, in effect legitimizing and justifying his increasingly autocratic regime.

In 2008, Putin bowed somewhat to the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms when he chose Dmitry Medvedev as his successor to the presidency and installed himself as prime minister (2008–2012). When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, things began to change. Sparked by election fraud, massive anti-Putin protests around the time of his inauguration in 2012 were followed by a visible turn toward authoritarianism and harder propaganda – in other words, the familiar ways of the KGB. Putin's concentration on a strong state reflected his personal interests and origins. As a lieutenant colonel of the KGB, in 1991 he witnessed the humiliating collapse of the once geographically massive and powerful Soviet Union. He was not alone in holding onto past grievances that never seemed to die however much time passed, thanks to the West's constant lecturing about its victory over the USSR. Patronizing Western narratives about Russian inferiority were propagated through foreign affairs, the media, and entertainment. They cast Russians as the stereotypical bad guys and as the evil, perennial losers of the Cold War. Even the skits in a Russian version of Sesame Street relied on tropes that were astonishing for their condescension.

In the Kremlin's eyes, yet another national insult came from Ukraine – a former Soviet territory – in the form of the Ukrainian protests (also called Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine), which ousted Putin-friendly President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014 over his rejection of a political association and free-trade agreement with the European Union. Along with pro-Ukrainian symbols such as flags and sunflowers, more overtly anti-Russian political symbols and rhetoric took center stage, some with origins in the early 20th century when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. Stalin – who Putin's Russia celebrates for his defeat of the Nazis – is remembered in Ukraine for his suppression of national Ukrainian identity as well as for Holodomor, the Ukrainian Famine (1932–1933), which killed millions. Moreover, for some Ukrainian nationalists, anti-Soviet sentiment goes so far as to venerate notorious Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera (1909–1959) as a liberation fighter. Bandera, who was leader of the far-right radical militant wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, aligned himself and his cause for Ukrainian independence with Nazi Germany beginning in the 1930s, serving as an intelligence officer during World War II on Adolf Hitler's side. Bandera was assassinated by the KGB in 1959, becoming for many in Ukraine a martyr to the cause of independence despite his fascist politics.

Support for Bandera does not represent all Ukrainian politics, but the faction that does support him and his Nazi-associated allies has become

prevalent in Ukraine, which only helped Putin's propaganda messaging. Additionally, in their eagerness to undermine Russia, Ukraine's Western allies have (rather hypocritically) ignored the Nazi specter that haunts the Ukrainian independence movement. When Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Canada and spoke to Parliament in the fall of 2023, Yaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old Canadian citizen and Ukrainian war veteran on Hitler's side, was praised as a "Canadian hero" before being identified as a former Nazi.[5] For Russians, as former Soviets (and not just for the Russians but for many nationalities that used to comprise the Soviet Union), there is no scenario in which any Nazi could be considered a hero. Putin has capitalized on this reality by calling Ukraine for its Bandera approval a nation of Nazis to generate domestic support for his imperialist claims.

The Russian president interpreted the political situation in Ukraine as a validation of his historical and increasingly bellicose rhetoric, laying the groundwork for the Kremlin's political and militaristic landgrabs along historical lines of empire. When he launched the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in February of 2014, it came with ease. Most people there traditionally associated themselves with Russia; it had become part of the Ukraine Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union only in 1954 when the Soviet government, with Nikita Khrushchev's support, transferred the territory as part of the post-Stalin efforts to "decentralize the Communist monolith."[6] According to Russia, a 2014 referendum held in Crimea following the territory's annexation found that "97% of its participants identified as Russian both ethnically and politically" and had never wanted to be made part of Ukraine in 1954.[7]

In the aftermath of the Crimea takeover, the war-like messaging began in earnest: Russia had not only risen from its knees; it had risen to become an all-powerful, besieged fortress, an invading country righteous in its need to defend itself. In the meantime, the Kremlin's relationship with the United States and the wider West deteriorated. Russia once again became enemy number one. It was accused of meddling in the 2016 US elections and helping to bring Donald Trump to power. Many Americans took to the anti-Russian propaganda with renewed vigor, familiar and reassuring as it was in the old days of the Cold War. Every country ultimately needs a good enemy, and Trump's obvious admiration for strong men and authoritarian leaders like Putin aided Americans' negative opinion of Russia, particularly when Trump embarrassingly "wilted like a flower on the world stage" during his 2018 meeting with Putin in Helsinki.[8] The Democratic Party condemned them both. While Republicans, traditionally the Cold Warriors, this time seemed indifferent to Russia, Trump's opponent Biden happily assumed the well-worn mantle of the American cowboy fighting the good fight against Russia, an enemy of "freedom."

Hollywood has also renewed its never-forgotten efforts to present Russia and Russians as confirmed villains – in films from *Air Force One* (1997) to *Golden Compass* (2006) and *Salt* (2010), to name just a few. Even the cartoon *Despicable Me* (2010) contributed to the trend with its Russian-type character Felonious Gru, who oversees an army of minions to steal the moon. In the meantime, Russian citizens, too, were bombarded with cartoons, posters, songs, commercials, and more touting a message of their much-needed defense on par with the Great Patriotic War. Film and TV also embraced militarized narratives. Before, there was a choice of TV programs. A lot of Soviet war and clandestine intelligence films – Putin once being a clandestine KGB operative – were balanced out by CNN, European news, and foreign movie channels, as well as some actual discussion programs. Now, there are mostly Kremlin propagandists screaming about how Russia needs to stand up to the enemy. Before, there may have been obvious Bandera criticism, but the Kyiv administration was not all painted with the same brush. Today, they are all derided as neo-Nazis; they are all the enemies according to black-and-white, total war propaganda: billboards celebrating Russian war heroes and advertising tanks showing line Moscow's streets. "Victory will be ours," they declare in true World War II style.

All of this has influenced the public and consumer behavior. The rising cult of Stalin has led to BMWs on the road that sport signs such as "on to Berlin" and "we can repeat," referring to a potential for another war similar to the one against the Nazis in 1945. As Putin has started to look more like a grandfather who likes war and lives only for national glory, stores like the Army of Russia allow the people to also dress the part. Featuring the president in the army fatigues store ads suggest: "You can be just like Putin."

When the Kremlin's "special military operation" – otherwise known as the Russo-Ukrainian War – began in earnest in February 2022, hard propaganda fully took over. As Ellul argues, *hard propaganda* is imposed from the ruling top with no consideration of popular public support and no right of public expression or demonstration. Hard propaganda *insists* that the story it puts forward is *the only* story, and the public is only a recipient, rarely a participant. As a result, the Russian people had little choice but to surrender to the message that the country needed to fight in order to defend itself from the dangers coming from the West to Russia via Ukraine.

From then, the warring narratives and images in Russia would no longer be just tropes. The war in Ukraine, Putin declares, aims not only to "demilitarize" and "denazify" the country but also to prevent the West from succeeding in its purported mission to destroy Russia.[9] At stake is nothing less than "the survival of Russian statehood" and the future of its

young people,[10] with Russia's latest foreign-policy doctrine asserting that the country fulfills its "unique historic mission" to "maintain a global balance of power" and "build a multipolar" world order.[11] This message is worthy of the Great Patriotic War; its totality is overwhelming with overt patriotism becoming each citizen's duty.

In pushing these now predominant narratives, Putin shows deep concern with what he refers to as "historical justice" – righting the wrongs of Russian history to restore its inherent imperial glory. With that comes a sense of standing up to the unfair West, which lies at the heart of Russia's foreign policy and the Kremlin's rationale for the Ukraine war.

To be sure, Russian culture has frequently indulged in grandiose imaginings in the past, and the collapse of the Soviet Union intensified its longing for the narratives of importance, giving rise to a cottage industry of alternate histories. In the last 25 years, these embellished narratives have taken center stage. Mathematician and conspiracy theorist Anatoly Fomenko's "new chronology," for example, claims that major events that occurred during the ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian empires actually occurred during the Middle Ages and revolved around Russia.[12] Fomenko's concern with the vast Western conspiracy to undermine Russian power and amend global history fills his books, found in abundance in every Russian bookstore during the early 2000s. As Putin and his security-service allies (*siloviki)* consolidated power, fantastical narratives of imperial grandeur, replete with time-traveling historical figures restoring Russia's honor, burst into the mainstream. These tales, many of which originated during the tumultuous 1990s, often depict democracy as a Western plot designed to destabilize Russia. Authors like German Romanov have cast 18th-century czar Peter III – famously overthrown by his wife, Catherine the Great – as a time traveler who returns to the past, thwarts Catherine's rebellion, and transforms Russia into a new Byzantium. Other popular narratives involve Stalin traveling to the future to prevent the USSR's dissolution.

This hawkish agenda is also aimed at Russia's children. Some youth groups, such as *Nashi* (meaning "ours"), already existed for patriotic education prior to the war's beginning in 2022, but their existence now became more mandatory. In 2023 – in a contemporary take on the Soviet-era pioneers – the Kremlin established Pervye, a state organization for children akin to the Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts of America, which emphasizes learning practical skills and doing volunteer work. Pervye (meaning literally "the starters") places Russian youth at the forefront of the Kremlin's hard propaganda efforts to instill patriotism in Russian children. These efforts have become even more direct, extending to school curriculums and the creation of a new, patriotic subject – "Conversations about Important Things" – that teaches bearing arms as citizens' duty.[13]

In 2023, new history textbooks were issued for tenth and eleventh graders. Authored by former culture minister Vladimir Medinsky and Anatoly Torkunov, rector of the once-respected Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the textbooks reflect Russia's "new approach" to history, emphasizing the need to reassert Russianness on the country's lost "historical territories" and praising the "special military operation" in Ukraine.[14] These and others are not attempts to reinstate the Soviet Union per se but to borrow from its state ideology, which kept the Kremlin notion of power and control central to everything else.

The current state ideology portrays the country as a "unique civilization" that must maintain its singular essence and whose demise could trigger global chaos.[15] As in the USSR, those who express opinions against this policy of the state are considered traitors. By the end of 2023, over 750 people and institutions have been branded "foreign agents," those under the influence of foreign sources; over 4,000 "administrative" cases of people maligning the Russian army, almost 170 of them have become criminal.[16] Every billboard around Moscow and other big cities displays a military man or woman defending the Motherland. Some have the additional message, "Join ours," as if those who do not join are not "ours" – *nashi* versus *ne nashi,* or "not patriots."

Over the past decade, Alexei Navalny (1976–2024) had been one of the loudest dissenting voices in Russia. In the summer of 2020, he was poisoned with Novichok, a nerve agent invented in the Soviet era. After seeking treatment in Germany and surviving his poisoning, Navalny chose to return to Moscow, where he faced increased politically motivated prosecutions. He must have known he could end up being killed, like politician Boris Nemtsov, journalist Anna Politkovskaya, and countless others. But he returned to Russia to "continue confronting" Putin.[17] After his arrest in January 2021, protests ensued, with tens of thousands of Russians taking to the streets to demand his release, only reinforcing the Kremlin's view of him as a threat that had to be neutralized. Images of Navalny on trial showed a portrait of Genrikh Yagoda (1891–1938) prominently in the background. The specter of Yagoda, Stalin's henchman who led the arrests, show trials, and executions during the Great Purges (1936–1938), foreshadowed Navalny's eventual death in February 2024 at the prison in Yamalo-Nenets in Western Siberia, nicknamed the "Polar Wolf." It also foreshadowed an upending of Russian daily life reminiscent of the 1930s as a result of the devastating Kremlin war in Ukraine.

In Russia, the war has brought a sudden, forcible, and bewildering transformation of the country's economy and society. European civilization has always been part of its cultural code. Despite lengthy periods of confrontation with the West, it has shared culture, history, geography, and much

more. But, according to Putin, as a "self-sufficient state-civilization," European culture should be eliminated from Russian public spaces.[18] This is not yet expected of restaurants and cafes – many are still French and Italian, though Chinese and Indian are increasingly present – but certainly of theaters, museums, and literature in case the public may draw some unflattering comparisons. For example, *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), a play by French author Edmond Rostand, has been removed from the repertoire of Saint Petersburg's Alexandrinsky Theatre for mocking the armed forces. Authorities feared audiences would associate this unflattering depiction with the Russian army in Ukraine.

Such cultural bans are not the only way ordinary Russians are being made to feel that Big Brother is breathing down their necks. With the beginning of the "special military operation," Russia was essentially brought under martial law. And since the conscription of men for the military – referred to by the Kremlin as a "partial mobilization" – was announced in September 2022, a police officer has been stationed at every subway turnstile in Moscow. It is tough to pretend that nothing has fundamentally changed when merely entering public transportation is controlled by a heavily armed man. In the early months of the war, conversations may have been dominated by the events in Ukraine, but it still felt natural to go to work or have dinner with friends. As war propaganda has grown louder and more insistent, ordinary life has moved into the background.

Putin regards Yuri Andropov, former KGB head in the 1970s, as a personal hero and has reinstated the Andropov-era "disciplinary check-ups" of cultural institutions. One art historian who works at the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg was recently fined for not being at her desk by 9:00 a.m., even though she had a work-related excuse, and even though the institution has never maintained nine to five working hours. Moreover, the recent charges brought against Oleg Orlov, the co-chair of the Nobel Prize-winning human rights organization Memorial, for "discrediting the Russian armed forces," involved a "crime" of having "a heightened sense of justice and a complete lack of self-preservation instinct."[19] The prosecutors called for Orlov to undergo a "punitive psychiatry" test, the type favored by Andropov. They contend that his long career of advocacy (including protesting the Soviet war in Afghanistan in 1979) must have left him mentally "inadequate."[20] Witnessing such a brazen inversion of good and evil turned the despair of many Russians into something closer to horror. Reason, logic, and humanity have been systematically sucked out of Russian life, dragging people back to the era of Stalin's Gulag.

Yet the efforts of hard propaganda are challenged every day. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has gone 30 years without a monolithic

ideology. Now that the Kremlin's narrative has become more bellicose, the vision Putin espouses for his people demands sacrifices of wealth and personal freedoms in the name of national glory. That makes his popularity less monolithic, not more. Sure, in the absence of any formal way to express dissent – public protests are forbidden, no official independent media exists – the Kremlin can fudge "87% support for Putin in the March 2024 presidential elections, confirming his fifth term in office."[21] But the fragility of the president's dominance is evidenced in the tens of thousands who gathered in Moscow for Alexei Navalny's funeral a month before and the thousands who showed up in his memory at voting stations at noon on the election day 17 March to express their anti-Putin views.

The Ukraine war is at the forefront of Russians' minds, though not in the way the Kremlin wants. Rather than fight *for* Putin's "patriotic" cause, many Russians resist it, and evidence of the covert fight of the "silent majority" is everywhere. The Kremlin certainly wants to portray its "special military operation" as a patriotic endeavor, yet in a March 2024 poll, 52% of respondents – and 74% of 18- to 25-year-old respondents – reported that they favor a peaceful solution. An older group up to 40 years old "voiced their support for peace at 60%."[22] This is notable in a country where expressing doubts about the government's actions can land you on a "foreign agents" list, or worse.[23] Even among the 45% of Russians who say they support the war unequivocally, "only 25% do so actively, such as by volunteering or providing financial assistance."[24] According to a 2023 Gallup-Romir poll, "48% of Russians report experiencing significant financial uncertainty" – the highest rate in the 56 countries covered.[25] Today's Russia is nothing like the citadel of stability and satisfaction that the Kremlin claims it to be. Though the Russian GDP grew by "more than 3% in 2023," despite Western sanctions, this hardly reflects sustainable economic dynamism.[26] Even modest estimates suggest that up to a million people – IT specialists, journalists, writers, scientists, actors, directors, and intellectuals – "left Russia in 2022 alone" to escape Vladimir Putin's increasingly repressive security apparatus.[27]

It is important to note that, to some degree, Putin owes his authoritarian mandate to the Russians themselves. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians – reeling from rapid, profound economic changes and the new culture of consumerist individualism – grew nostalgic for the "strong" state and the social contract of the communist years. Their superpower status, historic breakthroughs in space, and grand victories on the battlefield were long gone. Trading at least some of their new freedoms for the promise of renewed imperial glory seemed like a good deal. The problem with that tradeoff is that Russia can never curtail its

tendency to go to extremes with everything it does. As Soviet-era writer Andrei Sinyavsky (under the pseudonym Abram Tertz) observed, Russians "cling to form because we have not enough of it; we have never had and never can have either hierarchy or structure, . . . and move freely from nihilism to conservatism and back again."[28] Hence, we now have the over-the-top, almost surreal level of control that has replaced the chaos and disarray that arrived in the aftermath of the USSR. As a result of this extreme correction, those living in Russia today wake up every morning to a new chapter of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

This version of Orwellian dystopia is all too real; fiction it is not. Yet, as in Orwell, the Navalny crowds indicate that the people do not just quietly accept their fate. At a bookstore on Saint Petersburg's central Nevsky Prospect – as in bookstores around the country – the customer enters to find a mass of patriotic books on Russia and its history, despite the fact that, for obvious reasons, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is now the most-sold book in Russia. Adorning this store's sea of propaganda tomes near the entrance, however, are a few mugs emblazoned with images of Orwell along with quotes from his famous novel. One, in particular, stood out for its optimism: "If you are in a minority, and even alone, this does not mean you are crazy."

It is this remarkable quality of art that even in the depths of darkness and oppression, it can be unfailingly optimistic. Russia's own literature has saved the country numerous times, most recently from its pre-Putin, Soviet iteration of dictatorships.

Learning from Orwell, Vladimir Voinovich or Venedikt Yerofeyev wrote their satirical works that had made people cry from laughter when reading and listening to their words. In those days, families spent secret evenings around the table thrashing the authorities through humor. Satire enabled Russians to overcome their fear of the controlling government. "If we can make fun of the Kremlin, the Kremlin doesn't have power over us," they reasoned.

