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[Propaganda in a Fake News World](#)



Propaganda as an instrument of control over public moods – both inside and outside one’s own nation – has been known since antiquity. Propaganda is not necessarily deception, and not even always false. It has a different mission: to affect the target audience in order to make it change its opinion about something. Advertising, a commercial form of propaganda, is constantly making us discover new desires, and satisfy them by purchasing the products it offers. Political propaganda makes us vote for certain candidates or parties. International propaganda sways our opinions about other countries and nations, or their governments’ policies.

The basic difference between propaganda and other types of fake news is that it is 100% deliberate media practice. Even disinformation could be sincere: The person transmitting it may actually believe the lie and be completely genuine when distributing it. Manipulations of context can – sometimes – be an outcome of genuine misconceptions; for example, proponents of von Mises’s ideas promote “the gold standard” not because they want to bankrupt their audiences, but because, perhaps, that is what their calculations are telling them might just work. However, both are in reality constantly engaged in propagating their views, fully aware that they are deliberately trying to change their readers’ attitudes towards what they see as objective reality. Part of the audience finds in those messages something it wants to believe and follow. If that group becomes statistically significant, reality itself changes too.

Communications science has been dealing with propaganda for almost 100 years – since the First World War, when mass media became an effective component of military action for the first time. It is interesting that the propagandists acted first, and only later tried to understand what they had done with public consciousness. The core research in this field was done by the same people who were actively “littering” the brains of their own people, as well as their enemies, in 1914-1918. Walter Lippmann, the founding father of journalism as a science, worked in the Committee on Public Information, a Wilson administration propagandist institution that was responsible for “selling” the war in Europe to Americans. His fellow committee member Edward Bernays created the theory of public relations (along with propaganda). Lord Arthur Ponsonby, a key British researcher of propaganda methods and techniques and the author of the fundamental work *Falsehood in War-Time* (1928), was not involved in propaganda directly, but observed the actions of the British mass media and the government from a close vantage point: Parliament.

The methods and tools of propaganda were an important (if not the most important) instrument of Communist parties in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, especially the Bolsheviks and their successors in the Soviet Union. They grasped the ability of mass information to change public opinion and collective consciousness earlier than the fascists did. Similar to other totalitarian regimes, communist Russia made propaganda a tool to control society, an indoctrination machine. Ideas and means conceived during the two world wars have produced ways to manipulate peaceful societies; with frightening inevitability, such societies have turned into militaristic “zombies”, ready to follow the orders of the Fuhrer or the Politburo and join the “class struggle” or a “race war.”

The propagandistic Axis powers who were defeated in 1945 provided Western researchers plenty of material to study the use of propaganda as a weapon. During the Cold War, which started soon thereafter, the techniques used by the Nazis and their former allies, the Communists, were blended together. In 1950-1980s,

Frankfurt School philosophers and sociologists in Germany (Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas), French Structuralists and Post-structuralists (Ronald Barthes, Jacques Ellul, Louis Althusser, Jean Baudrillard, Régis Debray) and Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben managed to explain the nature of aggressive propaganda and the techniques that make it efficient. At the same time, constructivist philosophers, Karl Popper and Karl Jaspers in particular, were actively working on “vaccinating” European democracies against the totalitarian virus, including by use of the most dangerous medium of all - television.

When the communist system fell in Europe in 1989-1991, it looked as though the liberals’ ideal peace had finally arrived, in which there was no systemic opponent - no totalitarian egalitarian ideology based on propaganda and deception. It seemed that the propaganda era was over: The former enemy, socialist countries including Russia, started avidly absorbing Western communication methods, developing an aversion to censorship and ideology. However, propaganda is not exclusively a weapon of totalitarian regimes. It is practiced, albeit subject to many limitations and clauses, by all countries, even the most democratic.

As was already mentioned, propaganda is the deliberate manipulation of information in order to influence society’s behaviour. Coming back to [political] life to become a tool of real politics is also a manipulation; it just aims at the narrow social group known as “political leaders”. One way or another, propaganda lived through the lean years of the “noughties”, to rise like a phoenix from the ashes in the world of the Internet and social media.

The Russians did it

After November 8, 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, the power of information manipulation (propaganda) started being discussed not merely with excitement, but in a frenzy. Memoirs about active measures by Russian intelligence (for example, a story fake about the origins of AIDS) were dug up from the dusty annals of Cold War history, and “Operation Trump” was promptly equated with “Operation Infection”. Russian spies, real and invented, flooded Washington; an army of trolls led by the evil Putin attacked the pristine consciousness of American racists from the Southern states and paved the way for Trump’s victory.

Once again, propaganda as a tool became the centre of attention - this time, significantly amplified by the problem of little understood and lightly controlled social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter.

