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Propaganda



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Propaganda has been called “*the* defining political communication topic of our time” (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 145) alongside associated phenomena of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. Digital media environments have enabled new forms of persuasion and manipulation, including through AI-generated content, micro-targeted advertising, and networks of fake profiles on social media. This has led to debates and concerns about a potential new era of “post-truth politics” (Bjola, 2018, p. 305). As scholars remind us, however, propaganda has a long and complex history, with technological developments throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—from radio to the internet—being appropriated for propaganda (La Cour, 2020). Accordingly, it is important to avoid both ahistoricism and technological determinism when assessing propaganda and its implications.

What Is Propaganda?

A foundational challenge of propaganda research is how to define and meaningfully operationalize

the term. As Brown (2018, p. 196) notes: “Like many political buzzwords, such as populism, demagoguery, and ideology, propaganda is notoriously difficult to define.” The conceptual slipperiness of “propaganda” derives in large part from its mundane function as a means of accusation, i.e., “something that political actors would never admit to using themselves but might accuse their opponents of doing” (Farkas & Schou, 2023, p. 21). Due to such accusatory connotations, operationalizing “propaganda” in research often involves becoming implicated in struggles over who is designated as “good” or “bad” actors in public discourse. As Chernobrov and Briant (2022) note, the term public diplomacy historically “took off when the United States sought to replace the term ‘propaganda’ for describing its foreign population influence, to distinguish US propaganda activities from those used in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union” (p. 394).

In research, a longstanding definitional split pertains to whether propaganda only encompasses lies and deception, or whether it includes all forms of strategic persuasion. Adopting the former view, Brown (2018) defines propaganda as “the deliberate communication of faulty information” (p. 198), while Huang (2018) defines government propaganda as “inaccurate, exaggerated, or fabricated information or rhetoric that favors the regime or disfavors its antagonists” (p. 1035). These definitions overlap strongly with the concept of “disinformation,” which some researchers use synonymously (Tolz & Hutchings, 2023).

Adopting a broader view, Lu and Pan (2021) define political propaganda as “messages aimed at shaping political preferences, attitudes, opinions, and behavior of the public” (p. 24). From this perspective, all forms of strategic persuasion, whether they derive from a political party, think tank, government, or company, could be considered propaganda. Propaganda is thus always aimed at persuasion, but not necessarily through deception. This conception of propaganda has strong overlaps with terms such as strategic communication, public relations, advertising, public diplomacy, and soft power (Bui, 2017; Golovchenko et al., 2020; Rawnsley, 2015).

Both narrow and broad definitions have trade-offs. Narrow conceptions might miss how large-scale influence campaigns often use deception in close connection to other means of persuasion (Lu & Pan, 2021). Furthermore, the level of deceptiveness can be difficult to operationalize in practice. Broad conceptions, “as spin, not lies” (Carter & Carter, 2021, p. 920), risk encompassing nearly all public-facing communication from political, corporate, or governmental actors, an approach that often misaligns with popular understandings.

Source-Based Typologies

Across both narrow and broad definitions, propaganda involves agenda-setting, framing, and amplification of strategically desirable narratives, often through intermediaries such as news media, political actors, and, increasingly, social media influencers. To study this, scholars distinguish between different source- and message-based types of propaganda.

A long-standing typology differentiates between white, gray, and black propaganda based on source attribution (Golovchenko et al., 2020). *White propaganda* refers to propaganda which has a clearly discernible source, *gray propaganda* refers to that which appears to be without a source, and *black propaganda* refers to that which is deliberately attributed to a false source, often within a target group. Due to their unfortunate racial connotations, alternative labels have

been proposed such as *identifiable*, *obfuscated*, and *impersonated* propaganda (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020).

In digital media landscapes, discerning and tracing sources has become increasingly difficult (La Cour, 2020). Since information travels across private, semi-public, and public many-to-many networks, planting obfuscated (gray) and impersonated (black) propaganda comes with relatively low attribution risk beyond platform enforcement. Consequently, state-sponsored digital propaganda campaigns combine identifiable, obfuscated, and impersonated propaganda in attempts to shape public sentiments, for example, on domestic protests or international conflicts. A widely documented case is the Russian state’s use of identifiable pro-government news outlets in multiple languages, such as RT and Sputnik, in combination with networks of obfuscated and impersonated social media accounts (Crisley et al., 2022; Fisher, 2020; Golovchenko et al., 2020).

Message-Based Typologies

A message-based distinction in propaganda research is that of *hard* versus *soft* propaganda, encompassing respectively heavy-handed messages versus more subtle forms of persuasion (Huang, 2018; Mattingly & Yao, 2022). Like the concept of propaganda itself, operationalizing this distinction is challenging in practice, as what might seem subtle in one socio-cultural or historical context could come off as heavy-handed in others. That said, scholars heuristically use these concepts to distinguish, for example, state propaganda in political speeches from propaganda in pop cultural artifacts such as “movies, documentaries, soap operas, artistic performances, and viral social media content” (Mattingly & Yao, 2022, p. 1570).

Challenges and Gaps in the Field

Studying propaganda comes with a range of methodological challenges. First, discerning the exact aims of propaganda can be difficult, especially since campaigns often disseminate a wide array of

content to mobilize support, some of which might be unrelated to overall goals (Golovchenko et al., 2020; Lu & Pan, 2021). Second, assessing the effects of propaganda is notoriously challenging, as propaganda campaigns often tap into existing socio-cultural sentiments (Andersen & Sandberg, 2020), take place over multiple years (Carter & Carter, 2021), and work in tandem with other means of information control such as censorship and surveillance (Kuang, 2018; Golovchenko, 2022). Moreover, the relationship between exposure to propaganda and attitude change is highly complex (Crilley et al., 2022; Chernobrov & Briant, 2022). Third, contemporary media landscapes—in which messages travel fast and seamlessly between traditional media (radio, TV, film) and digital platforms (streaming, podcasts, social media)—make it difficult to study the scale and reach of propaganda (Frischlich et al., 2019; Klimeš & Marinelli, 2018). Fourth, especially in the realm of international relations, propaganda campaigns are often highly classified and thus difficult to study in their own historical period.

Despite persistent challenges, studying propaganda remains an important scholarly endeavor. Concepts and theories from twentieth-century research remain analytically useful, not least for avoiding presentism and technological determinism. At the same time, contemporary hybrid media systems raise new identification and attribution challenges that require both theoretical and methodological innovation. In future studies, existing quantitative approaches could fruitfully be supplemented with further qualitative research “targeting the political contexts in which these [propaganda] narratives are produced and the historical and cultural legacies with which they engage” (Tolz & Hutchings, 2023, p. 349).

Competing Interest Declaration The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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