FIGURE 6.2   George Orwell's Portrait on a Mug

Other works, more tragic than funny, had even greater impact. In 1962, in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,* Aleksander Solzhenitsyn wrote about the experiences of a prisoner after spending almost ten years in Joseph Stalin's Gulag. Despite the tragic subject, this slim novella is one of the most uplifting masterpieces of Russian literature.

Then, there was the 1967 *Journey into the Whirlwind* by Eugenia Ginsburg, who detailed her effort to persevere during the 1930s in the Magadan prison camp, not far from the Arctic Circle. These and other works are evidence of how art not only documents oppression but also, in searching for the meaning of existence, offers a path to survival. They show us how to endure without losing one's humanity while also bettering humanity in the process.

As both Orwell and Russian examples show, art saves the world every day, in every century and every generation. One prominent example is Vladimir Nabokov, a 20th-century Russian writer who became an American classic. He rewrote every piece of tragic Russian literature – including Anton Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky – in a happier key. Russian narratives are all about unjust societies in which people live, readying themselves for death, so Nabokov freed classical Russian characters by giving them a new life where suffering was no longer the norm. Remember the famous opening of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877): "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In *Ada* (1969), Nabokov turns this upside down: "All happy families are more or less dissimilar, all unhappy ones are more or less alike." Azar Nafisi, an Iranian teacher of literature, published a memoir titled *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in 2003 upon moving to America. In reference to Nabokov's most famous novel, she described the lessons of liberty that one can only learn from art.

Literature cannot prevent tyranny or war, but it debunks them every time. Even when most people in Russia feel they cannot openly fight against despotism, Russian art is never neutral.

If the Kremlin leaders learned lessons art has taught them about past dictatorships, dictatorships would not have repeated in Russia so often. But rulers are poor students. They don't appreciate culture; otherwise, Stalin or Putin would not have canceled masterpieces and imprisoned artists. They only love *kulturka,* or "culture-abridged," that references their own greatness or functions as an artistic cheerleader for the state's agenda. The best of Russian art, however, is the antithesis of *kulturka*. Connected to the universal experiences of injustice, it proves that oppression and confrontation invariably fail.

In the 1930s, Anna Akhmatova angered Stalin by writing *Requiem*, a prophetic poem about her and her contemporaries' resolve to outlast the

dictator's rule. As the story goes, he found out that when the poetess reads any of her work in public, she is greeted with a standing ovation. "Some woman is applauded for poems. Only I deserve such adulation," he allegedly quipped.[29]

Several decades later, Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) had a greater role in collapsing communism than most politicians of the late Soviet era. Leonid Brezhnev was so afraid of his condemnatory words that the writer was thrown out of his Motherland, his citizenship revoked.

In the 21st century, Russian writers continue the tradition of calling out totalitarian cruelty, offering a path forward, no matter how long it may take to get there. In her 2001 novel, *The Kukotsky Enigma*, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, now the nemesis of the Putin regime, explored and exposed the brutal effect of Stalinism on women and family life. In 2013, the Nobel Prize-winning author, Belorussian-born Svetlana Alexievich, published a heartbreaking oral history account, *Secondhand Time*. In the book, she described the deep scars of ordinary Russians. These scars, Alexievich poses, are not just a result of surviving authoritarianism. Some are brought about by the chaotic collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, which only better experiences with better governments can heal.

Looking at the Kremlin today, one wonders – don't they know how this ends? Every piece of Russian art told them that repression and war invariably fail, no matter the propaganda. And even if the state increases its propaganda effort tenfold, George Orwell will still be there to save the day.

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7

MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA IN AFRICA

Cracks, Crevices, and Continuities

Admire Mare

The concept of propaganda has received renewed scholarly and policy interest in the wake of the proliferation of false and misleading information that accompanied the 2016 US elections, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which also affected African countries such as Kenya and Nigeria.[1] These events have evoked unprecedented moral panics around the impact of "deception and false information in digital environments."[2] To explain the various modes, tactics, strategies, and practices of deception deployed by subversive actors, scholars have tended to lean on fashionable concepts like disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, foreign information manipulation interference, fake news, and information disorders.[3] This has inadvertently promoted ahistorical conceptualizations of deception and manipulation, erasing their historical antecedents, at the same time as it has presented them as chiefly the product of 20th-century Europe.

But, as Farkas and Neumayer observe, "propaganda is far from a new phenomenon."[4] Nor is it defined by the conditions found in any one location. In the words of Cunningham, it is very "problematic for us to read anything like modern and contemporary propaganda back into periods before the emergence of mass media and mass communication."[5] Rather, propaganda is deeply historical and continues to evolve alongside political systems and media technologies.[6] The main point to note here is that while propaganda takes on new shapes and forms in the digital age, its operational logics have remained the same. While the flirtation with new and fashionable concepts is inevitable, "we should not overestimate the novelty of deception"[7] in an ever-changing information and communication

ecosystem, for propaganda has always existed and will continue to exist so long as human beings contrive to formulate new goals and purposes.[8] It will also continue to adapt to new technologies and evolving socio-political and cultural contexts. Even as the advent of digital technologies and other emerging tools has created new possibilities such as micro-targeting, viral reach, and unparalleled access to global audiences, the digital "democratization" of the production, distribution, and consumption of deception and falsehoods has been facilitated by familiar propagandistic practices and structures.

Most literature on propaganda has also tended to present it as a 20th-century European phenomenon. However, this point has been heavily disputed by Lasswell et al., who argue that propaganda has always been a willing companion of military force and diplomacy throughout recorded history.[9] They concede that although its reach and scale accelerated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its historical roots cannot be frozen in time and space. The 20th century is largely seen as the epicenter of modern propaganda because it coincided with the mass permeation of mass communication platforms.[10] With the growth of mass communication technologies, the handy maiden of propaganda also became a huge societal concern. Deep-seated fears arose at the time about the possibility of demagogues having access to weapons of mass deception.

Therefore, moral panics around the potential of malign actors – including authoritarian regimes and terrorist organizations – using digital and social media platforms for mass deception are not new. For instance, in the 1920s, Europe witnessed a resurgence of concerns around the weaponization of propaganda for political and ideological purposes.[11] Demagogues like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini were at the forefront of deploying various propaganda tactics. In Germany, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, became the posterchild of modern-day propaganda, using communication channels like posters, film, radio, museum exhibits, and so forth to build support for and gain acceptance of the Nazi vision for the future of Germany. In Italy, Mussolini leveraged mediated propaganda apparatuses in order to push his fascist ideology and popularized them during and after World War II. As a "symbolic instrument," propaganda supplemented military force.[12] Beyond World War II, propaganda campaigns were used during the Cold War era. These campaigns were entangled in a complex matrix of influences: new communication technologies, including telegraph, newspapers, photography, radio, and film; the ascendant power of large corporations seeking new markets; the rise of reform-minded (muckraking) journalism; and the influence of art movements, psychology, sociology, and marketing.[13]

Cognizant of the urgent need to bring "propaganda back into [news] media studies" and the continued relevance of propaganda in contemporary mediascapes,[14] this chapter highlights the continuities and disruptions of propagandistic forms and strategies over time in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa. Instead of ditching the concept of propaganda for other sexy and more fashionable loaded signifiers, this chapter reminds us of the importance of putting historicity at the front and center of contemporary theorizations of manipulation and deception in the Global South. It also demonstrates the need to look beyond Europe as the spatial locus for considering how propaganda works within and beyond media. Using African case studies, it highlights the ways in which diverse political, economic, religious, cultural, and social agents have resorted to various forms of propaganda for (re)engineering consent and (mis)guiding public opinion.

This chapter unpacks the battles that ensued in the quest to use propaganda to influence public opinion in Africa. It proposes the concept of "rebooted propaganda" to explain new forms of deception associated with the digital age, arguing that rather than treating misinformation and disinformation as new phenomena, there is a need to see them as offshoots and variants of traditional propaganda logics.

The chapter starts by defining the concept of propaganda and teasing out the various typologies of disinformation. It then presents findings starting with pre-colonial propaganda logics in Africa before shifting to colonial manifestations of deception and the post-colonial configurations of current deception strategies, aims, and socio-technical infrastructures.

Conceptualizing Propaganda in an Ever-changing Media Environment

Mainstream literature is awash with various definitions of propaganda.[15] Most are drawn from political science, psychology, sociology, history, media studies, and cultural studies. A close reading of these definitions shows that they foreground its negative and positive connotations. The term "propaganda" comes from the Latin word "propagare," which means "to spread" or "to propagate." Smith deploys the term to refer to a more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps, and so forth).[16] Propaganda has been defined as a calculated attempt to "control . . . opinion by significant symbols, images, stories, rumors, reports and other forms of communication."[17] It encapsulates the manipulation of representations that take pictorial, written, or musical form.[18] Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to

shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."[19] For Sproule, propaganda is work done by large organizations or groups to win over the public for special interests through a massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their persuasive purpose and lack of sound supporting reasons.[20] Propaganda can also be defined as the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups to predetermined ends. For Bussemer, propaganda can be conceptualized as the "normally mediated forming of action relevant opinions and attitudes of political or social groups through symbolic communication and as manufacturing of public in support of particular interests."[21] This definition has been tweaked by Zollmann, who defines propaganda as "the forming of texts and opinions in support of particular interests and through media and non-media mediated means with the intention to produce public support and/or relevant action."[22] Overall, propaganda consists of various interlinked elements: production and distribution, content, reception, and non-mediated social processes.

These definitions all emphasize the intentionality of propaganda and see it as a tool of social control. Used by governments, organizations, or individuals to influence public opinion and behavior, propaganda has been understood to rely on persuasion, manipulation, and hidden or undefined sources that mystify the real nature of social relations.[23] It does so even as it takes on different meanings and forms, drawn from the context in which it is being used.

In contemporary societies, national governments deploy propaganda to encourage [or coerce] citizens to act and think in line with their philosophies and to uphold and support the contrived image of themselves as well as the nation that they seek to portray.[24] To achieve their intended objectives, propagandists deliberately select and present facts, arguments, and symbols in ways they think will have the most effect. Targeting emotions such as fear, anger, grief, guilt, and revenge,[25] propaganda uses unifying and divisive words like "us" and "them" or visuals, slogans, and symbols to mobilize support for a specific agenda. The techniques and strategies used by propagandists are wide-ranging, including rational arguments, direct suggestions embodied in the repetition of slogans or commands, and emotional appeals that can be direct or indirect and disguised as news or entertainment. Propaganda campaigns often exploit societal cracks and crevices. Through priming, propagandists frame messages in a way that the elements constituting its core message do not overly conflict with what the target audience thinks and has experienced. Propagandists are also adept at selectively presenting facts and distorting

information. They readily divert public attention toward everything but their own propaganda.

Before discussing the nexus between media and propaganda in Africa, it makes sense to distinguish disinformation from propaganda. While propaganda is aimed at promoting a specific ideology, cause, or agenda, disinformation is geared toward deceiving or misleading its audience by providing false or misleading information.[26] The propagandist, unlike "the journalist . . . sets out with the deliberate intention of deceiving the public, of concealing 'the truth' so as to direct public opinion in a particular way."[27] Unlike disinformation, propaganda can involve factual information, with propagandists weaponizing it to emphasize certain viewpoints and suppress alternative perspectives. In comparison, disinformation is mostly about confusing, misleading, or disrupting public understanding of a particular issue or event.[28] For Roberts and Karekwaivanane, disinformation is just one tactic in the broader menu of propaganda.[29] As a subset of propaganda, disinformation intentionally deploys false information to manipulate people's beliefs and behaviors. In short, while both propaganda and disinformation involve influencing public opinion, propaganda focuses on promoting a particular agenda using biased information, whereas disinformation is characterized by the deliberate spread of false or misleading information to deceive.

A Case of Siamese Twins? Media and Propaganda in Africa

Despite this cozy relationship between media and propaganda, scholars have bemoaned what they refer to as an "intellectual disengagement" with the concept of propaganda.[30] Pickard attributes this disengagement to the "field's gradual depoliticization and its accommodation of capitalist logics vis-à-vis media institutions,"[31] a scenario in which media studies retreated from the critical analysis of systemic problems, as evidenced by the Frankfurt School, and pivoted instead toward the limited effects tradition of American communication studies. This "depoliticization turn" shifted critical media studies toward administrative and quantitative research, which "ultimately helped reproduce status quo relationships." Consequently, mainstream scholarship shifted away from focusing on "media's discursive power to naturalize and legitimize existing power structures through predictable patterns of selection, emphasis and omission."[32] In this light, Zollmann, emphasizing what he calls "the marginalization of propaganda," surmises that "the term propaganda has largely been excluded from debates about public opinion formation in liberal democracies."[33]

Thus, following World War II, researchers generally shied away from the use of propaganda terminology, and media, communication, and

journalism-related research largely neglected to scrutinize propaganda.[34] This left the media's role in producing and distributing propaganda underexplored and created a yawning scholarly gap, especially in the post-colonial societies of the Global South, where state-sponsored propaganda campaigns were being normalized.

Propaganda and counter-propaganda campaigns have been waged through the media in Africa in manifold ways. This chapter uses the metaphor of Siamese twins to illustrate the inseparable and intricate relationship of media and propaganda in Africa. Contemporary understandings of propaganda would not be complete without discussing its entanglement with the history of media platforms like radio, television, film, and newspapers.[35] But as the metaphor suggests, this chapter does not presuppose that propaganda surfaced only when analogue technologies became available. It argues instead that propagandists have always used the available communication channels and devices to push their agendas.

Even though propaganda in Africa predates the rise of mass media technologies by several centuries,[36] it is worth noting that ever since mass media technologies came onto the scene in the 20th century, propaganda has found ready-made conduits for manipulation and deception. Taking advantage of available communicative technologies in different socio-political and cultural contexts, it has been employed, in Herman and Chomsky's words, to "manufacture consent" and engineer "the necessary illusions."[37] Their propaganda model, which articulates five news "filters" that guide news selection processes and lead to propagandistic output, underscores the role of ownership, corporate control, advertising, funding as well as market forces that influence the decision-making of managers, journalists, and external actors/institutions that provide information.[38],[39] Arguing that propaganda is mass media's Siamese twin, they posit that propaganda "require(s) the collaboration of the mass media."[40] This point is further corroborated by Ellul, who writes that propaganda "cannot exist without using these mass media."[41]

Because of their assumed agenda-setting power and ability to create interpretive frames, media platforms remain central producers and distributors of propaganda content. Through television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet, propagandists are able to skillfully manipulate public opinion. The media enable various stakeholders – governments and political elites, citizens, and civil society groups – with different orientations and objectives to push their agendas. They also play a major role in creating and maintaining ideology and thus perpetuating the deception that underlies ideological operations.[42] Scholars have long observed that propaganda in mass media can have a significant influence on public opinion, shaping people's beliefs and attitudes toward various issues, products, and political

ideologies. As tools for engineering consent, the media thus provide the "opportunities for increased propaganda activities."[43] This explains the current moral panic around the role social media plays in circulating propaganda content.

While much of this scenario can be easily applied to most countries of the Global North, the state of media and propaganda in Africa suggests otherwise. Research shows that in Africa other popular forms of communication, alongside the mass media, have been active conduits through which propaganda flows in and out of people's everyday lives.[44] For instance, in pre-colonial Africa, propaganda was circulated through word of mouth, pavement radio, riddles, idioms, and legends.[45] In other words, propaganda did not only emerge through analogue technologies on the African continent. Instead, propagandists have been around for much longer, using whichever communication channels and devices were available to help them push their agendas.

This chapter draws on primary and secondary data that address the relationship of media and propaganda in Africa. Primary sources were important to establish the state of research on cyber-propaganda in Africa, and interviews were conducted with cyber trolls, social media influencers, public relations personnel, and political consultants involved in producing and distributing propagandistic content. Interviews were also conducted with "guns-for-hire" who have worked in electoral campaigns for political parties and candidates over the past five years. In total, 16 interviews were conducted in Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.[46] Secondary material was consulted in archives, newspaper articles, journal articles, book chapters, and policy reports that were useful for establishing the state of media and propaganda in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa. The data were coded using thematic analysis.[47]

Cracks, Crevices, and Continuities in Africa

Producers and distributors of manipulative content take advantage of societal rifts, tensions, and sources of conflict in different ways. By emphasizing the cracks, crevices, and continuities associated with the deployment of propaganda, this chapter considers how its deployment in Africa changes across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Whereas colonial propaganda exploited fractious race relations to sustain a rigid separation – a crack – between whites and blacks, post-colonial propaganda has tended to exploit a variety of crevices, involving ethnicity, race, nationality, geopolitical alliance, and political affiliation. The relative narrowness of these more recent societal openings provides propagandists with a range of entry points to manipulate public opinion. Their tactics range across the board

of available alternatives: card stacking, name calling, glittering generalities, emotional appeals, bandwagons, plain folks, fear appears, testimonials, transfers, red herring, stereotyping, poisoning the well, and lying.[48] These techniques are used by propagandists to convince an audience to believe in a particular worldview. Continuities show the uninterrupted existence of propaganda tactics and strategies over time. While different technologies have come and gone, propaganda has remained largely stable, even while it adapts creatively and slowly to new communication channels. The African context, therefore, presents an interesting set of conditions from which to tease out connections between pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial manifestations of propaganda. I discuss propaganda's transformation across these periodizations below.

