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REWIRE PROPROPAGANDA

Propaganda, misinformation, and populism in the digital age

Sarah Oates

Introduction

This chapter aims to synthesise a working definition of propaganda in the digital age. The term propaganda often evokes a simplistic and overt attempt to persuade, such as the glorification of the Soviet worker on posters or an image of the American spokesman ‘Uncle Sam’ marketing bonds in World War II. While this chapter addresses the classic definition of propaganda, it also expands the definition into a concept of ‘rewired propaganda’ that demonstrates the utility of the term in understanding the interplay of misinformation and populism in the digital age. In particular, an awareness of the classic concept of propaganda allows us to see how the democratising effect of online information to create informed citizens is outmatched by the internet’s ability to leverage misinformation in the service of populist propaganda. In other words, propaganda can now ‘hide in plain sight’ as it is so difficult to disentangle from the broad range of information in the digital sphere. At the same time, those who adhere to principles of free speech and fairness are at a significant disadvantage both domestically and internationally in the sphere of rewired propaganda that lends itself more to the success of populist movements than traditional party politics.

Propaganda and media models

The classic definition of propaganda is ‘the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person’, as well as ‘ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause’ (Merriam-Webster online dictionary www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda). The key element that is often overlooked in these definitions is that propaganda is not, in and of itself, a negative communication tool. Rather, the term is defined by its ends rather than its means: you do not have to tell falsehoods in order to propagandise nor do you have to ‘dupe’ or fool people. This is reflected in the way that Russians, for example, have traditionally labelled propaganda as either ‘white’ or ‘black’. Propaganda can attempt to persuade through positive messaging, or it can attack and undermine through lies, half-truths, rumour, innuendo, or even fakery. Certainly, people may be propagandised into actions that do not reflect their core beliefs, but often people embrace propaganda that echoes their own values and desires.
That being said, propaganda has a justifiably negative connation in the contemporary media sphere that reflects a deep and enduring debate about the role of media in society in general. The media is supposed to function as the ‘fourth estate’ in the United States, a further balance against excess of power by the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of the government. More broadly, freedom of the press allows for a constant watchdog on powerful elites, meaning that the press work in the service of the citizens, telling ‘truth to power’. While the notion of an objective media is more an aspiration than a reality (Hearns-Branaman 2014), the notion of the media as the critical ‘voice of the people’ is the central organising ideal for journalists in democracies, in the same way that the ‘first do no harm’ principle in the Hippocratic oath is the touchstone of the medical profession.

Siebert et al. (1956) address the operationalisation of media freedom in their classic work about models of the press, highlighting the varying roles that the media is expected to play in different societies by analysing how the media functions in different countries. They developed a libertarian (or commercial) model of the media from the United States system, in which the press meet consumer demand for information in a commercialised setting with little interference from the state. From the United Kingdom, Siebert et al. articulated the social-responsibility model of the media, which suggests that media function as arbiters of political norms and respect state needs more closely than in the libertarian model. Thus, one could find better justification for the persuasive elements of propaganda more clearly in the social-responsibility model than in the libertarian model. However, as Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue, the libertarian media system is particularly vulnerable to manipulation by commercial interests.

For authoritarian regimes, Siebert et al. suggested that the concepts of media and propaganda are fused. In the case of the ‘Soviet Communist’ model, Siebert et al. found that the media’s primary purpose in the former Soviet Union was to propagandise the citizens about ideals of communism. Practically, this also took the form of censoring a great deal of information on international and domestic opposition to communism. In their fourth and final model from their 1956 volume, Siebert et al. suggested that the authoritarian model placed the press in the role of promoter of a dictator and his oligarchic circle. Again, in practice, this meant a great deal of censorship and control of the mass media.

Thus, propaganda would have been a normal and expected element of non-free media systems. Overt propaganda, except during wartime, was much less acceptable in the libertarian and social-responsibility systems of the media in the twentieth century.¹ This is what has made the concurrent rise of online communication, populism, and misinformation particularly jarring in the US media sphere. The following sections will discuss two case studies about this synergistic relationship in both a domestic and global setting: the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 and ongoing Russian propaganda delivered via the US media system.

