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MANUFACTURING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Big Lies, Alternative Facts, and Controlled Language

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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

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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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