Pre-colonial Africa and Propaganda Campaigns

Communication scholars, like other social scientists, have tended to treat Africa at the onset of colonialism as a tabula rasa.[49] In other words, Africa is portrayed as an ahistorical continent with no history of propaganda, and propaganda is largely presented as something that came with colonialism and modernity, such as the advent of the printing press. But there is a need to complicate its linkage with broader and ever-shifting communication ecologies by foregrounding the pre-colonial manifestations of propaganda that were evident in legends, myths, and stereotypes. As Mare aptly avers, popular forms of communication – such as music, jokes, rumor, street news posters, linguistic tricks, cartoons, and humor – provide non-literate (mostly rural) Africans with the means to engage in the discussion of news events.[50] Popular media do not only represent an alternative mode of propaganda dissemination in Africa but also illustrate the creative appropriation of existing communicative channels by situated actors engaging with news and information.[51] These informal channels of communication thus provided an outlet through which propaganda messages could be produced, distributed, and consumed in pre-colonial Africa. The clarion call here is that we should "guard against ahistorical approaches that fetishize contemporary understandings at the expense of critical and nuanced historical contextualization of the notion of propaganda."[52]

Shaw posits that propaganda in pre-colonial Africa took the form of oral discourse using communication norms that were informed by oral tradition and folk culture and enacted by communal storytellers or griots, musicians, and poets.[53] Bourgault[54] observes that social reality was constructed and presented in oral narrative by bards, storytellers, or griots, and village historians. Through stories, these early-day propagandists were able to recount the genealogies of people, narrate their histories and

their struggles, recount stories of the gods, and impart moral lessons. Others resorted to "oral praise poetry in creating personality cults in society" as part of a village or kingdom's propaganda activities.[55] Even after independence, as will be shown in the next section, the press in sub-Saharan Africa reverted to the "praise-singing" or propagandist role typical of the pre-colonial communal storytellers or griots.[56] These continuities in terms of propaganda logics and techniques between griots (during pre-colonial times) and journalists (in colonial and post-colonial times) highlight the importance of taking history into account when discussing the evolution of manipulation and deception in non-Western contexts.

Colonial Propaganda in Africa

Researchers have long maintained that propaganda in Africa predates the colonial project.[57] This is corroborated by Ogola, who argues that "Africa has a long history of fake news after years of living with non-truth."[58] Although colonialism allowed propaganda to become institutionalized and routinized in everyday life, it has existed since time immemorial.

But it was during the colonial era that propaganda became a weapon of first resort for colonial administrators and missionaries. Writing about colonial Zimbabwe, Msindo dates it to the colonial era, when it was deployed by the colonial state as "a response to political paranoia and insecurity."[59] Moyo posits that the "use of mass media as mouthpieces for state propaganda has persisted from the colonial through to the post-colonial era."[60] This scenario, in which the political and economic elites of the colonial period were the major producers and sponsors of propaganda, continues into the post-colonial era in many sub-Saharan African countries. Many Africans use film, music, literature, journals, and newspapers to counter European ideas about African society as well as to provide the foundations for post-colonial national identities.

Most scholarship on the relationship between media and propaganda focuses on the imperial propaganda of World War II.[61] Though much of this literature centers on the exposure of "vulnerable" and "powerless" Africans to imported propaganda from Europe, some historians, anthropologists, and theologians shine light on how analogue technologies like puzzles, postage stamps, portraits, magazines, theater, television, radio, and newspapers were employed to misinform and mold public opinion. Colonial powers like Britain, France, Portugal, and Germany resorted to propaganda methods to communicate their wealth and influence. In colonial Africa, the print media kept the "reading public" informed about developments in the world and created "a vision of the war in the minds of the population, both civilian and military."[62]

Propaganda was evident across the continent. Focusing on East Africa, Njoku demonstrates how race and propaganda were used to enlist Africans for World War II.[63] Monama argues that colonial authorities established systems and exploited mass communication platforms, such as the print media, radio, and films, to disseminate propaganda toward South African blacks, hoping to combat apathy and mobilize black loyalty and cooperation.[64] Going against the grain, Ibhawoh dismisses the idea that "imperial propaganda during the Second World War was produced in the metropolises of Europe and extended to the colonies to shore up local support for the war,"[65] arguing instead that West Africans were not just sponges of colonial war propaganda. On the contrary, the war "provided new opportunities for emergent West African elites to articulate their nationalist demands on a world stage drawing on the same discourses about freedom and self-determination that underlined imperial war propaganda."[66] Thus, liberation war movements creatively deployed the media and propaganda to give their struggle an international dimension as they sought to delegitimize colonial power.

Scholars also highlight the different communicative platforms that were deployed in colonial Africa over time, including postage stamps, puzzles, theater, newspapers, portraits, magazines, and radio. Convents argues that theater and cinema were used as a way to propagandize ideas or stress certain opinions.[67] Besides newspapers and radio programs, colonial authorities also used a combination of the convincing force of photographic documents and what were then called "moving pictures." Photography and film were leveraged by colonialists and their sympathizers to communicate information about their activities, and European colonialists employed documentaries to inform and educate the colonized about their imperial dreams.

The print media, including newspapers, posters, magazines, puzzles, newsletters, books, and postage stamps, were another arsenal in the hands of the colonizers. As Monama observes, the print media were preferred for propaganda purposes because of their diversity, range, and reach.[68] Radio, often presented as the "medium of the people" in Africa,[69] was also preferred because of its ability to transcend illiteracy barriers, provide instantaneous messaging, and disseminate wider coverage.[70] Its ability to engage listeners through sound and create emotional connections sets it apart from other media forms. For many, radio was considered a weapon of war capable of overcoming national borders and fronts. While radio broadcasts allowed for instantaneous communication with colonial subjects, the print media were invaluable for their permanence. For instance, newsletters, magazines, and newspapers could be read multiple times and shared with other readers or preserved for posterity.

In colonial Africa, most newspapers, television, and radio stations were owned by colonial authorities. Control of the media enabled colonial powers to manipulate public beliefs and behavior to support policies that served imperial interests.[71] In cases where the media were owned by private capital, it was mostly white Europeans who had similar political and economic interests as colonial administrators. These kinds of ownership and governance structures allowed colonial propaganda to thrive with minimum interference and resistance. Unfortunately, most post-colonial African governments inherited these media ownership structures, which they further (ab)used to push their own self-serving power retention agendas.

Foregrounding the Rhodesian context, Pattenden shows that colonial authorities used a variety of sources, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television programs, to recreate the key messages of the Zimbabwe African National Union and Zimbabwe African People's Union during the Unilateral Declaration of Independence period (1965–1980).[72] Acknowledging the open-ended nature of propaganda, he argues that both the Ian Smith regime and Britain recognized the importance of using propaganda for political purposes.[73] They used traditional media platforms to project an image of Britain as they believed it should be seen. From Cape to Cairo, colonial powers used propaganda extensively to further their economic and political exploitation of Africa and undermine African national liberation movements. Colonial powers like Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, and Portugal invested significantly in setting up print and broadcast media in Africa. These platforms were aimed at disseminating propaganda designed to legitimate their interests and undermine the interests of those fighting for freedom. Missionary books, newspapers, posters, and magazines were instrumental in dividing and conquering the continent. As intimated earlier, colonial newspapers were "established in different parts of the continent to mold the literate African middle class so that it would serve as a buffer against anti-colonial agitation by the working class and the peasantry, who were themselves targeted through radio propaganda."[74] In Europe, pro-government print and broadcast media were used to underreport colonial atrocities and human rights violations. The media were complicit in telling one-sided narratives about the colonial project and its successes.

Radio played an oversized role during the missionary era and the accompanying colonial project.[75] As Ribeiro opines, "no other communication technology was more influential than [radio] broadcasting, which was used to promote and to fight colonialism and different political ideologies."[76] Besides serving as a tool of social control for the apartheid government, radio was used by the ANC's "Radio Freedom" for counter-propaganda. The battle of the airwaves between Radio Republic South Africa and Radio

Freedom demonstrated how propaganda and counter-propaganda played themselves out. In Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, Lekgoathi, Moloi, and Saide argue that radio provided the liberation movements in exile with a platform to address their followers at home, propagate their ideologies, and counter the propaganda of the oppressive white minority regimes.[77] Because of its transnational affordances, guerrilla radio transcended the boundaries imposed by the settler regimes.

Compared to other African countries, South Africa is often projected as experiencing "colonialism of a special type."[78] As a form of colonialism, apartheid was characterized by well-choreographed propaganda campaigns, which tried to exert influence on international and domestic actors. On the basis of geographical separateness and structural racial discrimination, apartheid authorities sought to rationalize, normalize, and legitimize racial hierarchies through propaganda. They also resorted to demonizing African liberation fighters as enemies of the state. At the height of apartheid, propaganda operations were coordinated at the ministerial level, where they deployed falsehoods that legitimized white supremacy and furthered the power interests of the white minority against the interests of the vast majority of South Africans.[79] The apartheid government used taxpayer money to fund a well-oiled propaganda campaign in the 1970s, infamously known as the Information Scandal or "Muldergate."[80] The apartheid state used the money to establish a pro-government newspaper, *The Citizen*, that helped it place propaganda in international media to gloss its image, growing murkier as the anti-apartheid movement gained ground. The scandal led to the firing of two preeminent political figures, Connie Mulder and Eschel Rhoodie, and the replacement of Prime Minister John Vorster by Pieter Willem Botha.

Propaganda Logics in Post-Colonial Africa

In post-colonial Africa, propaganda campaigns have been turbo-charged and recalibrated by national governments. Using inherited media infrastructures and apparatuses, some national governments have turned state-owned media companies into propaganda mouthpieces. Most of these political elites use familiar propagandistic tactics – such as name-calling, transfer devices, plain folks, bandwagoning, and glittering generalities – and they are more evident in countries like Namibia, Malawi, Kenya, Cameroon, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where post-colonial governments maintain the same colonial media infrastructure for propaganda purposes. Because of these "legacies of the past," state-sponsored and directed propaganda continues to fester in the underbelly of most colonies.[81] Relying on state-owned newspapers, magazines, television, and radio stations, politicians and

public officials often resort to propaganda activities to (re)engineer consent. State-owned broadcasters like Botswana Television (BTV), Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), Lesotho National Broadcasting Service (LNBS), Namibia Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Ugandan Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation have been castigated for facilitating propaganda campaigns on behalf of political and economic elites. Most of these propaganda campaigns are mounted during elections, periods of social unrest, and commemorative events.

In Zimbabwe, state-owned newspapers like *The Chronicle* and *The Herald* were used to rationalize and legitimize ethnic massacres against the Ndebele speaking people in the Matabeleland region between 1983 and 1986. At the height of the Gukurahundi massacres, these newspapers performed collaborative roles, abandoning the objectivity norm and working too closely with the political power center.[82] Since the turn of the 21st century, ZBC has come up with programs and emotive jingles laden with propaganda.[83] These include Zvavanhu ("Issues about People"), Madzinza eZimbabwe ("The Zimbabwean Ancestry and Living Traditions"), and Murimi waNhasi ("Today's Farmer"). Anchors for these propaganda-driven programs have been recruited from among public intellectuals, such as the late Professor Claude Mararike, Dr. Vimbai Chivaura, Professor Isheanesu Mupepereki, and Dr. Tafataona Mahoso. Presented with jingles such as Hondo Yeminda ("War for Land") and Rambai Makashinga ("Remain Steadfast") that were played every 15 minutes on state-owned television and radio stations, they built on the "us versus them" typologies associated with war journalism and constructed the opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), as "regime change agents," "sell-outs," and forces of darkness. This propaganda tactic has been used consistently over the past 24 years to portray the opposition in a negative light.

Most news bulletins and current affairs programs are produced in local languages – ChiShona and IsiNdebele – to ensure geographical reach and impact. Chikwanha, Sithole, and Bratton argue that Zimbabweans were indoctrinated by official media and deprived of alternative or independent sources of information.[84] Since the early 2000s, there have been concerted efforts by the Minister of Information and Publicity to transform the ZBC into a propaganda mouthpiece for the ruling party, shut down newspapers that publish unofficial points of view, and expel Western news correspondents from the country. Mutsvairo discusses the role of *The Herald*, a state-owned newspaper acting as a propaganda mouthpiece, arguing that the newspaper's ownership structure forces editors to pointedly

paint a positive picture on stories involving Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) officials, even when unprejudiced scrutiny is needed. Anything that seeks to dehumanize, discredit, or demonize the opposition attracts instant attention and is decidedly disseminated at whatever cost.[85]

Rwanda provides another interesting example of how propaganda has been used to instigate genocide. In mid-1993, Hutu radicals launched their own radio channel, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), to incite hatred toward the minority Tutsi ethnic group by using propaganda and ethnic ideology.[86] Content on this radio included the Hutu Ten Commandments. As part of this ethnic ideology, it was claimed that the Tutsi were foreign to Rwanda and had no right to live there, that the Tutsi were responsible for continuing Hutu poverty, and that the Tutsi were a danger to the Hutu. Hutu propagandists used a combination of newspapers and the radio to disseminate these ideas hostile to the Tutsi. Studies have shown that radio broadcasts had a significant effect on the participation in killings by both militia groups and ordinary civilians.[87]

During the 2007–2008 electoral violence in Kenya, radio and mobile phone Short Message Services (SMS) were used to disseminate propaganda untruths to foment ethnic hatred in the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya.[88] Hate speech against specific ethnic groups was spewed on social media platforms. Elections came at a time when social media platforms, blogs, and SMS were entering mainstream communicative arenas, and soon after a ban on live broadcasts was announced by the then internal security minister, John Michuki.[89] Kenyans resorted to alternative communicative platforms to spread hate speech and incite people, and they employed SMSs to stir emotions regarding alleged vote stealing and inciting people to attack other communities perceived as allies with Mwai Kibaki and the Party of National Unity. Stereotypes, glittering generalities, and outright lies were used for ethnic mobilization.

In South Africa, the media have been mobilized during different spates of xenophobic violence. Research on media and xenophobia in South Africa has demonstrated that "the depiction of immigrants by the mainstream print media is overwhelmingly negative, and this in turn enforces negative stereotypes that contribute to further xenophobic attacks."[90] In 2008, tabloid media and social media were implicated in the stereotyping and biased coverage of African immigrants when they were held responsible for having nurtured anti-foreigner sentiments, which culminated in violence that killed close to 100 African migrants. In recent years, insurgent movements like #OperationDudula and #PutSouthAfricansFirst have propagated nationalist and indigenous ideologies. Social media platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp are being used to push

narratives that the vigilante groups were "cleaning up communities" and "providing opportunities" to South Africans marginalized by the national government.

Rebooted Propaganda in the Digital Age

The current advent of social and digital technologies has reconfigured the production, distribution, and consumption of propaganda content, improving, refining, and expanding the tactics and techniques of propaganda. Despite transformations in communication and media technologies, propaganda remains consistent, but its methods of production and delivery have dramatically evolved. Because of audience metrics and analytic systems, it is easier now to measure the reach, impact, and reception of propaganda messages. Whereas other scholars have advanced concepts like "networked propaganda," "rewired propaganda," "cyber-propaganda," and "digital propaganda,"[91] in this chapter I propose the use of "rebooted propaganda" to refer to the reconfiguration, recalibration, and turbo-charging of tactics and strategies of manipulation and deception in the digital age.

Unlike traditional propaganda, whose recipients consumed it passively through analogue communication channels, digitally mediated propaganda is associated with active consumers who assist in the spread and mutation of propaganda. Social media platforms, blogs, podcasts, and mobile phones have "democratized" the production and distribution of propaganda. Social elites no longer have the monopoly over the mental means of propaganda production and distribution. Ordinary people are also able to push their own counter-propaganda campaigns. As Roberts and Karekwaivanane observe, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and X have become more popular mediums for disseminating propaganda.[92] The algorithmic dissemination of content and the circumvention of traditional media filters and opinion-formation gatekeepers make propaganda spread faster, reach deeper, be more emotionally charged, and most importantly, be more resilient due to the confirmation bias that online echo chambers enable and reinforce.[93]

It is now possible for propagandists to micro-target and customize their manipulative and deceptive campaigns for maximum impact. The digital age has amplified this capability, expanding the propagandists' toolkit to target and recruit individuals.[94] Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning technologies have also created deepfakes and synthetic media, which can create highly realistic and manipulated content. Like most new technologies before it, the mass adoption of generative AI tools – like Bard, ChatGPT, and DALL-E – has ignited unmitigated euphoria and hysteria.

There are fears that these technologies can be used to fabricate convincing narratives to support a specific cause or discredit an opposing viewpoint.

Notwithstanding the fact that in recent years "scholarly work has focused less on propaganda as a concept,"[95] digital transformations have created opportunities for significant decentralized non-state actors as well as central institutionalized forces, enabling new forms of audience participation in propaganda's creation and dissemination and quick repurposing of content for counter-propaganda. The return of propaganda to prominence in communication and media studies has coincided with a wave of polarized political tensions and an institutional crisis of distrust and profound skepticism toward official sources of information and objective fact-finding.[96] In this seemingly unregulated and uncontrollable information environment, there are deep-seated fears that propaganda will be unleashed to passive and gullible audiences with no capacity to actively decode its preferred, aberrant, and negotiated meanings. The agency of propaganda audiences is generally undervalued and muted in discussions about its impact.

It is worth noting the industrialization, professionalization, and recruitment of "paid-for influencers" and cyber trolls in selected African countries. These practices show that propaganda in Africa has grown to become a highly organized industry with demand and supply dynamics. In Nigeria, self-styled "propaganda secretaries" have been recruited by governors and parliamentary and presidential candidates in a bid to shape political narratives and spread deceptive and manipulative information. These cyber troops were responsible for pushing out political messages aimed at discrediting opponents on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X, and in 2003 the BBC revealed a thriving "disinformation industry" in Nigeria that gave prominent influencers cash, lavish gifts, government contracts, and political appointments for their work. Some influencers were paid as much as 20 million naira ($45,000; £37,000) for pushing electoral propaganda during the 2023 plebiscite.[97]

In Kenya, political parties and candidates have resorted to hiring and deploying paid-for influencers on X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Threads. Some are influential bloggers with millions of followers and subscribers. Like Nigeria and Zimbabwe, Kenya has a burgeoning industry of paid-for influencers. These "guns for hire" are recruited for electoral propaganda purposes. They use their digital footprint to push key messages linked to particular candidates. Bloggers and influencers were instrumental in the peddling of electoral propaganda in return for financial rewards. These "paid-for influencers" earn between $10 and $15 a day for posting content on behalf of their political clients. For the past decade, political parties and candidates in Kenya have extensively employed bloggers, influencers, and digital campaign managers to shape the narratives of their campaigns.