**Trump: populism’s perfect storm**

Trump ran a campaign almost devoid of traditional policy statements or even a definable political ideology. A study of campaign messages found that Trump did not post clear issue statements on his website during the critical period of the 2016 primary campaign, although his main Democratic contender, Hillary Clinton, did (Oates and Moe, 2017, p. 213). The Oates and Moe study also found that Trump rarely tweeted specifically about policy, although he and his supporters tweeted in large volume about non-policy-specific ideas that could be considered populism, especially around Trump’s vow to ‘build a wall’ to control immigration. It was clear from both the nature of Trump’s tweets and those who tweeted about the candidate that his campaign followed the central tenet of populism as ‘a political approach that strives to appeal to
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ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups’ (www.lexico.com/en/definition/populism).

It's important here to note that Trump's campaign went beyond merely striving to appeal to people on a populist issue, in that Trump also routinely used misinformation in his campaign. For example, despite extensive evidence to the contrary, he characterised immigrants as lawless individuals who were stealing jobs from American citizens. Paradoxically, his tactics gave him an unprecedented amount of media coverage as the US media not only reported the misinformation but also attempted to correct it (Patterson 2016). Clinton, pursuing a policy-based rather than a populist campaign, struggled to gain the same attention as Trump. Perversely, her perceived misdeeds were amplified, even when evidence later suggested that her leaked emails in the final moments of the campaign came from foreign adversaries (Patterson 2016; Jamieson 2018). By running a populist campaign with a misinformation playbook, Trump garnered far more coverage and less serious criticism than Clinton.

There are two elements here that suggest Trump's victory could rewrite the rules of US campaigns in terms of how candidates fight for office and how their messages are amplified in the traditional and social media. In the first place, can a rational, policy-based candidate have the same appeal as a populist candidate who tailors his message to what an audience would like to hear (rather than suggesting realistic policies)? The second issue is that both traditional and social media engaged more with the misinformation than with a rational discussion of policies and respect for facts. It is not surprising that this was the issue on social media, where a lack of moderation as well as design that favours sensation over information have been well documented by analysts such as Vaidhyanathan (2018).

The libertarian media system was not effective at averting an election campaign from being overwhelmed by a propaganda campaign rife with misinformation in 2020 in the United States. The libertarian media system dictates that media should provide the consumers with the news they will find most interesting and engaging. It is a system that relies heavily on the ability of the citizen, rather than the journalists, to filter news. The US media system failed particularly to stem populism overwhelming an informed campaign and electorate on two major fronts. First, traditional journalists did not provide equal coverage to the two candidates. According to Patterson, the media consistently gave Trump both more coverage and less criticism than Clinton. At the same time, by the 2016 election, those who were inclined to support Trump’s populism over more traditional policymaking and ideology were likely to be alienated from traditional, fact-based journalism. According to a study by Benkler et al. (2018), a right-wing media bubble was firmly established by the 2016 elections. Interestingly, while Clinton supporters still consumed news across a range of media sites, Trump supporters were increasingly isolated in an echo chamber anchored by news sites such as Fox News, Infowars, and Breitbart. Many of the news sites used by Trump supporters were likely to combine support for Trump with misinformation about his opponents.

This far-right alternative sphere was further isolated and strengthened by social media information algorithms, which encourage users to consume like-minded media content. Benkler et al. argue that information communication technology needs to be understood both within the context of political institutions and through change over time. By analysing the linkages between online news sources and Twitter, they found that Trump supporters isolated themselves within self-reinforcing information bubbles and rejected traditional journalistic content characterised by objectivity, lack of bias, truthfulness, and verification. Benkler et al. see this as the culmination of decades of media changes and political development in the Republican Party, accelerated by the affordances of the online sphere. Their analysis is useful evidence of the need to consider the role of information communication technology within political contexts. If the
changes in the media environment wrought by technology had a set effect on information consumption, we would expect the changes to be essentially the same across both the right and the left. However, as Benkler et al. demonstrate, populism only became entrenched and powerful on the right in the United States.

Although Trump’s election based on misinformation-fuelled propaganda may have appeared to change campaign norms in the United States, there are important caveats. Trump actually lost the popular vote in 2016, winning because his pattern of support gave him the majority of Electoral College votes. In addition, there were several factors aside from propaganda that significantly helped Trump to victory. First, Clinton was surprisingly unpopular as a grudging compromise candidate who had endured a grueling primary battle with the more liberal and charismatic Senator Bernie Sanders. Her long history as first lady and secretary of state left opponents – and even possible supporters – with plenty of complaints about perceived or real failures of personality or character. At the same time, Trump’s campaign was more aggressive at exploiting the features of social media that could target undecided voters in key states. Finally, given that most of the media and many pundits did not seriously believe that Trump could win, particularly given his racist and sexist comments as well as his complete lack of political experience, many unreliant Democrats didn’t bother to vote.