Even considering its level of aggression, and even in a situation of unlimited digital distribution, propaganda follows the rules and patterns of media influence identified by scientists. Although people are ready to be deceived, to achieve a discernible effect - not to mention a decisive one - messages should be frequent, and the information should be socially relevant. The Agenda-setting theory (McCombs et al, 1994) provided quantitative proof that for a politically significant effect, the audience must be subjected to long-term and frequent exposure. The cultivation theory, which describes the impact on the audience of messages indirectly encoded into popular TV shows, also yields no examples of a sudden, immediate effect on the audience. Information priming - a harsh manipulative mechanism, partially resembling a provocative interrogation - demands (as we can see from the example of Russian viewers) a monopoly on information and the absence of alternative information channels, but, according to research, the priming effect disappears very quickly when the structure or tone of communication changes.

Although the hypothesis of a Russian influence campaign that could alter an election outcome in the US sounds appealing, it comes up short when tested using the main theoretical tools, and, frankly, simple common sense. To some extent, Russian agents (only a minority of whom were real secret agents) undoubtedly attempted to use “information weapons” to “interfere” in the 2016 US election process, as well as the French and German elections in 2017. Identification and objectification of this “weapon” have already been completed, and, although it may take a while, an antidote will be developed. The problem of fake news in 2016-2017 is just another wave of the crisis of trust in mass media and authorities, which are similar in nature and happen whenever several criteria are met: polarisation of domestic and foreign policies, a technological leap in the field of media communications and a slow reaction to change by social mechanisms.

Internal polarisation is especially noticeable in countries like the USA (where two political forces are continuously changing places), but other regimes are also prone to it to some extent. Society splits on the

basis of attitudes toward the existing status quo: one group finds the current state of affairs agreeable and wants slow, natural changes, while the rest are dissatisfied and insist on the need for quick, radical action. Populist leaders (including Trump, and even Putin) are capable of fuelling such polarisation, but even their malevolent intentions are not omnipotent: History shows that social, economic and military crises are radically reducing polarisation and helping societies become immune to this disease.

External polarisation, meanwhile, is a more of a made-up effect than a reality. The modern world is not divided into ideological alliances; unions are pragmatic. The myth of the external polarisation of the world is used in domestic policies as a bogeyman, or a symbol of a threat.

A technological leap in media communications has been going on for 20 years already; during this time practically all aspects of the information and entertainment businesses have undergone changes, with the emergence not only of new media technologies (the Internet, mobile devices, social networks) and new forms of distribution (from Netflix to push notifications), but also of radically new forms of media organisation. This constant wave of innovation is destroying the “old media” and creating “new media”, which it quickly renders outdated. Technological challenges often simply fail to emerge; progress rushes past, paying no attention to the problems and “time bombs” it leaves on the way. Certainly, the exciting anonymity and total freedom of Internet communications, romantically built nearly into the very design of TCP/IP protocols, is today reaping the whirlwind of botnets and cyber accounts, engaged in less than pleasant activities. Universal access to programming tools and relatively open access to the codes of key systems create many possibilities for hackers. People’s dependence on computer control systems increases the threat of cyber-terrorism.

The slow (delayed) social response to today’s challenges is an important component of our crisis. The welfare states built in the second half of the 20th century put some unsolved (or unsolvable) social conflicts under a long-term anaesthetic. Global economic growth, which continued even despite the crises of 1998-2000 and 2007-2009, was an additional “painkiller” – despite the stagnation of the middle class in most developed countries, and the growth of inequality, on the whole, societies are “satisfied” with the performance of their governments. However, the extended anaesthesia does not change the fact that Western societies (and Russia’s as well, by the way) are riven by contradictions. As the most numerous generation (the baby boomers) began ageing and their retirement years grew longer (due to growing life expectancy), it turned out that many 60- or 70-year-olds were ready to tolerate the pain of social frustrations only when they were kept busy. This effect was particularly noticeable during the 2016 US election campaign; Trump is the president of disgruntled baby-boomers, while Barack Obama, a representative of the next generation, not only failed to decrease the level of discontent in society, but on the contrary, he heated it up.

The slow social response is like an overheated kettle, capable of whistling as it releases steam, but chaos, panic of the elites and many errors can easily appear in this process.

To the objective reasons behind the fake news crisis, we obviously also need to add the subjective. There are many different interests in the modern world – state, private, corporate, institutional. To achieve their goals, some representatives of these interests could (and, as we know, actually did) use natural problems. Plunging Russian audiences into the muck of scandal helps the Kremlin stay in power. Donald Trump became president thanks to his effective exploitation of the problems of public trust in the US. The European right-wing – such as the Alternative for Germany and Italian radicals – gained parliamentary strength. Vladimir Putin, engrossed in 3D geo-political chess, is promoting illusory Russian “national interests”.

The main threats of the fake news crisis are definitely linked to the structures of trust discussed in the [first part of this review](#). Societies, as well as the international community, will sooner or later create new, more advanced and more stable structures. They will not necessarily need to be similar to media institutions familiar to us (press, television, journalism as such) or traditional diplomacy.

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