In Zimbabwe, scholars have investigated the emergence of cyber-trolls (such as "varakashi" and "nerrorists") in the post-Mugabe context.[98] Since the 2018 elections, both the ruling ZANU-PF party under Emmerson Mnangagwa and its nemesis, the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC Alliance) under Nelson Chamisa, have resorted to cyber-propaganda warfare through deploying troll armies like "Varakashi" (ZANU-PF affiliated) and "nerrorists" (MDC Alliance affiliated). These online political gladiators have been instrumental in spreading lies, stereotyping, using glittering generalities, and pivoting to plain folks. Mostly operating on X, Facebook, and WhatsApp, they have taken propaganda to the next level. Counter-propaganda battles have also been waged on various social media platforms.

It is important to highlight that while most of this chapter has focused on domestic actors behind propaganda campaigns in Africa, foreign actors are also actively trying to influence public opinion. The role of geopolitical and economic actors like Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France, Britain, and the United States in propagating propaganda cannot be ignored. For instance, in recent years, Russia and China have invested heavily both in setting up broadcasting studios in Africa, such as Russia Today, Sputnik, and China Global Television Network, and they push their propagandistic messages through journalists and social media influencers. A report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in 2024 showed that Russia continues to be the primary purveyor of propaganda in Africa, sponsoring 80 documented campaigns and targeting more than 22 countries. Because Africa is often portrayed as the region of the world where the interests of all global powers converge, the Wagner Group has set up a sophisticated propaganda machine to try and restore Russia's diplomatic influence.[99] The machine consists of troll armies, bots, social media influencers, and traditional media platforms whose objective is to promote the dissemination of information about Russian interests in the region. In many ways, this reflects the continuation of Cold War dynamics in Africa, with China coming in as the relatively new geopolitical actor. These dynamics highlight the "rebooted" nature of propaganda in the digital age, whereby a wide variety of actors are leveraging automated bots and anonymous human "sockpuppet" accounts in efforts to amplify and suppress particular streams of information during elections, security crises, and other pivotal events.[100] In the realm of international relations, "reloaded or rebooted propaganda" is often used by diplomatic actors with partisan foreign policy goals.

Conclusion

Focusing on pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial manifestations of propaganda in Africa, this chapter has foregrounded the role of cracks,

crevices, and continuities in understanding the evolution and stability of manipulation and deception strategies over time. It has demonstrated that some post-colonial African governments have appropriated state-owned media for propaganda purposes in ways that reproduce and reincarnate colonial logics. It highlighted how the human being as a social infrastructure has been implicated in propaganda logics. By historicizing propaganda from an African perspective, this chapter has shown how media and propaganda are entangled with each other. As a battleground for social influence, the media provided a veritable site for propaganda and counter-propaganda, pitting the colonized and colonizers, the liberators, and the liberated and so forth. Without throwing the baby out with the bathwater, the chapter has highlighted the importance of revitalizing the concept of propaganda in order to avoid the unmitigated fascination with sexy and fashionable terms like disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, fake news, and information disorders. It demonstrates that change and continuity are at the front and center of our theorizations of the mutation of propaganda in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

Instead of reforming inherited propaganda infrastructures and apparatuses, the chapter argues that some African governments have repurposed and refined the deployment of state-owned media institutions for propagandistic purposes. Taking over from where colonial and settler governments left off, these post-colonial regimes are abusing their ownership and control to "manufacture the necessary illusions" that are so central to propaganda. This means that instead of creating independent and resilient public service media institutions charged with disseminating truthful and credible public interest information, partisan and biased media institutions have been retained for the purpose of regime preservation.

The disruptions and decentering caused by propaganda in these current conditions suggest the emergence of the concept of "rebooted propaganda." It posits that current propaganda logics, which activate digital and social media platforms as the conduits for mass deception and manipulation, have been unleashed from their analogue tradition. In the context of rebooted propaganda, recipients are not simply passive and gullible targets but active participants with agency and decoding capital.

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8

"DESTROY THIS MAD BRUTE"

Propaganda and Sexual Violence

Sarah Banet-Weiser[1]

One of the most commonly heard maxims in the advertising world is the idea that "sex sells." Objectified, highly sexualized women have been depicted in advertising selling perfume, cigarettes, cars, and more. Indeed, this is one of the most critiqued aspects of media culture by feminist scholars, who have studied the sexualization of advertising for decades.[2] And, while there have been some important feminist interventions in recent years, much of contemporary advertising, regardless of the media platform on which it circulates, continues to rely upon the tried-and-true formula of a sexually objectified woman to sell products, even products that have absolutely nothing to do with women, sex, or sexuality. Advertisers' investment in the idea that "sex sells" relies upon a basic bait-and-switch to which advertisers are so beholden: an objectified, heteronormatively sexy woman offers an empty promise to a consumer, a thing one would like to possess, and this desire is projected onto a product.

It has also long been conventional wisdom that advertising is not exactly propaganda, though these media forms share some similarities. Like advertising, propaganda utilizes highly stereotyped images to "sell" a product, though that product is often not material or sold to a group of consumers but rather consists of an ideology, dynamics of power, and binary depictions of conflict. Like advertising, propaganda offers empty promises, using affective attachments such as nationalism, patriotism, racism, or sexism to communicate a political position. The purpose of propaganda, like advertising, is to persuade an audience about an idea – whether that is a justification of war or a rationale for buying a product. And all advertising and all propaganda depend on the skillful and strategic use of media,

whether through the radio, a print magazine, a television ad, or an Instagram influencer.

After all, media in all of their forms, as decades of scholarship have persuasively argued, provide a central cultural space for representation, recognition, and narratives, as well as a space to generate financial profit. But they are about more than the transmission of ideas, as Angela McRobbie, James Carey, and Stuart Hall (among others) remind us.[3] They are also about the circulation of ideology and world views. As Hall has argued about the media, "though not formally part of the state, they play a critical function – in articulation with other institutions – in the business of *popular influence via "the social production of news."*[4] The ideological, cultural, and interpretative practices of propaganda are expressed primarily through the territory of the press and mass media – and, in the contemporary moment, digital media.

Why begin this chapter with the common strategy of "sex sells" in advertising? Because part of using women's bodies in advertising involves objectifying these bodies. To make a human into an object necessarily means deliberately dehumanizing them, turning people into things, commodities to be exchanged. Propaganda also often requires deliberate dehumanization as a justification for violence. Propaganda also uses sex – or more accurately, women's bodies and sexual violence – to "sell" its politics. In this chapter, I explore a specific subset of propaganda, one that uses sexual violence as a key logic in the transmission of its message. Sexual violence can take many forms; here, I examine how the *threat* of sexual violence is used as a propaganda tool. This threat manifests in images, narratives, and media forms such as Instagram posts and videos. I theorize how and through what mechanisms sexual violence is weaponized and depicted as its *own* kind of war, even within the context of a broader geopolitical or cultural war. Sexual violence is used as an instrument of propaganda to create one actor as a victim and another as an enemy and is strategically positioned to promote particular ideologies and identity constructions, those that are typically white, masculine, and nationalist. I discuss the way sexual violence is exploited during times of war, whether this is on the ground military combat or a digital cultural war, as a way to justify continued violence; sexual violence propaganda depends on a doubling down on binary understandings of gender, fueled by other elements of the war context, including authoritarianism and a nostalgic melancholy manifest in nationalism and patriarchy.[5]

Obviously, sexual violence also occurs outside the context of war; sexual violence is commonplace, not unusual. Looking historically, we need only examine chattel slavery in the 17th–19th centuries in the United States to see how states supported the rape of enslaved people by their owners.

When enslaved women were understood as property, as commodities to be owned, they were dehumanized and objectified, seen as instrumental mechanisms for the reproductive economy.[6] Sexual violence was thus used during slavery as a way to discipline and control enslaved women; in this context, rape "functioned as a technology of racial terror enabled by law and the state."[7] Enslaved women, in other words, were not positioned as victims who were violated; their dehumanized status meant that for slave owners, they were "unrapable," bodies that slave owners felt entitled to.[8]

In the contemporary era, some statistics show that one out of six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.[9] Sexual violence, across all world geographies, is more a norm than an exception. Part of the normalization of sexual violence is enabled by the fact that women are frequently not believed when they accuse someone of sexual violence; they are positioned as inherently doubtful subjects, untrustworthy, manipulators, and liars.[10] Propaganda exploits this convention, using women and sexual violence as powerful weapons to justify other kinds of violence. Propaganda uses the *idea* of sexual violence as a narrative tool and a highly fungible and fragile concept, one where there are often contradictory positions on whether, how, and when "justifiable" sexual violence occurs. Thus, these contradictory constructions of sexual violence depend on how *victimhood* is constructed. Here, it is worth quoting Lilie Chouliaraki at length on how to define victimhood:

> This slipperiness [of definitions of victimhood] suggests that we might best understand *victimhood* not as a single linguistic term, a word with a specific meaning attached to it, but . . . as a whole politics of communication, where competing claims to pain and their communities of recognition struggle for domination and where, consequently, the truth of suffering does not come to reflect the systemic conditions of violence behind the claims but rather the balance of power within these struggles.[11]

Propaganda can also be understood as a "whole politics of communication," created to shift the balance of power in a given situation to a particular advantage. When propaganda uses sexual violence as a rhetorical mechanism, the hoped-for outrage always depends on whether the woman depicted is widely understood as a symbolic ideal.[12] In this context, women are typically positioned in terms of purity and innocence; it is often white women who symbolize the nation itself, and thus the violation of a white woman's body is symbolically seen as the desecration of the nation. Whiteness, and specifically white women, is the backdrop for much of the propaganda that marshals sexual violence – a way to morally justify what

Kathryn Higgins calls "white victimcould": "the very possibility of harm (rather than the fact or even likelihood of harm). . . so as to position fearful white subjects as morally 'wronged'").[13] As I will discuss later in this essay, propaganda that uses sexual violence as a trope also often uses whiteness as a milieu for its message because it is white women who are often proxies for the nation.

While there are some departures to this dynamic when we move from wartime propaganda to the digital propaganda of the cultural wars, there are important continuities as well: the construction of a "pure" and usually white female victim, the connection of women with the nation, where the nation is not just "imagined" but is also embodied and performed in particularly gendered ways, and a biological binary of gender where men are positioned as dominant and women as subordinate. The weaponization of sexual violence in the context of war is typically, even if unofficially, state-supported, and the state recognizes some categories of people as humans and not others. Within digital propaganda, however, the war on women shifts from the state to individual influencers, even as there are similar logics in the ways that sexual violence is weaponized.

My argument is not about whether sexual violence actually *occurs* during wartime. Over centuries, there has been more than enough evidence compiled to suggest that sexual violence is a common occurrence during war. When international human rights agencies determined rape was a war crime in the 1990s, the official connection between the state and wartime rape became clear.[14] I'm interested, rather, in how sexual violence is a rhetorical mechanism, a strategic tool, to justify continued violence. In the following pages, I explore the use of sexual violence as a key technique of propaganda, moving through historical instances of how propaganda engages sexual violence as a way to justify other violence to the contemporary climate of digital media, where misogynistic influencers engage sexual violence as a way to control and discipline women. Clearly, propaganda has heightened visibility during wartime, and wartime propaganda almost always weaponizes sexual violence. Yet, importantly, propaganda is not only present in conventional wartime; we need to understand contemporary cultural wars as similar to conventional wars in that both use propaganda and weaponize sexual violence. The subset of the online world called the "manosphere" is a key space for propaganda in the war against women.

Sexual Violence, Propaganda, and War

Sexual violence is part of everyday life, regardless of geopolitical context, class, race, or ethnicity. It is, however, interpreted, understood, and believed

differently in those different contexts because legal discourses about truth, evidence, and credibility have been the primary frames of public understandings of sexual violence. These legal discourses, despite the promise of neutrality or objectivity, are shaped and framed by cultural constructions of identity, such as race and gender. Sexual violence is often called "rape culture," which became the backdrop for cultural wars in the late 20th century, when media were again recognized as a template for violence against women. In 1975, a documentary film titled simply "Rape Culture" detailed the relationships between and within patriarchy, sexual violence, and media entertainment that glamorizes rape (*Rape Culture,* 1975). During the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, feminist theorists expanded on this notion of rape culture and how it relates to patriarchal and legal norms; as Catherine MacKinnon has argued, the legal concept of consent relies upon an assumption that consent can be freely given between liberal subjects.[15] Yet, as she powerfully points out, liberal subjectivity does not take shape on a free and equal playing field; if women are always already constructed as subordinate to men, then consent is emptied of all meaning. Women are constructed as objects, men as subjects, and only subjects possess the capability to give consent.[16] From this perspective, *all* culture is part of rape culture; rather than specific acts of violence, rape culture is based on the idea that merely living in the world as women is inherently about sexual violence. However, as Kathryn Higgins and I have recently argued,

> Rape culture is so named not because it encourages or cultivates an acceptability around something called "rape" itself – most people, if asked outright, would agree that "rape" is morally abhorrent and socially unacceptable. The problem with rape culture is, rather, that it muddles our capacities to make many experiences intelligible *as* rape, and so publicly recognizable as violence.[17]

Thus, the question of evidence is always fraught when it comes to sexual violence, because it comes down to who we believe and why.

In other words, as is well-documented by feminist scholars, there are different struggles over belief when sexual violence occurs between two individuals, including over what actually happened, how it happened, and whether consent or force was involved. Aside from whether or not to believe that sexual violence has actually occurred, there is a related struggle over who is to interpret what sexual violence actually *is:* a sociopolitical fact of everyday life, a characteristic expression of white heteropatriarchy and capitalism, or a defining feature of how gender and race are lived in different cultural contexts. This comprises what Higgins and I call "an

economy of believability," which "encompasses not only representations of sexual violence but also the labor that is required to *become believable*, as well as the resources of believability that are distributed unequally depending on cultural position and identity." In other words, there are different elements that need to be marshaled in order for sexual violence to be recognized: the victim needs to be understood as a "worthy" victim (which usually means a white woman), and the performance of victimhood needs to be believable, which usually means a reliance on "purity" and innocence. When women experience sexual violence, their testimony – if they decide to offer testimony, because most cases are not reported because women are so rarely believed – is almost always shaped by these cultural constructions of gendered believability. These constructions shape what women say about sexual violence, which has meant that their truths have always been suspect, questioned, and challenged, borne from subjective "experience" rather than objective "fact."

While feminists and legal scholars have been theorizing the subject of believability in the context of sexual violence for decades, the position of sexual violence within a context of war has only more recently been engaged. Sexual violence is a weapon of war in different ways: it is in itself a violent act, and the *threat* of sexual violence is also used to justify defense and further violence. As Rana Jaleel points out, "war and its accoutrements are understood as both a cause of rape and also an answer to it."[18] She calls this "the work of rape," and through legal archival work alongside analyses of the UN and other NGO policy reports, incisively argues that the recognition of sexual injury in domestic and international law is contingent on other imperial and colonial histories. She argues

> that the legal and social meanings of rape and other forms of sexualized violence are shaped by ideas of what counts as consent and coercion, which are themselves formed through racialized geopolitical imperial and settler conflict – the materialities and imaginaries they produce.[19]

These racialized and gendered geopolitical conflicts set the stage for sexual violence during war – and how this violence is then mobilized as propaganda.

For example, in World War II, it is reported that over one million German women experienced sexual violence at the hands of Russian soldiers by the end of the war. During the Vietnam War, there are reports of the rape of many women in the village of My Lai, Vietnam, by US soldiers during that massacre. Nancy Farwell defines rape as "a weapon and strategy of war."[20] Because rape intersects with other axes of oppression, such as race, patriarchy, and religion, Farwell argues that war rape is part of

a continuum of violence against women. And, because sexual violence remains what some feel is a slippery slope, dependent as it is on individual testimony, which is in turn shaped by dominant gender conventions, it has been largely understood as personal violence rather than systemic or structural violence.[21] It wasn't until the "ethnic wars" of the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s that the frame of interpretation of sexual violence shifted from a crime that could be prosecuted to positioning rape as a weapon and strategy of war.[22] During the 1990s and in the wake of ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe, rape and sexual violence became part of the language of human rights and atrocity crimes (due to feminist interventions), but still maintained particular boundaries around the subject of "woman" and the category of "sexual violence."[23] That is, only those who are contained within these supposedly universal subject categories are understood as victims.