Yet overall, there was a significant underestimation of the power of Trump’s combination of populism and misinformation to inspire voters to ‘Make American Great Again’. Trump’s victory is a compelling example of how populism and misinformation can craft an intoxicating form of ‘rewired’ propaganda. After 2016, the question is whether this has permanently altered the terms of engagement for political campaigning in the United States. Given the attraction of desire over reason in Trump’s campaign, does this signal the end of policy-based campaigning in the United States and the start of an era of electoral propaganda?

Russia and digital disinformation

As noted earlier, media systems used to parallel national borders closely, a point underlined by Siebert et al. and more recent studies of the way in which media systems reflect national political systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004). While there were extensive attempts at foreign propaganda throughout the twentieth century, they were of limited reach and success due to the ability of national systems to control their key information outlets. The online sphere offers a way for governments to produce and distribute foreign propaganda far more effectively. The twin forces of populism and misinformation, delivered through a US system made vulnerable to populist propaganda through the 2016 elections, give an unprecedented opportunity for foreign media manipulation.

Russia has received a great deal of attention for its propaganda campaign in the 2016 US elections, particularly after congressional investigations and hearings revealed the nature and extent of the campaigns. Although the campaign was initially dismissed as relatively small, later evidence suggested that the Russians had succeeded in disseminating a fairly wide range of content in the 2016 election (Jamieson 2018). The material created and disseminated on social media by the Internet Research Agency in Russia was designed to look like it was produced by Americans. The goal of the content was to spark political action, in particular to organise rallies and protests. This was met with very limited success (Jamieson 2018), although the Russians identified and worked to motivate groups on both sides of the political spectrum through wedge issues such as immigration, gay rights, et cetera.

As Jamieson acknowledges in her detailed study of the 2016 Russian disinformation campaign, it is impossible to establish with any precision the effect of the messaging. In part, this
is due to the fact that the Russian content aimed at the right was difficult to disentangle from Trump’s campaign messages. It is never possible to gauge the effect of a particular ad, although Jamieson and others have noted that Trump’s higher spending on late television ads, his more tactical approach to social media deployment, and his efforts in swing states were important.

What is significant about Russian propaganda in the 2016 US elections is that it demonstrated the realm of possibilities for manipulation for authoritarian states in democratic media systems. This gives an asymmetric advantage to non-free states in terms of propaganda and misinformation. As social media companies continued to (slowly) wrestle with the problem, the extension of the libertarian principles into the online sphere – freedom of speech as paramount, virtually no regulation of content – has left open a clear channel for propaganda from foreign states. At the same time, democracies have a much harder time penetrating the more closed online or traditional media systems in non-free states.

Rewired propaganda

These two case studies of Trump’s election and the Russian interference in 2016 lead to a consideration of ‘rewired’ propaganda. Propaganda has been a part of society and media systems for a long time. Yet propaganda has been bounded in US elections by the history and tradition of political campaigning. As the two political parties control the nomination system, candidates are expected to generate ideologies and policies that resonate with the core party constituencies. The Republican Party has experienced significant changes in the past decade, in particular as moderates and conservatives have pulled further apart. Trump could be considered the fruition of a long shift away from policy-based or even ideological argument to populism in the United States, which is a departure from the form and calculus of party politics. At the same time, as Benkler et al. point out, the US media system has become notably more polarised, with a separate right-wing echo system that preferences propaganda over information.

Thus, the political system in the United States has demonstrated that populism can win the biggest election of them all, albeit in a contest with a surprisingly untraditional contender. However, it should be noted that Trump had an enormous, unprecedented media advantage. His constant stream of misinformation and populist messages led to more, rather than less, uncritical coverage than was given to his more traditional opponent (Patterson 2016). Nor were the traditional media connected with all of the American electorate. The media sphere itself was ‘rewired’ into two separate sectors (Benkler et al. 2018): Clinton supporters consumed a range of more fact-based media while many Trump supporters preferred content that leaned more towards propaganda than news. This was then reinforced by social media patterns of consuming information. In this sense, the media system itself is ‘rewired’ in that the traditional bastions of political influence – the parties and the mass media – are essentially sidelined for many in the digital world.