Sexual violence has also been justified, in courts of law and in everyday life, as a mere manifestation of masculinity, rationalizing the act through the idea that men will "naturally" be both violent and desire sex at all times. Thus, sexual violence is often dismissed as a familiar convention of "boys will be boys." In the context of war, however, this construction of gender shapeshifts into a different sort of subject (though the gender mythologies of "boys will be boys" also frame this construction). As Masha Gessen argues about alleged sexual violence in Israel and Palestine,

> Sexual violence is a category of crime that stands apart in peace and in war. It is shocking – –more shocking than killing, which is, after all, normal and often legal in war. At the same time, it is expected: it surprises no one that men high on adrenaline, men who are armed, men who are all but guaranteed impunity, will rape defenseless people.[24]

Thus, the cultural constructions of gender and race shape how sexual violence is interpreted in both everyday life and in the context of war. Sexual violence in our daily lives is typically understood as an act of violence committed by one individual against another. In war, however, while sexual violence is materially enforced on individual bodies, women are often characterized as proxies for the nation itself, their bodies symbolizing the body of the nation.[25] Rape accusations during war always signify more than expressed outrage against real or feared sexual violations of human – and most often women's – bodies. As human rights lawyer and feminist scholar Kiran Grewal reminds us, the image of the raped woman is conjured as representative of violations to the "body" of the nation.[26]

France's Marianne, Germany's Germania, the United States' Lady Liberty – the nation has long used images of women's bodies to convey a

national identity, something to defend and protect, just as (white) women are positioned as in need of protection and defense. Outside the West (though still from the West's perspective), women's bodies have symbolized the nation in more nefarious ways: Africa as a continent to be raped and pillaged, the Middle East as a group of nations where women need to be protected from rapacious men.[27] Historically, war propaganda has used the woman-as-nation trope to weaponize sexual violence and to then use it as a justification for war and violence. To rape women in this formulation is to rape the nation; in the case of Africa, this rape is rendered justified and justifiable through persistent dehumanization and dismissal of actual violence.

In other words, when propaganda uses sexual violence as a narrative tool, there need to be clearly defined characters in the narrative. A clear enemy and victim need to be immediately identified, but even within this reductive binary, there are specific elements that come to the fore when examining how propaganda uses sexual violence. In these cases, the victim is usually female, vulnerable, and portrayed in terms of purity and innocence. Propaganda positions the virginal female body as the victim, by either rapacious individuals or rapacious nations, casting girls and women as vulnerable, in crisis, and in need of protection. This protection is found through the regulating and policing of their bodies. The history of how sexual violence is understood as a crime documents the way in which prosecuting sexual violence often depends on casting the victim as a "perfect" victim, one who is pure and innocent, one who does not deserve such violation.[28] Of course, this perfect victim is always, either implicitly or explicitly, juxtaposed with her opposite – the woman who asked for it, deserved it, is not understood culturally and politically as pure or innocent. This concept is weaponized by propaganda – whether state-sanctioned or digital propaganda – and used to "protect" or demand outrage for a violated and humiliated (white, masculine, nationalist) ideal. Indeed, precisely this insistence on purity as a prerequisite for outrage and defense is what makes sexual violence as fungible as a rhetorical tool in propaganda. Who gets to be pure? Who is worthy of defending? Whose violation is legible?

There are clear strategies and mechanisms that function to create a context in which some women/nations will be understood as victims and others as rapacious enemies. This is the Manichean logic that undergirds the weaponization of sexual violence in a context of war: as we see in wars from world wars to regional conflicts, sexual violence is often, even if unofficially, justified as a necessary mechanism of war, and the threat of rape is used as a justification for further violence. Propaganda is a media form that powerfully stirs nationalist identifications, playing on fears of violation – as well as vulnerability – and fosters a desire for revenge. The

revenge desired, then, is in the name of the entire national body. In other words, sexual violence (and its believability) becomes a trope or tool of convenience leveraged when it serves the propaganda narrative; it is rendered illegible or legible accordingly, which is dependent on how an idealized victim is portrayed.

Gessen points out that "rape is common in war and in peace; to convey the trauma of sexual violence, victims and witnesses may feel the need to embellish."[29] The need to embellish is an apt way to characterize propaganda: propaganda uses hyperbole in order to influence public opinion, state policies, and everyday discourse. Yet, believability regarding sexual violence depends on a number of factors: was it consensual? Was she the appropriate kind of victim? Is it a matter of "he said/she said"? This fungibility in how sexual violence is understood *as* violence allows for its malleable use within propaganda – arguably, there is no real need for *actual* evidence in propaganda but only statements or images that cast doubt or work to persuade citizens of a common enemy. This dynamic is found in the use of media (radio broadcasts, newspapers, flyers) that paint a picture of sexual violence in hyperbolic and binary terms, where there is a clear enemy and a clear victim, and where women stand in for the nation. Whether or not one believes that sexual violence occurred in the context of propaganda is not a "he said/she said" situation, but rather it is how states (and in contemporary culture, digital media) can effectively *use* sexual violence to influence and justify; indeed, as Jaleel argues, "Rape as a concept offers a fiction of coherence."[30] This "fiction of coherence" is the undergirding logic of propaganda; it is decidedly not ambivalent, opaque, or difficult to decipher; its power relies on its unassailable lucidity. In a striking example of this, a famous recruitment poster from World War I featured a racist image of a gorilla wearing a helmet labeled Militarism, a blood-stained club labeled Kultur, holding a terrified white woman, with the words "Destroy this mad brute. Enlist. US Army."[31]

And these themes tragically continue into the contemporary moment, where cultural wars on women take place online, on multiple media platforms, taking the form of comments, images, videos (including deep fakes), image-based sexual abuse, misinformation, and misogyny.[32] Digital propaganda, like historical propaganda, uses the context of a cultural war to justify biological binaries of gender, misogyny, and control over women.

Digital Propaganda and Sexual Violence

While feminist theorists made, and continue to make, crucial interventions that have resulted in actually recognizing rape and sexual violence as part of culture rather than an anomaly in the contemporary digital context, the

same tropes of gender binaries, humiliation, and the control of women used in historical propaganda during wartime have been taken up with renewed force. Indeed, the contemporary digital media context is the space for newly configured propaganda against women. Like historical forms of propaganda, the contemporary media climate of sexual violence presents itself in deterministic and resolute terms; in the digital world, these themes are amplified and circulated even more broadly.

The contemporary digital environment is, of course, a space of contradiction; there are conflicting sentiments about women and sexual violence: it is at once seen not only as a relatively open space where women can finally and truthfully "speak out"[33] but also as a corrupted place with "mob justice" and "trial by media," where accused men are understood to be at a particular structural disadvantage. There are different affordances offered by digital spaces that add to these conflicting understandings and make it an especially rich space for the proliferation of propaganda.

As scores of scholars, pundits, and commentators have noted, digital technologies and platforms are proliferating and multiplying our capacities for networked communication. In the current hypermediated conjuncture, our ability to both issue and challenge bids for truth in highly public ways has, at least in terms of access, been radically (if not evenly) democratized. We see this clearly in what has been called the "manosphere," a part of digital culture devoted to celebrating particular forms of heteromasculinity by denigrating and demonizing women. The manosphere is thus a space where misleading information is circulated to promote a particular political and worldview; put simply, it is a space that claims that women are the cause of all problems.[34]

One characteristic of propaganda is that the messages are often misleading and/or outright false. Digital propaganda in the manosphere follows this pattern, boldly stating "feminism is a cancer," that rape "is the answer," and that women are a dire threat to society.[35] Subtlety is not part of propaganda; rather, the messages often draw upon the harshest and boldest stereotypes – of gender, race, etc. – in order to make a strong point. Women are claimed to be using "sex power" to take over men; they are responsible for low birth rates because of reproductive rights over their own bodies; they are responsible for the numbers of men in prison, apparently wrongfully accused of sexual assault and domestic violence.[36] The digital era has seen misinformation proliferate, in part because of the flexibilities offered by these media platforms; that is, at the center of the circulation of current forms of misinformation are digital media and communication platforms, which centrally use misinformation to mobilize citizens and communities.[37]

Contemporary digital propaganda thus uses similar tropes as historical propaganda, with a very important twist. For women, digital propaganda

flips the switch: rather than claiming to protect them *from* rape in the name of the nation, digital propagandists threaten them *with* rape. Yet, despite this shift in focus, there are important continuities between war propaganda and digital propaganda in how sexual violence is marshaled and positioned strategically. With historical propaganda, the threat of sexual violence was always lurking as a potentiality, as a constant threat to control and discipline women. Regardless of the source of propaganda, when sexual violence becomes a narrative propagandistic tool, it becomes about women as representatives of men's valor, or property, or the respect they are apparently "owed." However, an important distinction from historical propaganda is the move from state-sponsored war propaganda to a private, for-profit digital propaganda revolving around a war on women.

In a cynical twist, digital propaganda that weaponizes sexual violence makes men, rather than women, out to be vulnerable – men are disenfranchised, alienated, and lonely. But the focus on a common enemy remains the same; however, in the case of digital propaganda, the war is not against a state power but against women in general and feminism in particular. The emergence and heightened visibility of networked misogyny, often centered in the manosphere, can be understood as contemporary digital propaganda with a goal of controlling and disciplining women.[38] Extreme right movements use misogyny as a core logic to their propaganda, and their misinformation campaigns demonstrate a clear continuity with sexual violence propaganda in wartime: it is not merely a strategy or tactic, but rather this propaganda is frequently based on misogyny as a set of discourses and practices that aim to "reset" the gender balance back to its "natural" patriarchal relation.[39] Using pseudoscientific theories of biology, digital propaganda purports to offer "evidence" of male superiority.

Thus, in the digital world, influencers attempt to also provide a "coherent fiction" about sexual violence. The fiction in misogynistic propaganda is that women are taking over a man's world, and a space in the digital world called the manosphere provides the context to tell this story. The contemporary cultural climate is one in which a networked, digital misogyny has taken hold, described as "a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms."[40] There are specific logics and affordances of media platforms, including widespread circulation, issues of evidence, and private ownership, that allow for an amplification of what philosopher Kate Manne has described as "the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance."[41]

As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, wartime propaganda is powerful due to a number of different factors: war creates public and private anxiety, often economic precarity, alienation, an uncertain view of

the future, and most of all, fear.[42] These are conditions that often allow for vulnerability and/or susceptibility; propaganda works to dehumanize and make vulnerable the "enemy" through racial and gendered binaries as a way to justify further violence. Within the manosphere, propaganda works in similar ways: misogynist users exploit biological binaries to assert the superiority of men and the inferiority of women; they dehumanize women as objects and things to possess in order to justify violence (either psychological or physical) against them. Within digital propaganda, the threat of sexual violence is made in the name of the nation, much like historical war propaganda. But the "nation" conjured in digital propaganda is a mythical nostalgic nation, one where only specific women – those who "actually" represent the nostalgic nation – are worthy of protection from the evil outsiders (usually feminists, but also immigrants, people of color). The spaces that are opened up by contemporary iterations of propaganda that centers misogyny are framed, like so much propaganda, not in ambivalent terms but as a simplistic zero-sum game: women are taking over space, jobs, desire, families, and power. This digital propaganda insists that every space or place, every exercise of power that women deploy, is understood as taking that power *away* from men.

Despite this misogynistic framing of women, however, digital propaganda continues a focus on those women who are worthy of male attention; the "purity" of a specific kind of woman remains a prominent framing in the contemporary era.[43] Like historical propagandists, many of the misogynistic influencers who produce digital propaganda are similarly obsessed with the purity of women they feel are worthy of them, and they leverage the threat of rape in order to express racist sentiments and anti-immigration policies (among other things). Indeed, one common threat made by misogynists in digital propaganda is to say to women online, "I hope you get raped by [racist slur/racial group]," demonstrating how women's "purity" is entirely contingent on how they support the dominance of a specific masculine demographic. And, unlike historical propaganda, which utilizes the mechanisms of mass media, digital media is clearly more customized to specific audiences, using the strategies and tactics of digital influencers to accrue followers and comments. For digital propaganda against women, this means that the community of users becomes a persistent source of support (and often revenue), creating a feedback loop of investment and growth. The rapid circulation of information and the sheer reach of digital media mean that it has a different impact than mass media forms such as radio, print, or television. Additionally, since digital media is very lightly regulated, especially when it comes to misogyny or racism, there is a wide range of propaganda circulating that humiliates women. Thus, it is not often the state that commissions the messages but rather online influencers,

who have followers in the hundreds of thousands and even millions. Yet, despite the number of followers, online influencers often operate within echo chambers, where their audiences are already predisposed to a particular political message.[44] Thus, the manosphere is a particularly rich site for propaganda about sexual violence, since humiliation and control of women is one of its most visible themes. Digital propaganda is transformed into not necessarily a state-aligned commission (although it could be) but an everyday war on women.

Perhaps one of the most visible individuals who use sexual violence propaganda in his media productions is the "influencer" Andrew Tate. Tate has acquired his visibility through his videos and comments about, among other things, women: he is openly misogynistic, has stated in his videos that men need to control and discipline women, has been charged with physical violence against several women, and is currently under investigation for human trafficking and rape allegations. There have been thousands of words written about Tate, perhaps because he has so much reach with millions of followers. As Bethany Iley argues, Tate proposes (among other things)

> that men should be physically strong and seek resources and status (in today's world, money and fame), while women should serve their partner and nurture their children. Women who follow these expectations should be cared for. Women who do not should be punished.[45]

Here, we see continuity with historical propaganda with the focus on the "worthiness" and purity of select (read: white) women. The "punishment" Tate calls for is often sexual violence: his videos contend that rape victims must "bear responsibility" for their attacks and date women aged 18–19 because he can "make an imprint" on them.[46] In another video, he says that if a woman accuses him of cheating on her, "It's bang out the machete, boom in her face and grip her by the neck. Shut up bitch." In 2022, his videos on TikTok had been watched 1.6 billion times.[47]

This points to another important difference between historical propaganda and digital propaganda advocating sexual violence against women: digital propagandists post their misogyny on for-profit media platforms, where sexual violence, hatred, and control over women are tragically quite lucrative. In another example, the widely visible defamation trial between actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard was claimed by Heard's former attorney to have

> generated "by far" the greatest volume of abusive and/or vitriolic social media attacks of any case her firm has ever handled, including their

representation of clients suing the white supremacist and neo-Nazi actors responsible for the violence at the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally in 2017.[48]

According to research from private firm Cyabra, the online reach of pro-Depp social media posts is approximately 100 times that of those supporting Heard.[49] Posts attacking Heard are, simply put, the safest commercial bet for those seeking to monetize the spectacle of the trial.

The political-economic logics that structure the platform environments – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and increasingly Tik-Tok – not only allow for but encourage misogynistic propaganda because these platforms are committed to the notion that what is most profitable circulates more broadly and propaganda circulates freely and widely. The fact that the commercial imperatives that underlie such platforms dissuade regulatory intervention into the spread of mis/dis-information means that misleading and false propaganda about women circulates alongside news stories, sports, gossip, and so on, thus putting the responsibility on the user to arbitrate the distinction between opinion and fact.[50] Because media platforms are governed by engagement-based revenue mechanisms, it is difficult to make meaningful distinctions between the claims themselves, the reasons for users' engagement with them, or their implications for honest, informed, and egalitarian public discourse.

The Fungibility of Sexual Violence

After the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, many news stories circulated about Israeli soldiers finding evidence of sexual violence committed by Hamas, and international tribunals were held to try to determine whether it happened, even though many of the victims were dead. But it was clear from the beginning that the fact of sexual violence could not be separated from the decades of violence and conflict between Israel and Palestine. The state of Israel was quick to report on the alleged sexual violence, circulating "eyewitness" stories in mainstream media (including US mainstream media) as well as online. These stories circulated at the beginning of what continued to be a relentless attack on Palestine by Israel, and thus were mobilized (like historical propaganda) to justify the continued violence.

But almost as soon as those stories circulated, others were aired and circulated that cast doubt on the veracity of the reports, with varying claims that the volunteers that were sent in to retrieve bodies exaggerated claims (or were not trained on how to identify instances of sexual violence) or reports of evidence that were falsified.[51] Those who doubted or questioned

the initial reports were seen as traitors, anti-Semitic, or worse. As Gessen explains,

> If rape, in the context of war, is interpreted as a humiliation of a nation rather than an attack on an individual's body, then those who are seen as doubting claims of rape are easy to cast as enemies of the people.[52]

While all propaganda has the propensity to mislead in order to create a powerful political message, in the context of sexual violence, this propensity becomes even more complicated. Issues of the cultural construction of women as inherently deceitful, alongside historical tropes of woman-as-nation and thus in need of defense, twist and clash when the heightened context of violent conflict, geopolitics, and sexual violence meet. And, just as feminists have insisted for decades, the cultural and historical construction of the proposed victims matters. As Jaleel argues,

> The continual social and legal battle to define and redefine what consent means and what counts as force or coercion can be a symptom of the problem if rape and other forms of sexualized violence remain locked into categories of violation that depend on Anglo-American epistemological traditions of injury – ones rooted in autonomy, self-possession, or other hallmarks of individuated rights.[53]

Thus, the conflicting accounts of what happened during the Hamas attack in Israel are also subject to these "epistemological traditions of injury." What does sexual violence mean if victims don't fall into these traditions? How do propaganda images reinforce these traditions and the truth of the violation?

I began this chapter with a brief mention of the convention of "selling sex" in advertising, connecting this convention with the way "sex sells" in propaganda. Both advertising and propaganda trade in the business of false promises and invented desires. And while advertising has been shown through decades of research as responsible for cultivating hegemonic gendered and racial norms, propaganda uses sexual violence to justify further violence, especially against women. Historical forms of propaganda are often discussed in terms of their reductionist images, with bold racist and misogynist stereotypes; they are frequently seen as a relic of the past. Yet digital propaganda that encourages sexual violence is very much a threat in the present, unregulated with a vast reach. Some of the same stereotypes of women needing to submit, to be disciplined, to be controlled form the core logic of the manosphere. While also reductionist, these images and statements too offer false – and dangerous – promises to their ever-increasing audience.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Barbie Zelizer, Nelson Costa Ribeiro, Kelly Fernandez, Sara Reinis, and Catherine Rottenberg for their insightful and generative feedback on this chapter.

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19 Jaleel, *The Work of Rape*, 7.

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9

FROM FAKE NEWS TO FALSE MEMORIES

Tracing the Consequences of Exposure to Misinformation

Ciara Greene

An important feature in the discussion of propaganda is the rise of so-called fake news. Much ink has been spilled on this topic over the last decade, but despite oft-expressed concerns about the impacts of online misinformation, there has been comparatively little empirical assessment of its effects. This chapter describes a body of work that aims to trace the consequences of misinformation exposure for cognition and behavior.

The first instance of the term "fake news" was in the 1890s; however, it really came to prominence during the 2016 US presidential election.[1] Adequately defining the term and delineating what is and is not fake news often proves difficult, as there are almost as many definitions as there are users. "Fake news" may be considered an umbrella term used to describe various categories of information and news media. This includes *misinformation*, defined as inaccurate information that may be spread either intentionally or unintentionally, and *disinformation,* defined as inaccurate information spread intentionally with the aim of causing harm, for example, by disrupting political or social processes.[2] Of course, the term fake news has also been variously applied to other forms of media, including advertising, propaganda, and the content of satirical news sites such as *The Onion*.[3] This intentionally inaccurate information created for humorous purposes would not meet most scholars' definition of the term, as it is not intended that the recipient should believe the content of the information. Almost since its inception, the term "fake news" has been weaponized for political ends, used to describe instances where a journalist or other source is incorrect on some detail or to indiscriminately tar any politically uncongenial news content.[4] In this context, use of the term may be viewed

as problematic and other terms such as "information disorder" may be preferred.[5] In this chapter, I use "fake news" as shorthand to refer to completely fabricated news items, describing events that either did not happen or happened very differently from how they are portrayed.

False Memories for Fake News

Over the last few years, several researchers, including my collaborators and myself, have worked to identify the consequences of exposure to fake news stories. As cognitive psychologists, our central interest has been in the question of how this information is processed in the mind and brain. The key discovery here is that when people see fabricated descriptions or photographs of events that never took place, they can come to believe in and even remember those fictional events.[6] Moreover, these false memories are especially likely if the content of the fabricated material is consistent with the participant's political or ideological views.[7]

This may seem rather surprising to scholars who may be unfamiliar with the reconstructive nature of memory. While the experience of "remembering" often subjectively feels as though we are simply finding a memory that has been filed away until we come along to retrieve it – a bit like accessing a file stored on a computer – in fact, memories are not stored in one piece and retrieved intact but are instead reconstructed every time.[8] Our reconstructed memories are often incomplete, and we use cues in our environment or experience to "fill in the blanks" – usually without our conscious awareness.

Memories are not reconstructed at random; instead, we tend to use mental frameworks called schemas,[9] which act as a sort of blueprint for our memories. Many of our day-to-day experiences overlap substantially with each other. For example, consider your morning routine: it is quite likely that every working day you get up at about the same time, eat the same thing for breakfast, brush your teeth in the same way, and wash the various parts of your body in the same order in the shower. Over time, you develop a schema of what your typical morning looks like, and your memory of most days fits neatly into this framework. One consequence of this is that it is very easy to mix up different instances of the same schematic behaviors. For example, if I asked you what you ate for breakfast last Tuesday, you are quite likely to report your usual breakfast fare ("toast with jam and a cup of coffee"), even if, on that particular Tuesday, you had run out of bread and eaten cornflakes instead. Thus, your memory of last Tuesday is in fact a false memory, the construction of which has been influenced by all the Tuesdays that have gone before.

A similar process occurs when we decide whether or not we remember something happening. This process is called source monitoring,[10] and it

consists of two concurrent judgments: a heuristic process based on quick rule-of-thumb assessments and a slower, more systematic process that evaluates whether events are likely to have happened. For example, I might ask you whether you remember the time you went to the circus with your father. Simply reading that sentence might conjure some mental image, one that possibly includes your father, a Big Top, jugglers, and lion tamers. How can you determine whether this mental experience constitutes a memory of a real trip to the circus or simply an imagined version of such a trip? The heuristic process considers the phenomenological characteristics of the mental experience in order to determine whether it matches the characteristics of a typical memory. If your mental image of the trip to the circus is especially detailed and vivid and contains lots of sensory features (the sound of cheering, the smell of popcorn) or emotional features (excitement, wonder, fear), this judgment is likely to conclude that you are in fact remembering a real event. The systematic process, on the other hand, evaluates whether the mental experience is consistent with your existing knowledge of the world. For example, you might happen to know that no circus has ever visited your hometown and thus dismiss the mental image as fantasy on the grounds that it is unlikely to be true. Both of these judgment processes can fail and falsely identify a mental experience as a real memory. A mental image that is particularly vivid is likely to pass the heuristic judgment process, while an event that is deemed especially probable or consistent with past experience can fool the systematic process. By the same token, both processes can lead to a fake news story being falsely recalled.

To illustrate this, I will describe some recent experiments in which we investigated the formation of false memories for fake news stories. These studies typically take place online to mimic the real-world experience of encountering online information (and misinformation) and follow a standard methodology. First, participants are invited to take part in the study under the guise of a cover story; for example, we might tell participants, "We're interested in perceptions of media coverage of COVID-19 issues." Crucially, participants are never told that we are studying misinformation, as advance notice of this would likely alter how they respond to the news stories. Participants are then presented with a series of news stories, including a mixture of true stories and completely fabricated ones. Each story typically consists of a one- to two-sentence headline with an accompanying photograph; previous research has shown that the inclusion of photographs (either original or doctored) along with news headlines can lead to an increase in belief for the story, a phenomenon known as the "truthiness effect."[11] The photograph acts as an additional signal of trustworthiness, activating a cognitive bias that "two sources are better than one," where

the photograph and the news headline are treated as two independent sources for the information in the story. In addition, presenting a photograph can help create a detailed and visual mental image of a fabricated event, short-circuiting the heuristic judgment process described earlier.[12]

After each story, participants are asked a series of questions. The exact content of these questions varies depending on the goals of the study, but at a minimum we usually ask participants, "Do you have a memory of the events described in this story?" Participants select their answer from some pre-set options, for example, "a. I have a clear memory of seeing/hearing about this"; "b. I don't remember seeing/hearing this, but I remember it happening"; "c. I don't have a memory of this, but it feels familiar"; "d. I remember this differently"; "e. I don't remember this." We would classify a response of a or b as indicating a memory for the story. Participants are then asked to indicate where they first heard about the story (e.g., on TV, via social media, or through family and friends) and to comment on how they felt about the event at the time. After responding to all the stories, participants might complete some other measures before being fully debriefed.

An early example of this paradigm in action asked participants to indicate how interested they were in a range of different topics, including football, politics, and pop music.[13] They were then asked to read a series of news stories related to the topic they were most interested in and the topic they were least interested in. Unbeknownst to the participants, the list of stories included some that were fabricated for the purposes of the study. As you might expect, participants tended to recall more true stories related to the topic they were interested in than the topic they had little interest in. This is because people are more likely to consume news media related to their interests and therefore more likely to have come across these stories before. More importantly, participants were also twice as likely to recall the false stories related to their high-interest topic. This might initially seem counterintuitive – surely, if you are very interested in a topic, you should more easily recognize that a story related to that topic is not true? But in fact, these results fit very well with the source monitoring framework described earlier. A high level of interest in a topic naturally leads to more knowledge and engagement with that topic, which in turn leads to a more developed schema. As a result, new information on that topic is more likely to overlap with existing memory traces and trigger a sense of familiarity. The mental image arising from the fabricated news story may therefore be incorrectly deemed a memory through failures of either the heuristic process – if the new information has perceptual characteristics that are similar to existing memories – or via the systematic process – if the new information is consistent with prior knowledge and experience.

Schemas are continuously developed through the extraction and assimilation of commonalities among our various experiences.[14] But the nature of that experience will depend on the information environment of a given individual. Thus, each person's schema for a given topic will vary with their media consumption, political beliefs, and desires. We might therefore expect the same information to be either consistent or inconsistent with an individual's schema for similar events, as a factor of their political orientation. In line with this, Frenda and colleagues reported that self-reported liberals were more likely to report false memories for fabricated scandals about George W. Bush, while conservatives were more likely to remember fake scandals implicating Barack Obama.[15]

We investigated this topic in the context of the 2018 referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution. Instituted in 1983, the Eighth Amendment had made abortion illegal in Ireland in all but the most extreme cases. Following an extended grassroots campaign, a referendum was held to repeal the amendment and allow the government to legislate for legal abortion. Abortion is, of course, a highly polarizing issue. The referendum campaign was hard-fought, and the result was expected to be close, even though in the event, the Repeal side was victorious with a substantial majority. In the week before the referendum, we partnered with a large online news site to recruit its readers to an online study of media coverage related to the Eighth Amendment.[16] More than 3,000 participants completed the study, roughly one of every 1,000 registered voters in the country.

Participants viewed a series of news stories, including ones we had fabricated for the purpose of the study. Participants were randomly assigned to view a news story claiming that either the Yes (pro-choice) or No (pro-life) campaign had been forced to destroy 25,000 campaign posters after it emerged that the posters had been paid for by illegal foreign donations. This was completely untrue. Nevertheless, about 30% of participants remembered having heard this story before, and nearly half reported believing that it had happened. Perhaps more importantly, people were more likely to report a false memory for the news story that aligned with their pre-existing ideology and reflected badly on the opposing side: No voters were nearly twice as likely to remember the story about the Yes campaign than the story about the No campaign, and Yes voters remembered the story about the No campaign more frequently than the story about the Yes campaign.

We can interpret this finding in light of the theoretical models discussed earlier. Over the course of their lifetimes – and more particularly, over the course of the referendum campaigns – participants had developed detailed schemas regarding the behavior of "their side" and "the other side." A story

that reflects badly on the opposition is much more likely to be consistent with that schema and therefore to pass the systematic judgment process as being something that seems like it probably happened. Once that judgment has been made, the person may go on to construct a detailed memory of the event. In the case of the abortion study, that appears to have been the case. When asked to report how they had felt on first hearing about the destruction of the campaign posters, many participants provided responses that clearly demonstrated that they were experiencing a rich false memory; for example, one participant noted, "I had my mind made up prior to these posters, however, after this story I was disinterested in the No campaign," while another told us, "I don't think anything wrong happened and the posters shouldn't have been burned." Of note here is that our fabricated story did not mention the posters being "burned"; the participant confabulated this detail themselves.

In our next study, we recruited participants who had voted for the United Kingdom to either leave or remain in the European Union during the 2016 Brexit referendum.[17] Once more, we found that participants were more likely to falsely remember fake news stories that reflected badly on the opposition. One story suggested that either the Leave or Remain campaign had been accused of election tampering after ballots voting for the other side had been found in a dumpster outside a polling station. Leave voters tended to remember the story implicating the Remain campaign, while Remain voters tended to remember the story about the Leave campaign. As in the abortion study, we found that many participants constructed rich false memories of these fictional events, telling us specific details of their reaction to hearing about the event and explaining how it had determined their voting choices.

In this study, we also tested an additional hypothesis: the idea that presenting a threat to a participant's social identity as a member of a particular group (in this case, as either a Leaver or a Remainer) would motivate them to protect that identity by forming more ideologically congruent false memories. The social identity threat was presented in the form of a television news report that described the results of a study comparing Leave and Remain supporters. Unbeknownst to participants, we had fabricated this report and invented the Australian news show it was seemingly presented on. The content of the report was carefully designed to activate common stereotypes about Leave and Remain supporters. Thus, in the version designed to threaten the Leave group, Leavers were described as "uneducated and unintelligent," while in the Remain threat, Remainers were described as "elitist and undemocratic." As predicted, participants who were exposed to insulting content targeting their own group were even more likely to form false memories that reflected badly on the opposition.

In a follow-up study (as yet unpublished), we found similar results for US Republicans and Democrats. The tendency to form false memories for congruent rather than incongruent fake news stories was enhanced if participants were first exposed to a threat to their identity as a Republican or Democrat. The threatening text in this case stated that the participant's group regularly scored lower on standardized intelligence tests than the opposition and had a poorer understanding of political issues. Moreover, we found some preliminary evidence in this study that the act of forming an ideologically congruent memory led to an increase in identity strength, whereby participants identified more strongly with their political party after falsely recalling a story that reflected badly on the opposite side. These results suggest that the tendency to form ideologically congruent false memories is not just determined by the presence of schema-consistent information but is also motivated by a desire to protect one's group identity.

We have examined the formation of ideologically congruent false memories in a range of other contexts. These include studies of climate change (in preparation), where believers in and deniers of man-made climate change were more likely to form false memories that reflected poorly on the opposing side in the debate; nationality, where participants tended to recall fake news stories that cast their own nationality in a positive light and others in a negative light; and cancer care, where individuals who reported strong beliefs in complementary and alternative medicines were more likely to fall for fake news stories about cancer prevention and treatment.[18] In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we investigated the formation of false memories for pro- and anti-vaccination misinformation.[19] Participants were more likely to falsely recall stories that aligned with their pre-existing opinions about vaccines, with pro-vaccine participants tending to recall stories saying things like, "The innovative mRNA technology of the COVID-19 vaccine will triple the natural strength of your immune cells and decrease your chance of succumbing to any future diseases," while anti-vaccine participants were more likely to recall stories making claims such as "The mRNA technology in the COVID-19 vaccine strains your immune cells, making you more susceptible to countless other illnesses." Others have found similar effects; for example, Calvillo et al. reported a partisan bias in how Republicans and Democrats remember fake news about the riots at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.[20]

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates conclusively that we can be very easily convinced not only to believe that fabricated events might have happened but also to actually remember having experienced them. Previous research has demonstrated that false memories can have significantly behavioral consequences; this is seen in the case of mistaken eyewitness testimony, as well as in experimental studies showing changes

in participants' willingness to eat certain foods after forming a false memory of being sickened by that food as a child.[21] This raises significant questions regarding the further impact of exposure to such fake news stories, which will be addressed in the next section.

Behavioral Consequences of Exposure to "Fake News"

News articles and peer-reviewed papers often assume that exposure to fake news must have grave consequences, with particular concern about impacts on public health or democracy. This concern was first expressed during the twin political behemoths of 2016 – Brexit and the US presidential election – with myriad comment pieces trumpeting headlines like "Did fake news and polarized politics get Trump elected?" and "How fake news caused Brexit." With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the quantity of online misinformation increased sharply, leading the World Health Organization to declare an "infodemic."[22] There is, however, surprisingly little direct evidence of the relationship between misinformation exposure and behavior. In a recent scoping review, we reported that just 1% of all misinformation research published between 2016 and 2022 measured actual behavioral outcomes, such as voting or vaccine uptake, with an additional 10% measuring participants' intentions to engage in the targeted behavior. The remaining 89% of papers studied proxy measures, such as attitudes or beliefs in the misinformation.[23] The reasons for this are not hard to determine: measuring a one-to-one relationship between exposure to a piece of information (true or false) and subsequent real-world behavior is immensely challenging. Efforts to do so are hampered by issues with measuring the behavior in question, as we cannot follow participants into the voting booth or vaccination clinic, and by the inherent difficulty in tracing the link between information exposure and subsequent action.

It is natural to fear the consequences of exposure to vast quantities of misinformation, and indeed there is good reason to implicate the spread of misinformation in events such as the "Pizzagate" attacks, the reduction in measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination following publication of a paper describing a spurious link with autism, and of course rates of COVID-19 vaccination.[24] These examples suggest that people can be very easily persuaded to engage in behaviors that are counter to their own interests and the public good. In contrast with this, decades of research in public health and policy have demonstrated that it can be extremely difficult to enact behavioral change. Consider the enormous effort expended by governmental bodies to persuade their citizens to eat healthily, wear sunscreen, get cancer screenings, or refrain from drinking and driving, often with modest results.[25]

In this context, it is not at all obvious that exposure to specific pieces of misinformation will have drastic consequences for behavior. Behavioral choices are driven by a complex web of personal goals, attitudes, and beliefs, perceived and actual availability, as well as social influence in the form of in-group norms and expectations.[26] In the dramatic examples mentioned earlier (Pizzagate, the MMR scandal), large online and in-person communities were formed, which pushed conspiratorial messages and continuously reinforced key pieces of misinformation, creating a social and informational environment that was detrimental to good decision-making.[27] In the case of COVID-19, there is indirect evidence that people living in geographical regions exposed to greater quantities of misinformation have lower vaccine uptake rates,[28] but these data are largely correlational. It is therefore virtually impossible to identify whether an individual citizen's receipt of the vaccine was influenced by exposure to a particular piece of misinformation ("the vaccine contains microchips!"), their social environment and political partisanship ("no one I know is getting the vaccine"), ease of access to the vaccine (including its local availability, cost, and the willingness of medical practitioners to provide it), or other personal factors (e.g., a fear of needles).

In an effort to bridge this gap, we conducted a series of experiments investigating the impact of exposure to a single piece of misinformation on intentions to engage in a specific target behavior. In order to disentangle the effects of misinformation exposure from other factors, we created entirely novel "fake news" stories for our studies. Thus, participants cannot have encountered the stories before and should not have an *a priori* belief or disbelief in the information contained in them. In the first of these studies, conducted during the first COVID-19 wave in 2020, more than 4,000 participants were recruited via an online news website.[29] Using a similar paradigm to that described in the summary of false memory research above, participants were presented with a series of news items related to COVID-19 and asked to indicate whether they remembered having encountered each story before. In addition to four true stories, each participant saw a randomly selected two out of the following four fake stories:

1. New research from Harvard University shows that the chemical in chili peppers that causes the "hot" sensation in your mouth reduces the replication rate of coronaviruses. The researchers are currently investigating whether adding more spicy foods to your diet could help combat COVID-19.
2. A study conducted at University College London found that those who drank more than three cups of coffee per day were less likely to suffer from severe Coronavirus symptoms. Researchers said they were

conducting follow-up studies to better understand the links between caffeine and the immune system.