In earlier work, I defined rewired propaganda in Russia as “a commitment to disinformation and manipulation, when coupled with the affordances of the new digital age, give particular advantages to a repressive regime that can proactively shape the media narrative” (Oates 2016, p. 399). In other words, we needed to move beyond the ‘Soviet Communist’ (Siebert et al. 1956) concept of censorship and heavy-handed state manipulation to understand that an attractive narrative that resonated with citizens was a far more effective means of persuasion in the contemporary media sphere. Often – indeed, almost inevitably – one will need misinformation or even disinformation to maintain a plausible propaganda narrative. An additional important element of the notion of ‘rewired’ propaganda, beyond a discussion of the transition from Soviet to Russian propaganda, is that the media system has shifted globally. It has moved from a
top-down model in which information was controlled and preferred by key media outlets to a far more audience-driven and algorithmic model in which stories circulate among networks. The concept of ‘rewired propaganda’ is suggested as way of understanding a communicative method that leverages misinformation, campaign tactics, and the way both traditional and social media functioned in the 2016 US elections. When populism replaces party-based politics rooted in ideology and articulated policies, rewired propaganda becomes as powerful in democracies as it has been in non-free states such as Russia.

At the same time that there are comparisons of systems in Russia and the United States in 2016 in terms of populist propaganda, there is the specific issue of Russian propaganda in the 2016 US elections. Historically, effective propaganda has tended to be bonded within state systems and certainly within national media systems. While there were many well-documented attempts at foreign influence, the opportunity for international mass propaganda was limited by several factors. Notably, although foreign actors could either run open propaganda outlets or attempt to subvert existing media outlets or journalists, it remained a complex and cumbersome task. For example, in one well-documented case of classic propaganda, the Soviet Union planted a story in an Indian newspaper that AIDS had been developed in an American laboratory (Boghardt 2009). By then using that story as a source, the Soviet media repeated and amplified the claim. However, it took an immense effort and years to give the story any traction at all.

In 2016, foreign interference rode a populist wave in a media environment that was ripe for manipulation. Especially when isolated from competing information in the ring-wing information sphere in the United States, populist messages flourished, given that citizens have little trust in sources that do not resonate with their worldview. This raises many complex questions about media audiences: namely, is the system design or the individual citizen ultimately responsible for consuming populist misinformation rather than democratic knowledge? Much of the popularity of Trump stems from his ability to identify unmet grievances of American citizens, resentments that are often based in grim economic realities. Yet how long will citizens continue to blame Democrats, rather than deeper and broader economic forces, for their particular challenges? To what extent are a significant segment of Americans accepting of the racism and sexism as voiced by their president? A populist president is new in the United States and currently dealing with one of the most significant global challenges to health and the economy to date. This will provide a significant challenge to a populist ruler as citizens are much more demanding of effective action in a crisis.

Rewired propaganda in the digital age

One of the most powerful ways in which the online sphere differs from traditional media systems is in its global reach. Within countries, traditional media outlets had enormous power to set the agenda and disseminate information (considered to be news in democracies and propaganda in non-free states). The internet initially challenged this information hegemony through the creation of alternative information sources: namely, digital native media, blogs, and forums. With the creation and explosive growth of social media, the distribution channel for news and information metamorphosed into a different system, one that Benkler et al. assert fostered ‘network propaganda’.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) write that ‘the emergence of the internet and social technology have brought about fundamental changes to the way information is produced, communicated and distributed’ (p. 11). These characteristics include ‘widely accessible, cheap and sophisticated’ publishing technology that makes is possible for virtually anyone to create and distribute content; making private consumption patterns visible and public; the speed at which
information is disseminated; and the fact that information is now passed in ‘real time between trusted peers, and any piece of information is less likely to be challenged’ (11–12). They cite Frederic Filloux in highlighting how Moore’s law has fostered the spread of misinformation as the exponential growth of available technology drastically lowers the cost of creating, disseminating, and acquiring information.

Technology itself, however, cannot account for the rise of propaganda and populism. Technology is value neutral, and the features outlined by Wardle and Derakhshan are available to essentially all sides in political debates. Indeed, most of the original conception of how the internet would reshape the global communication space suggested that the internet would level information hierarchies, tell truth to power, and create more freedom of speech. While scholars and analysts had become increasingly more cynical after the failure of the Arab Spring to bring enduring democratic change to most of the Middle East, it was the election of Donald Trump in 2016 that caused a significant switch in the debate from ‘cyberoptimism’ to ‘cyberpessimism’.

Certainly, the internet, especially social media, brought great changes to the consumption, production, and distribution of information. Yet an often-overlooked aspect of the digital sphere is the way in which it challenges national information hegemony. While there are still powerful media outlets and information sources within countries, information boundaries are increasingly porous and opaque. This allows foreign actors who wish to try to influence domestic audiences in other countries new and more promising opportunities, such as those shown by Russian actors in the 2016 US presidential election. For example, Russia has an extensive network of foreign-language websites, such as RT (formerly Russia Today), that blend news and misinformation to promote particular strategic narratives for the Russian state. It should be noted that Russia is not alone in these tactics, but democracies are more limited in how they can promote information to authoritarian states. One could also argue that Russians have been more proactive and creative in their information warfare strategies than their Western counterparts.

If we consider the misinformation and propaganda opportunities surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, it is easy to see the opportunities afforded by the contemporary media system combined with misinformation creating an environment in which propaganda can thrive. US media consumers have experienced a large amount of misinformation and even disinformation emerging from the White House, which has highlighted the difficulty of informed policymaking and citizen action in a national crisis. It is interesting to note that while Trump was skilled at populist messages during the 2016 election, by late April 2020, he was still struggling to find a populist rhetoric to address the pandemic. The structure of the US traditional and social media system itself, divided and divisive, not only created a challenge to crafting a national response but also left a void into which both domestic and foreign misinformation could push propaganda narratives. A comparison of the painstaking planting of the AIDS virus story by Russians in the 1980s and the ease with which foreign propaganda can accuse the Americans of having created COVID-19 in a lab as a bioweapon showcases the power of rewired propaganda.

The relationship of propaganda to populism

This volume is focused on the broad sweep of populism and its relationship to propaganda, a synergistic partnership that is discussed in detail throughout the book. For the purposes of this chapter, it’s important to consider how propaganda, misinformation, and the digital age create such a promising environment for populism. Indeed, this is a particularly important question because there was so much earlier focus by analysts on the exact opposite: how the internet would foster genuine debate and stronger democracies.
As noted in the introduction to this volume, populism can be considered to be ‘a political movement that both reflects the crisis of liberal democracy and challenges core democratic premises’ and has flourished in environments with the ‘spread of fake information, conspiracy beliefs, and propaganda’. Although populist movements are typically grounded in genuine grievances, these grievances are often magnified or distorted in ways that make it easier for politicians to manipulate the masses. This is in opposition to the notion of a democracy founded on informed debate and rational voters.

The success of populist movements around the world from the United States to Russia to Brazil suggests that propaganda is a better pair with populism than with traditional democracy. This chapter has discussed how populism, particularly in the 2016 US elections, can be fuelled by propaganda and misinformation. In addition to the features outlined by Wardle and Derakhshan, the new media ecosystem allows malicious actors, both foreign and domestic, to ‘hide in plain sight’ by posing as media outlets or (in the case of social media) as trusted fellow citizens.

This leaves us with two significant challenges to traditional US democracy. First, political actors can now see the power of populism. Even if your goal is not to undermine democracy, it is very tempting to use propaganda and misinformation, rather than informed debate and traditional party politics, in order to win elections. At the same time, the current US media ecosystem asymmetrically favours populist propaganda over informed debate. Not only did many citizens preference misinformation and propaganda over real news in the 2016 campaign, but there is also a growing body of evidence that social media actively misinforms the public by its very nature. The dilemma that remains is whether the global rise of populism, as well as the new media environment engendered by the digital age, will permanently disadvantage responsible journalism and democratic elections. There is a pervasive power in rewired propaganda, the modernisation of classic propaganda infused with misinformation that is supported by the nature of traditional and social media. It remains to be seen if rewired propaganda will outpace the democratic function of the media in democracies such as the United States.

Note

1 This leaves aside the issue of democratic states that broadcast propaganda in foreign countries.

References


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