3. A whistleblower report from a leading pharmaceutical company was leaked to *The Guardian* in April 2020. The report stated that the coronavirus vaccine being developed by the company causes a high rate of complications, but that these concerns were being disregarded in favor of releasing the vaccine quickly.

4. The programming team that designed the HSE [Health Services Executive] app to support coronavirus contact-tracing was found to have previously worked with Cambridge Analytica, raising concerns about citizens' data privacy. The app is designed to monitor people's movements in order to support the government's contact-tracing initiative.

Each of these stories was designed to target a particular behavior, with two intended to increase the target behavior (eating more chili peppers, drinking more coffee) and two intended to reduce the behavior (downloading a contact-tracing app, getting vaccinated). Later in the study, participants were asked to indicate how likely they were to engage in a series of health behaviors over the next few months. This list included the four targeted behaviors: "I intend to eat more spicy food;" "I intend to drink more coffee;" "I intend to get a COVID-19 vaccine once it becomes available;" "I intend to download the HSE contact-tracing app once available." It also included some filler items designed to obscure the purpose of the study (e.g., "I intend to get more sleep," "I intend to reduce my screentime").

As each fake story was viewed by half of the sample, we were able to compare the effects of exposure to each piece of misinformation on the target behavior. We observed small but measurable effects on some (but not all) of the behavioral intentions. Specifically, we observed a roughly 5% change in intentions to drink more coffee or download a contact tracing app but no effect on intentions to get vaccinated or eat more spicy food.

In this study, about one quarter of participants reported a false memory for at least one fake story, though the frequency of false memories varied widely (with the highest rates for the contact tracing app story and the lowest for the chili peppers story). This allowed us to examine the effects of false memories for fake news on behavioral intentions by comparing participants who falsely remembered each story with those who saw the story but did not form a false memory. Once again, we found significant effects on some, but not all, behavioral intentions: participants who "remembered" the coffee story reported being nearly 12% more likely to drink more coffee than those who had seen the study but didn't remember it. By contrast, participants who "remembered" the contact tracing story were

7% more likely to download the app. Once again, there were no effects on vaccination intention or intention to eat more spicy food.

This study suggested that a single exposure to misinformation can have effects on an individual's intention to engage in specific health behaviors, but the effects were generally small and inconsistent. Of course, this study had some limitations. We evaluated intentions to engage in a behavior rather than the behavior itself, since, as noted earlier, measuring real-world behaviors is notoriously difficult. There is a well-documented intention-behavior gap,[30] so it is possible that intentions might not correspond to real-world behavior. However, intentions are usually a necessary first step for behavioral change, so where there is no change in intention, it is unlikely that there will be a change in behavior. Another key element in behavior is attitudes: we typically engage in actions that conform to our tastes and views. In this first study, we didn't evaluate participants' existing attitudes toward vaccination or investigate how they might interact with exposure to the misinformation. Moreover, the effects in this study were based on a single exposure to a novel fake news story. There is reason to believe that real-world behavioral effects might increase after multiple exposures, since just two exposures to a fake news story can increase its perceived truthfulness.[31] We therefore followed this study with another in which we manipulated the number of exposures to the misinformation and controlled for pre-existing vaccine opinions.

In this final series of experiments,[32] we recruited 3,463 as-yet-unvaccinated participants and exposed them to pro-vaccination misinformation (e.g., "Regulators were so intent on providing a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine that the vaccine trials consisted of six phases of testing rather than the usual three"), anti-vaccination misinformation (e.g., "Episodes of 'memory loss' reported after receiving the second COVID-19 vaccine dose increased this month"), or a neutral control condition. Participants were exposed to the misinformation either once or twice before being asked about vaccination intentions. Importantly, we also included a measure of participants' pre-existing vaccine opinions. Across the board, pre-existing vaccine opinion was by far the biggest driver of behavioral intentions, regardless of misinformation condition. Multiple exposures to fake news stories did increase their perceived truthfulness, in line with previous research, but they had no effect on vaccine intentions. Moreover, we found similar effects when we replaced the misinformation with true pro-vaccine (e.g., "Pfizer-BioNtech booster vaccine significantly improves immune responses in patients with cancer") and anti-vaccine news stories (e.g., "AstraZeneca vaccine advice unlikely to change despite rate of rare clots 'doubling'"). These results indicate that one (or even two) exposures to a novel piece

of information (true or false) have little impact on behavioral intentions, especially in the face of strong existing attitudes.

Conclusion

In an age of disinformation, the Internet may be swirling with untrustworthy or downright dangerous content. However, in considering the potential impact of this information, we must reflect on how it is processed by its recipients. In our efforts to counter this threat, we naturally think of technological solutions to what is often perceived as a technological problem, focusing on the responsibilities of journalists and social media platforms. These are important features of the "infodemic," but while the Internet may be new, lies, partisanship, and bias are not. The human mind is not a blank slate to be written on by bad actors. The extent to which misinformation or disinformation affects our beliefs, memories, or actions is heavily influenced by pre-existing attitudes and social norms, and it interacts with cognitive mechanisms that have evolved over millennia. We neglect the study of the human mind at our peril.

Notes

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10

BEYOND THE SHELVES

Investigating Propaganda in the Library

Miranda Clinton, Ellen Perleberg, and
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Across the United States, a common theme is emerging at public librar-
ies. Organized efforts to remove titles (i.e., book challenges) are higher
than they have been since the existence of the American Library Associa-
tion (ALA). Since 2020, the ALA has documented a sharp and steady rise
in demands to censor library books and other materials, with challenges
targeting multiple titles at once.[1] In those 140 years prior, title challenges
were a relatively minor occurrence. Between 2000 and 2020, the number
of unique titles challenged was relatively minimal and consistent. Efforts
to restrict books in public schools have also increased, with the majority
of targeted titles focused on BIPOC and LGBTQ+ authors or subjects.[2]
This is particularly concerning given the lack of representation of histori-
cally marginalized groups already present on bookshelves.[3] The sudden
uptick and calculated frequency of specific titles being targeted begs the
question: to what extent has challenging books become a form of political
propaganda?

  Political propaganda is a systematic and deliberate attempt to dissemi-
nate information designed to unify people around a common idea, brand,
or agenda. Yet propaganda requires collective buy-in. Social movements
create and rely on propaganda to spread their messaging and rely on
Internet communication to coordinate among members. Despite the con-
nection between social movements, political pressure, and propaganda,
little research to date has sought to connect it with the rise of book chal-
lenges facing public libraries around the United States. The ALA's 2023
State of America's Libraries suggests that before 2020, a vast majority of
challenges were by parents who sought to remove or restrict access to a

book that their child was reading. Now, it seems that challenges are the work of collective action. A recent article in the *Michigan Law Review* examines how "parental rights politics" have been used to erode legal protections for historically marginalized groups to current-day access to abortion.[4] Our chapter supports this argument, explaining how "parental rights politics" is being used to target titles across the United States by distributing propaganda via social media channels and organizational networking.

We draw on three sources of data. First, access to a database maintained by the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom of all book titles challenged from 1990 to 2022. Second, BookLooks' *Book Reports* and *Slick Sheets,* including a rating guide developed by the organization. Third, Moms for Liberty's *Book of Books,* a compilation of BookLooks reports and sample pages of book titles that contain content deemed inappropriate for children. We find that titles featured in Moms for Liberty and BookLooks messaging have grown exponentially since their creation and that this increase is statistically significant. To better understand this significance, we conducted an in-depth content analysis of BookLooks reports and *Slick Sheets* on titles that had an increase in challenges since the formation of these groups. On the basis of our analysis, we argue that content created by these organizations is a form of political propaganda, designed to spur collective action.

Theoretical Background

Social movements have long existed in the United States, and researchers have since documented the profound ways social movements "interact" with other societal factors at play to create policies that enhance human rights and well-being.[5] While sustained activism requires offline organizing, institutional engagement, and strategic planning, media engagement plays a central role in increasing outside awareness and amplification.[6]

More recently, scholars have narrowed in on the important role platforms play in amplifying and connecting otherwise disparate voices through online engagement. In the groundbreaking work #*HashtagActivism*, scholars explore the important role social media plays in contemporary activism, explaining how the Black Lives Matter movement activated affordances to connect like-minded individuals to create virtual community formation and push for social change.[7] Digital technologies enable grassroots activists to "organize without organizations" and enhance their ability to communicate with stakeholders outside their immediate network, curating personal opinions and experiences for a wider audience.[8] "Curating actors" embedded in social movements seek to strategically communicate activists

goals and demands, effectively bypassing traditional news gatekeepers to communicate political information directly to the public and mobilize followers to take action, whether that be in the form of donations, advocacy, or volunteerism.[9]

Nonetheless, progress toward equal rights frequently triggers a subsequent "backlash," which seeks to undermine advancements and reverse established policies.[10] Research demonstrates that the democratizing potential of digital activism is undermined by existing political and financial power structures.[11] Organizing around retrenchment leverages Internet tools and disinformation-laced propaganda to shift public opinion toward positions that a majority oppose. Throughout history, white women have been at the center of this strategy, working together to stall the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, mobilized boycotts of public schools during integration by spreading misinformation, and stripped trans-individuals of human rights.[12] By understanding the connection between disinformation, political propaganda, and white social movements, this chapter will help connect the literature between social movement mobilization through technological platforms and the undercurrents of inequity baked into propaganda.

Since the concept of studying propaganda first surfaced in the 1920s, it has sought to understand how symbols are activated to link together brands, people, and nations through deliberate, systematic dissemination of information, ideas, or rumors.[13] Research on propaganda explains that the practice is not necessarily sinister. As Walter Lippmann noted in 1922, democracy might have died without wartime propaganda, but its professionalization led to distinguishing between "good" (i.e., efforts to influence a target population) and "bad" (i.e., manipulation or fraud).[14] Since propaganda aims to influence public opinion toward a specific goal, its accuracy is difficult to distinguish, but studies have documented that disinformation is often embedded within propaganda as a tactic for swaying public perception.[15]

This chapter utilizes the framework of "parental-rights politics" to unveil the subtle yet harmful nature of propaganda entangled with disinformation. Specifically, we scrutinize propaganda created by two groups in the United States that are organizing around the removal of books that address race, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health from public and school libraries. We posit that content created and disseminated by groups like Moms for Liberty or BookLooks constitutes propaganda because both groups divert attention away from their true agenda, capitalize on child-centric issues to attack books that appeal to moderate audiences, and target titles outside the boundaries of what constitutes young adult fiction.

Data and Methods

This chapter draws on three sets of data: ALA's book challenge data; Book-Looks rating reports and "Slick Sheets"; and Moms for Liberty's Book of Books Report.

The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom has recorded school and public library book challenge data since 1990, publishing annual summaries of trends and statistics alongside advocacy materials. With permission under a non-disclosure agreement, we obtained a copy of the raw data from the ALA, which included the year of the challenge, the state where the challenge took place, the author and title of the book in question, the library type (i.e., school or public library), the challenger's role (e.g., parent, patron, librarian), the number of titles challenged per incident, and the reason for the challenge (e.g., violence or offensive language). We requested the data dumps in two sets. One contained all challenges from 1990 to 2019, before the creation of Moms for Liberty and BookLooks, and one from 2020 to 2022, after the creation of these groups. This initial dataset contained 12,454 challenges from 1990 to 2019 and 11,179 challenges from 2020 to 2022, totaling 23,633 challenges from 1990 to 2022.

Filed as a Limited Liability Company in April 2022, BookLooks' mission is to "write and collect detailed and easy to understand book content reviews centered around objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content." It has compiled a list of titles that span across genres and age ranges and uses a five-level rating system to decide age appropriateness based on the content of the book, ranging from 0 to 5 to indicate the suitability of the content. A zero rating is considered content appropriate for all ages; it must include no hate, profanity, nudity, references to gender ideology, or drug/alcohol use but may include mild inexplicit violence. A five on the rating scale is considered "aberrant" and contains "explicit references to sexual assault/battery, bestiality, or sadomasochistic abuse." The devised rating system is based on content "that has been legally and statutorily categorized as explicit, offensive, or obscene." Using this internal system, BookLooks has reviewed and reported 496 books thus far.[16]

Moms for Liberty was founded in 2021 as a conservative activist group with a vociferous objection to COVID-19 safety precautions in Florida. After protocols weaned, the group shifted focus, targeting schools and libraries and encouraging members to run in school board elections. Since 2021, it has since grown into a sprawling powerhouse of 285 chapters in 45 states and features merchandise with their tagline, "We do NOT CO-PARENT with the GOVERNMENT." In 2023, the group was labeled by the SPLC as an extremist group, following a series of news stories highlighting the use of Adolf Hitler quotes in a chapter of the group's

newsletter.[17] While the Indiana chapter eventually removed the quote and apologized via its Facebook group, the wider organization, in association with the Republican Party, hosts media training workshops on how to prevent negative coverage, unify messaging, and reach undecided voters.[18] One such resource created by Moms for Liberty is the "Book of Books," a 111-page compilation of BookLooks reports excerpts and QR codes to the full report. Despite recent news coverage indicating a decline in support for Moms for Liberty,[19] a steady rise in book challenges throughout the United States says otherwise.

The final data set was created by cross-referencing titles provided by the ALA for the 496 titles identified by Moms for Liberty and BookLooks as containing explicit, offensive, or obscene content. The total number of challenges to these titles spanning from 1990 to 2022 was 5,753. We subsequently classified these challenges based on the same time frames as the ALA data, sorting challenges to the respective titles between 1990 and 2019 and from 2020 to 2022.

Findings

The most immediate finding was the significant rise in book challenges for titles targeted by BookLooks and Moms for Liberty. These titles encountered only 792 challenges over a 29-year period (1990 to 2019) but garnered 4,961 challenges from 2020 to 2022, an uptick of over 500% since the organizations were formed. When examining the percentages over time, titles opposed by these organizations comprised approximately 6% of all book challenges from 1990 to 2019. From 2020 to 2022, they made up 44% of all book challenges, representing a sevenfold increase.

By controlling for titles featured by Moms for Liberty and BookLooks, we were able to test the statistical significance of this finding. From 1990 to 2019, there were over 11,662 challenges to book titles not featured by these organizations, and from 2020 to 2022 there were 6,218 challenges to titles not featured by these organizations. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between titles targeted by BookLooks and Moms for Liberty versus those that were challenged by patrons but not emphasized by these groups. The observed frequencies indicate that titles featured in Moms for Liberty or BookLooks materials experienced a higher frequency of challenges compared to titles not featured by these organizations, $\chi^2(1, N = 23,633) = 4143.78$, p <0.001.

Given the important role these organizations play in galvanizing attention around certain titles, we conducted a thematic content analysis of the materials produced and circulated by BookLooks and Moms for Liberty. The data reveal a concerted effort reflective of "parental rights politics,"

evident in their use of a unified language, influential design choices, interconnected circulation of content, and an emphasis on subjects that deal with racial and sexual diversity. Our content analysis indicates that messaging created by these groups was aimed at shaping public opinion by portraying certain titles as "dangerous" to the well-being and development of America's youth.

Through content analysis of the corresponding material surrounding the titles in question, we find that both Moms for Liberty and Book-Looks focus on "protecting children" but do so under the framework of "parental rights politics," targeting titles outside of what would commonly be considered young adult fiction and targeting books that would otherwise appeal to moderate audiences. Minority groups, often central to the novel, are portrayed in a pathologizing manner. Additionally, it categorizes novels that allow teens to explore important subjects as perverse, framing them as something they need "protection from." While Moms for Liberty and BookLooks insist that they are separate organizations, they cross-promote each other's content. For example, most entries in Moms for Liberty's Book of Books include a QR code to the title's corresponding BookLooks entry.

BookLooks' *Slick Sheets* were the most blatant examples of propaganda. These documents are a condensed summary of the book report and accompany titles with a rating of 4 or 5. *Slick Sheets* feature illustrations and excerpts with high shock value, including salacious pull quotes. These quotes are aimed at misrepresenting trans identity and are similar to the targeted disinformation circulated by groups trying to curtail trans rights.[20]

While our data do not allow us to pontificate intention, design analysis strongly suggests that its purpose is to manipulate opinions or beliefs about books that center discussions of race, gender, and sexuality to foster a shared understanding that these subjects are universally bad for children. While some of their definitions are standard; for example, other definitions serve as what Ian Hanney López refers to as a *dog whistle*, a form of coded language or messaging that carries a hidden meaning for some while appearing innocuous to others.[21]

For example, the defined terms "violence" or "mild" mirror the language of the Merriam-Webster dictionary and Google AI information returns. However, their use of the phrase "gender ideology" differs significantly from the academic use of the term, which analyzes cultural variations in how people define and understand concepts like "woman" or "man." Moreover, they combine "gender ideology" with "inexplicit sexuality." However, there is no generally agreed-upon definition of "inexplicit sexuality." Taken separately, this might mean situations where a character expresses sexual feelings subtly or with nuance.

While BookLooks and Moms for Liberty define the term "gender ideology/inexplicitly sexuality" as "nondescript reference(s) to one's sexual or gender identity," their examples explicitly target LGBTQ+ rights. The language included to provide context is "Jake and Bob are gay and married to each other" or "John was born a boy but feels like a girl." This focus on homosexuality or trans-identity as problematic portrays heterosexuality as the norm and reinforces the idea that LGBTQ+ identity is not acceptable or legitimate. This definition of "gender ideology" also aligns with the definition circulated by The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank with close ties to Moms for Liberty.

By activating the phrase "gender ideology" and creating an alternative (incorrect) definition of the concept, it allows the conservative conceptualization to dominate search engine results. For example, when the phrase "gender ideology" was put into an incognito Google search on 29 March 2024, the top return was the Heritage Foundation. A query for "gender ideology" on YouTube on the same date was also dominated by conservative thinkers pathologizing trans-persons and spreading disinformation about the subject. The top video was a man wearing a blue and purple wig claiming steak is kale as an example of how gender ideology is nonsensical. The next two videos have millions of views and include titles like "Gender ideology 'pervasive' and 'toxic' influence in western culture: Matt Walsh" or "She Destroys Gender Ideology in 5 Mins."

Search returns are influenced by geographic location and are not a static representation of information retrieval over time. But analyzing the Search Engine Results Page (SERP) provides insights into how political groups can manipulate platforms to reinforce social biases. Such a finding is not exclusive to political propaganda, as the esteemed researcher Safiya Noble initially discovered. Her research shed light on the relationship between search engines and power and explained how SERP reflect and amplify harmful stereotypes and misinformation, particularly affecting historically marginalized groups.[22] Cross-promoting concepts across organizations is a powerful way to signal legitimacy and build a network of like-minded thinkers that use unified language around key terms. By deliberately repeating certain phrases, these keywords in turn extend the reach of these organizations into mainstream discourse.[23]

In addition to drawing on phrases well-established as anti-trans propaganda, BookLooks reports with a rating of three or greater contain a "content warning" that states

> You are about to access material that may contain content of ADULT nature. These files may include pictures and materials that some views

> may find offensive. If you are under the age of 18, or if such material offends you or if it is illegal for you to view these materials, please exit now.

Some of the language in this warning is reminiscent of a trigger warning, giving individuals the opportunity to prepare themselves for content that could be harmful to their emotional or physical well-being. However, some of the language implies that the excerpts selected from the books are pornographic. Specifically, the sentence that reads, "If you are under the age of 18, or if such material offends you or if it is *illegal* for you to view these materials, please exit now" (emphasis ours). Young adult fiction is not illegal for children to access, but pornography is.

Comparing literature created for a young adult audience with legislative rules around pornography is problematic for several reasons. Pornography is created to arouse an audience, and it is illegal to knowingly distribute to minors.[24] Pornography is explicitly focused on sexual acts and imagery. Young adult fiction includes a variety of genres and topics (e.g., romance, science fiction, fantasy) that often explore coming-of-age subject matter that young audiences can identify with. Novels rely on complex narratives and character development, helping young readers develop empathy and understanding for those who might face similar struggles (including themselves). Diversity in books contributes to a more culturally responsive pedagogy, helps introduce children to a variety of cultures, and sheds light on the experiences of those with physical disabilities or mental illness.[25]

Upon further examination of this language use, we found that Book-Looks often blurs the line between what constitutes defamatory content and narratives aimed at educating audiences about human rights violations. One method they employ to achieve this is by consistently using categories in their rating system and/or summaries of concerns without providing clear definitions for these categories. For example, the phrase "hate" is a central component of Level 1 and Level 2 in their "Content Based Rating." A one is for "Child Guidance," indicating that some content may not be appropriate for very young children. This rating includes "mild violence, mild/infrequent hate, mild/infrequent profanity, non-sexual nudity excluding genitalia, no references to sexual activities, no drug or alcohol use, inexplicit sexuality, inexplicit gender ideology." A two is rated "Teen Guidance," indicating that some content may not be appropriate for children under 13. Books classified as two should include "moderate violence, moderate hate, moderate profanity, non-sexual nudity involving genitalia, inexplicit sexual nudity/sexual activities, drugs or alcohol use, explicit sexuality, explicit gender ideology."

In addition to concerns of "hate" in the rating system, similar language appeared in "summary of concerns" on the Book Reports. Summaries of concerns in the book reports also included a lot of language *not included* in the rating system. For example, books categorized as one or two included phrases like "inflammatory," "alternate," "controversial or inflammatory political/cultural/or racial commentary," "gun control activism," and "pedophilia" in the summary of concerns. When we closely examined books rated 1 or 2, a clear pattern emerged, particularly concerning books that address LGBTQ+ sexuality and race-related issues.

Below is a small sample of books flagged by BookLooks as inappropriate for young audiences (Rating 1 or 2) because of reasons not clearly defined. Included are excerpts from the organizations highlighted as evidence supporting their rating.

A is for Activist: Rated 1 for "controversial cultural and political commentary." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "Environmental justice is the way!" "F is for Feminist."

Girls who Code: Rated 1 for "controversial racial commentary." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "I'm black, and growing up, I felt that a lot of those dress-up games, even when they did have a black girl, showed just one brown skin tone-there wasn't a dark-skinned girl, a light-skinned girl, different shades. And the hair was usually really straight and didn't look like mine. I have curly hair and I didn't grow up seeing that, so I didn't think it was beautiful."

Ghost Boy: Rated 2 for "inflammatory racial commentary." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "Tamir Rice, then," shouts Pop. "2014. He died in Cleveland. Another boy shot just because he's black."

Black Boy Joy: Rated 2 for "controversial social and racial commentary" and "alternate sexualities." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "If Dylan were to write a poem about his sister, Tabitha, he might mention oat milk and a plant-based diet, her pink mirror with the gold bumblebee on it, her big gold hoop earrings, her being a Beyoncé fan, her having a girlfriend who is also her best friend." "Cornell leaned forward, trying to read some – black lives matter; love is love – when Carter reminded them he was in the room."

Beyond Magenta: Rated 2 for "inexplicit sexual activities including "pedophilia," "alternative sexualities," "suicide commentary," and "hate." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating (note this particular book report has over 17 pages of contestable content): "My Facebook page says "male – so happy I'm taking T," so I'm out there. ("T" stands for testosterone, a male hormone.)" "Usually, though, I bind. A binder is a double layer of spandex that looks like a tank top. It's very tight so

when you pull it over you it compresses your chest. Binding, honestly, is very uncomfortable. Binding makes it hard to breathe." "When I was thirteen, I told my parents I was a lesbian."

Blended: Rated 1 for "controversial racial commentary" and "gun control activism." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "Because noose means, well, a noose is what they used to hang people. Lynch people. Black people." There, I said it."

Mama and Mommy and me in the Middle: Rated 1 for "alternate sexualities." No excerpts provided.

Hello Universe: Rated 1 for "controversial religious commentary." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "I'm not sure what God looks like. I don't know if there's one big God in heaven or if there's two or three or thirty, or maybe one for each person. I'm not sure if God is a boy or a girl or an old man with a white beard. But it doesn't matter. I just feel safe knowing someone's listening."

Perfect: Rated 1 because "the book contains thievery and mental illness involving OCD." No excerpts provided.

What was Stonewall? Rated 1 for "references to discrimination and hate." Sample of content cited as evidence of rating: "Lesbian activists not only had to fight homophobia – the fear and hatred of gay people – they also had to fight for their rights as women."

The examples of content categorized as "hate," "controversial," or "pedophilia" are dog whistles. By rating titles that engage with racism, sexism, homophobia, and theology as inappropriate because they deal with "hate" or "harm children," it allows BookLooks and Moms for Liberty to publicly condemn and stigmatize LGBTQ+ people or groups like Black Lives Matter without seeming overtly racist or extreme. This tactic undermines public support for people and causes by stoking fear that children may be exposed to content deemed to promote hate, genital nudity, sexual activities, or substance abuse.

Moms for Liberty and BookLooks explicitly deny supporting book banning on their websites. However, book reports and the "Book of Books" summary include specific information like the page numbers of the content deemed objectionable, descriptions of the content that is deemed objectionable, the ISBN for the book, as well as additional resources. As mentioned earlier, the books featured by these organizations focus on issues of race and LGBTQ+ identity.

This kind of information typically resembles that requested in reconsideration forms used by libraries or educational institutions to initiate a review of materials, policies, or actions. While these forms may vary, they frequently inquire about the title, the author, and the publisher, as well

as concerns about the resource. Some forms ask for sections of the book deemed objectionable, and the specific page numbers provided by Moms for Liberty and BookLooks' resources allow challengers to respond to this question.

Even books rated three or lower remain highly susceptible to challenges and face increased scrutiny following the establishment of BookLooks and Moms for Liberty. For instance, two books, *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl* and *Out of Darkness*, had never been challenged before the creation of these organizations. However, they were suddenly removed from book-shelves in 2022, citing a "lack of interest."[26]

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl is Jesse Andrew's debut novel published in 2012. It is a coming-of-age story about a high schooler named Greg Gaines who befriends a classmate named Rachel. As the two spend more time together, their bond grows, leading to a profound connection before Rachel passes from leukemia. *Out of Darkness*, written by Ashley Hope Perez in 2015, is a novel about an interracial teenage couple that explores the consequences of identity, racism, and school violence. It is based on a real historical event that took place in East Texas in 1937. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* was awarded the ALA Best Fiction Award for Young Adults (YA) in 2013, was a *New York Times* bestseller, and appeared in *TIME* magazine's 100 Best YA Books of All Time in 2021. The book was turned into a movie in 2015 and won the Grand Jury Prize and the Audi-ence Award at the Sundance Film Festival that year. *Out of Darkness* has been equally lauded. The title has won a plethora of prestigious awards, including the Michael L. Printz Award, the Tomas Rivera Mexican Ameri-can Children's Book Award for older readers, the Kirkus Best Teen Books of the Year, the School Library Journal Best Book, and Booklist's 50 Best YA Books of All Time. These accolades, as well as the subsequent movie adaptations, create doubt that school districts choosing to remove these titles are doing so because of low circulation/interest.

Both novels are rated 3 by BookLooks but portray *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* as less explicit than *Out of Darkness*. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* was coded as "inexplicit sexual nudity," "sexual activities," and "excessive/frequent profanity and derogatory terms," whereas *Out of Darkness* was categorized as having "mild" profanity and derogatory terms, but "explicit" sexual nudity and "explicit sexual activities including the sexual assault and battery of a minor."

What is not highlighted by BookLooks but is true about these books is that both stories feature interracial relationships in either the novel or the film adaptation. In the original book of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,* both Greg and Rachel are white; Rachel is Jewish. In the film adaptation, Rachel is portrayed as Black while Greg is portrayed as white. *Out of*

Darkness explores interracial relationships as one of its central themes. The romantic relationship faces severe societal opposition, and racial prejudice is a significant aspect of the novel.

Our data indicate that the propaganda being created around these titles is impacting the number of challenges these books receive. Titles rated as "minor restricted" were among the most challenged YA fiction in our dataset. Despite being intended for minors, additional restrictions create an extra layer of difficulty for teens attempting to access these books. Interestingly, books about young romance *not* listed by BookLooks include titles by Nicolas Sparks, including *A Walk to Remember* or *The Notebook*, which deal with white, heterosexual relationships. While the style and tone of these novels are different from *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, it is telling that neither title received a BookLooks review. Neither novel is meant for young audiences, so if all books were simply being reviewed for parental oversight, one would expect these to have ratings of two or higher based on the BookLooks system. This emphasis on titles that feature stories about queer or black experiences while failing to review similar content about white or straight characters indicates that novels being reviewed are selected using subjective criteria.

Given that BookLooks and Moms for Liberty focus on youth readers, many might assume that their reviews target YA literature. Dating from the 1970s, "Young Adult" is a relatively new classification within libraries, tailored to readers aged 12 to 18, that is presumed to reflect topics and issues of interest to those in this age group. The creation of this genre was not only about providing age-appropriate reading but also about fostering safe spaces for teens with diverse needs, a decision that has unsurprisingly led to clashes with parents due to its non-didactic and countercultural nature.[27]

However, BookLooks and Moms for Liberty also targeted nonfiction and literary titles inside of adult or general audience genres, as in Rupi Kaur's 2014 poetry collection *Milk and Honey*. Poetry is a genre that largely does not make a YA distinction and would generally appear in school libraries in the Dewey 800 section (Literature) and in public libraries within adult collections. Similarly, 15 titles by Colleen Hoover (e.g., *Hopeless, Without Merit, It Ends With Us*) as well as Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* all have a BookLook's report. Even though these titles might appeal to younger readers because some of the books feature stories that involve high school students, these titles are already recommended for mature audiences and published for adults.

Since having a BookLooks report, *Milk and Honey* went from two challenges from 2014 to 2019 to 33 challenges from 2020 to 2022. Books by Colleen Hoover had never been challenged, but since 2020 they are starting to receive nominations for removal from several libraries throughout

the United States. Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* (rated 4 by BookLooks) was challenged eight times from the date of publication (2007) through 2019, but it faced 28 challenges from 2020 to 2022, a 250% increase.

Other books written for mature/adult audiences include the comic novel *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, which was published in 2018. It depicts the semi-autobiographical journey of a Mexican American character facing hardships since childhood. Before the formation of Moms for Liberty and BookLooks, *Lawn Boy* did not encounter any book challenges. Since 2020, the book has been challenged 120. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison received 57 challenges since its 1970 publication through 2019. From 2020 to 2023, that number nearly doubled to 97 challenges. Our data suggest that even books not directly featured by these organizations impact the other titles written by the authors. For example, ALA data indicates an uptick in challenges to other novels by Toni Morrison since the creation of these groups in 2020. For example, *Beloved* was challenged 66 times up until 2019 but received the same number of challenges in just two years and routinely discussed at school board meetings.[28]

These books are already classified as adult in the American library system, making these organizations' targeting of books not meant for young adult readers a calculated redundancy. Undermining established systems is not only a tactic of propaganda but also an essential action in "parental rights politics" to disrupt the established standard and make a claim for a campaign that solely recognizes them as the rightful voice for all parents. It also is a revolving door back to selectivity and anonymity as to which book gets reviewed and which rating it receives. For instance, the adult book *Flowers in the Attic* by V.C. Andrews received a "2" rating score, while the rest of these books received a 3 and above. *The Bluest Eye* is flagged for having inflammatory racial and religious commentary, profanity, and sexual activities, yet the classic *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou deals with similar content and is not currently rated by BookLooks. These data suggest that such an arbitrary assessment of books already classified as adult fiction is aligned with a broader effort to remove and restrict adults' access to meaningful literature.

However, many of the books targeted are meant for young readers grappling with their own life circumstances or eager to explore a world outside their own imagination. We argue that these classic works are essential reading and that providing young readers with enlightening stories about historic events, figures, and experiences that they may not learn about in their schools is essential for creating well-rounded adolescents. The selectivity according to which books get targeted further complicates the ramifications of BookLooks and Moms for Liberty in marking books as hazardous because they bring into question the political ideologies of race, sexuality,

power, and history, as seen with *The Bluest Eye*, *Nineteen Minutes, Lawn Boy,* and *Beyond Agenda.*

Conclusion

The ALA's "The Freedom to Read Statement" states that those who work to limit, remove, or censor access to reading materials are denying a fundamental premise of democracy.[29] The Supreme Court and other courts have supported this interpretation, noting that the First Amendment should protect against government attempts to censor books, magazines, or the news and that children also enjoy some of these protections. Children do not simply "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression" once they enter school property or a public library. Courts around our nation have interpreted this protection to include access to information beyond the classroom.

Yet this chapter highlights the significant rise in book challenges and its relationship to two organizations – BookLooks and Moms for Liberty. We argue that the propaganda circulated by these groups is an effective mechanism for spreading conservative ideology and impacting school board and state elections. Our Chi-square analysis of the proportion of titles challenged by the public over a 32-year period reveals that titles featured by these organizations have faced increased scrutiny since their inception, with a surge of over 500% in just two years. At the same time, our thematic content analysis shows a concerted effort aimed at shaping public opinion about these titles. It both pathologizes minoritized groups and frames novels exploring important subjects as perverse.

We classify the content produced by these organizations as propaganda, designed to activate "parental rights politics." The subjective criteria used to select novels for review, particularly their emphasis on categorizing novels about queer or Black experiences as "dangerous for children," further highlights the strategic nature of their assessments. The deliberate repetition of certain keywords and phrases across both organizations also serves as a form of coded propaganda. By activating "dog whistles," it allows organizations like Moms for Liberty and BookLooks to spread hidden meanings to those who ascribe to their political beliefs while increasing their public appeal.

Thus, despite both organizations trying to distance themselves from the act of book banning, our analysis reveals otherwise. The propaganda efforts of BookLooks and Moms for Liberty have been clearly effective, as evidenced by the most challenged young adult fiction since their inception. Regrettably, many of the materials singled out by these groups are already scarce in libraries. This lack of representation is indicative of the

larger publishing industry, which tends to prioritize mainstream tastes and biases. In his book "Under the Cover," Clayton Childress highlights how this industry focus restricts opportunities for authors from marginalized backgrounds to share their experiences.[30] Consequently, the targeting of precarious titles compounds this inequality, further limiting the diversity of materials available in libraries.

While some might interpret the fact that most challenges do not result in a title being removed from the shelves, we argue that it points to the larger goals of organizations like BookLooks and Moms for Liberty. The statistical significance of our findings indicates that the messaging spread by these groups results in increased challenges directed toward the titles featured in their propaganda. More challenges create extra administrative burdens for schools and public libraries already underfunded by the state and weaken librarian control over their collections. By selectively highlighting misleading excerpts, *Slick Sheets* promotes a unified ideology about books on these topics to influence public perception and undermine public education. It sows distrust in the education system, diminishing the tax revenue that supports public schools should parents opt to enroll their children in charter or private schools as a result.[31] The heightened attention to book banning has led to librarians experiencing harassment, job loss, defamation, and potential prison time.[32] Given Moms for Liberty's previous involvement in banning mask mandates at public schools, we argue that this organization's broader goal is to divert resources away from public education and information.[33]

In light of these findings, it is imperative that more research critically examine how the tactics employed by BookLooks and Moms for Liberty cohere with a propaganda framework. It is also imperative that it consider how to ensure the access of future generations to public schools and public libraries. If the ongoing trends associated with these organizations persist and their efforts toward influencing content control continue unchecked, we may witness a substantial purging of literature reminiscent of the red scare era of McCarthyism. Such a scenario would diminish diversity of representation and restrict the availability of safe spaces for the expression of youths' experiences across America.

Notes

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